CHAPTER 17

Getting Along: Politeness Theory and the Gospels

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1 Introduction

Politeness Theory, after more than half a century of growth and development, is coming of age but looking more like a divided clan than a nuclear family. Its academic ancestry traces back at least to Erving Goffman’s “On Face-Work: An Analysis of Ritual Elements in Social Interaction” in 1955; the family tree expanded with the appearance of Searle’s Speech-Act Theory in 1965;¹ and with the passing of another decade, the encompassing sociolinguistic interest in interaction dynamics was taking leaf. As Goffman paraphrased the signature Lazarsfeld Formula, “Talk is socially organized, not merely in terms of who speaks to whom in what language, but as a little system of mutually ratified and ritually governed face-to-face action, a social encounter,”² and anything that reflected relationships would necessarily imply social delicacy. Brown and Gilman’s work on (in)formal pronominal addresses, which appeared in 1960, was another example of that delicacy, animating the field even further with their argument that “a man’s consistent pronoun style gives away his class status and his political views” and their observation that one “may vary his pronoun style from time to time so as to express transient moods and attitudes.”³ They pointed as well to the potentially non-reciprocal power feature of verbal interaction: “Power is a relationship between at least two persons, and it is non-reciprocal in the sense that both cannot have power in the same area of behavior,”⁴ hence each person is to address others in ways deemed socially appropriate to their relative status. Numerous theoretical progeny have been birthed in this emerging territory of address terms, though conflicting family values across the field seem to be leaving little more than a general agreement that speech not only conveys information, it also codifies and creates relationships.

¹ Searle, “What Is Speech Act?”
⁴ Ibid., 255.
Located within the territory of address conventions is the civil entity known as politeness. In a 1960 publication, for example, Clifford Geertz said in connection with “linguistic etiquette” in Java that “Politeness is something one directs toward others; one surrounds the other with a wall of behavioral… formality which protects the stability of his inner life.”5 S. M. Ervin-Tripp would subsequently contribute the concept of “dispensation right,”6 claiming that the more powerful speaker of a hierarchical chain owns the right to allow subordinates to address him/her in more informal speech styles. Others applied these concepts to studies of formal and informal pronouns, especially in Romance and Germanic languages, and more can be seen of related discussions in Suzanne Romaine’s overview.7 Through these studies, language was again and again being construed as far more than a mere exchange of information, for whether researchers framed their work under the rubric of sociolinguistics, sociology of language, or discourse analysis, they were identifying longstanding complexities of interpersonal discourse that were ripe for the investigator’s picking, and the world’s language terrain was their orchard. By the time Richard J. Watts would tabulate it, publications dealing with politeness terminology (even excluding non-linguistic respect methods such as body gestures and gifting) had exceeded 1200, and he was watching the numbers growing exponentially “week by week.”8

Every culture provides ways for people to “just get along,” as Rodney King once infamously put it, and politeness studies are as inevitable as the need for human civility that they aim to explain. These needs would have been present in ancient societies too, and Palestinian Jews of the first-century Mediterranean world surely would have been no exception. So after reviewing definitions and frameworks that have shaped politeness research in recent years, this study will examine selected New Testament Gospel narratives in which such strategies might be expected to appear, and will consider which of the prevailing paradigms is most useful for understanding them.

2 Defining Politeness: Is There a Macro-Theory?

Despite the necessity, even inevitability, of demonstrations of politeness in daily interaction, the field has been short on attempts at a culturally inclusive

7 Romaine, Language in Society, 155–66.
8 Watts, Politeness, xi.