

Chaucer's Use of Directives in *The Canterbury Tales*:  
Dialogue between the Host and the Pilgrims\*

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## 1. Introduction

There are many directive expressions in present-day English. A directive expression is a speech act, which is defined as 'the direction of fit is world-to-words and the sincerity condition is want or wish or desire'.<sup>1</sup> Directive expressions include requests, orders, and commands.<sup>2</sup> Because a speaker's directive threatens a hearer's negative face, or 'freedom of action and freedom from imposition',<sup>3</sup> the speaker chooses appropriate directive expressions in relation to the social distance and the power between speaker and hearer.

Some examples of directive expressions speakers employ to soften directives are the word 'please' and the phrases 'Could you NP?' and 'Would you NP?'. However, these two specific directive expressions did not appear until the seventeenth and nineteenth centuries, respectively. The present study examines how directive expressions and politeness strategies were used in the late Middle English period. Special reference is made to *The Canterbury Tales* (hereafter, *CT*), which was written by Geoffrey Chaucer (c. 1343–1400).

## 2. Method of the Present Study

### 2.1. Historical Pragmatics

One of the best ways to examine directive expressions in the past periods is historical pragmatics, which lies at the intersection of historical linguistics and pragmatics. Jacobs and Jucker define thus:

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<sup>1</sup> John R. Searle, *Expression and Meaning: Studies in the Theory of Speech Acts* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1979), p. 14.

<sup>2</sup> Rodney Huddleston and Geoffrey K. Pullum et al. eds, *The Cambridge Grammar of the English Language* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), p.29; p. 61.

<sup>3</sup> Paul Brown and Stephen C. Levinson, *Politeness: Some Universals in Language Usage* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987), p. 61.

- the description of the understanding of conventions of language use in communities that once existed and that are no longer accessible for direct observation, and
- the description and the explanation of the development of speech conventions in the course of time<sup>4</sup>

Historical pragmatics are unable to directly observe how people spoke in the past. However, some historical sources such as letters, dramatic dialogues, and dialogue in narrative fiction and poetry, reflect features of the spoken language of the period.

## 2.2. Politeness in the History of the English Language

When examining how politeness strategies worked in directive expressions, we observe different strategies diachronically. Face-saving strategies used in present-day English would not appear in Old English. As Kohnen stated, directives often employed performative constructions:<sup>5</sup>

(1) Ic bidde eow þæt 3e 3ymon eowra sylfra, swa eowere bec eow wissiað.

[I ask you to take care of yourselves, as your books teach you.]

(Helsinki Corpus, Ælfric, *Letter to Wulfsgie*, 26)

Performative constructions threaten hearer's negative face in present-day English. There was little consideration of face in the hierarchical society of the Anglo-Saxons and politeness strategies employed in present-day English are rare. In contrast, polite markers such as 'I beseech you, so please your lordship, and if you will give me leave'<sup>6</sup> were carefully employed so as not to threaten the hearer's negative face in the Early Modern English period.

From the viewpoint of historical pragmatics, the Middle English period is considered for the transitional period between Old English and Early Modern English as with the case of morphology and syntax.

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<sup>4</sup> Andreas Jacobs and Andreas H. Jucker, 'The Historical Perspective in Pragmatics', in *Historical Pragmatics: Pragmatic Developments in the History of English*, ed. by A. H. Jucker (Amsterdam, Philadelphia: John Benjamins, 1995), pp. 3–33, (p.6).

<sup>5</sup> Thomas Kohnen, 'Directives in Old English', in *Speech Acts in the History of English*, ed. by Andreas H. Jucker and Irma Taavitsainen (Amsterdam: Philadelphia, 2008), pp. 27–45.

<sup>6</sup> Barbara Fennell, *A History of English: A Sociolinguistic Approach* (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2001), p. 165.

### 3. Data and Analysis

It is necessary to examine the similar situation in the study of historical pragmatics. Jucker compares three temptation scenes in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* (hereafter, *Gawain*) and suggests that the use of direct requests increases as the relationship between the characters becomes closer. In the first temptation scene, the Lady says to Gawain as:

(2) *Gawain*, 1303–04<sup>7</sup>

[...] ‘Iwysse, worþe as yow lykez;  
I schal kysse at your comaundement, as a knyzt fallez,’

She employs a very indirect way and the expression does not seem request at the first sight. In the last temptation scene, in contrast, the Lady uses the direct request as:

(3) *Gawain*, 1794

‘Kysse me now comly, and I schal cach heþen,’

She requests with a bare imperative because the social distance is getting closer and indirectness is not necessary.<sup>8</sup> This suggests that the expressions of directive vary with the social distance.

*CT*, which was produced in almost the same period as *Gawain*, includes similar situations. The Host suggests to the pilgrims that they tell their own stories to relieve the tedium on their pilgrimage to Canterbury Cathedral. There are twenty-nine pilgrims from different social classes. The text, therefore, is excellent material for an examination of varieties of directives.

The social distance and the power between the Host and the pilgrims are determined by the T/V distinction, used in English since the thirteenth century as a result of French influence. The distinction in Chaucer’s period was that ‘ye’ was used when addressing an unfamiliar person or someone of higher status than the speaker, and ‘thou’ was used when addressing someone of lower status or to express intimacy.<sup>9</sup> Not all of the pilgrims are addressed by the Host using second person pronouns, but there are still ample examples. Table 1 shows how the Host addresses each pilgrim:

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<sup>7</sup> The edition of *Gawain* for this study is *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, ed. by J. R. R. Tolkien and E. V. Gordon, 2nd edn, rev. by Norman Davis (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1967).

<sup>8</sup> Andreas H. Jucker, ‘Courtesy and Politeness in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*’ *Studia Anglica Posnaniensia* 49.3 (2014), 5–28 (pp. 22–24).

<sup>9</sup> David Burnley, *A Guide to Chaucer’s Language* (London: Macmillan, 1983), pp. 15–22.

Second person pronoun	Pilgrims
Thou	Miller, Reeve, Cook, Summoner, Franklin, Physician, Pardoner, Shipman, Sir Thopas (Chaucer), Manciple
Ye	Knight, Man of Law, Wife of Bath, Friar, Merchant, Squire, Prioress
Both*	Clerk [ye→thou], Monk [ye→thou], Nun's Priest [thou→ye], Canon's Yeoman [thou →ye], Parson [thou→ ye]

\* [        ] indicates a shift in the pronoun used.

Table 1. Second-person pronouns used by the Host in *CT*

The Host also uses address terms that, like the second person pronouns, are chosen based on the social distance and the power. The term ‘dame’ is a marker for a lady of superior class:

(4) *CT*<sup>10</sup>, D 827–30, H (hearer): Wife of Bath

So blesse his soule for his mercy deere.

[...]

“Now dame,” quod he, “so have I joye or blis,

Because the Wife of Bath is addressed using ‘ye’, the address term ‘dame’ is closely related to the high status marker. Another term, ‘sir’, also occurs frequently with ‘ye’. The term functions as a form of polite address and is often combined with nouns of occupation such as ‘Sire knyght’ (A 837) and ‘Sire Man of Lawe’ (B<sup>1</sup> 33), both of whom the Host addresses using ‘ye’.

To examine the connection between the social distance and the directives, the data will be divided into four categories depending on the pronouns used by the Host: (i) Thou characters; (ii) Ye characters; (iii) Thou-to-Ye characters; and (iv) Ye-to-Thou characters.

(i) Thou characters

(5) A 3134–35, H: Miller

Oure Hoost answerde, “Tel on, a devel wey!

Thou art a fool; thy wit is overcome,”

(6) A 3905, H: Reeve

Sey forth thy tale, and tarie nat the tyme.

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<sup>10</sup> The edition of *CT* for this study is *The Riverside Chaucer*, ed. by Larry D. Benson et al., 3rd edn (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008).

- (7) A 4345–53, H: Cook  
 Now telle on, Roger; looke that it be good,  
 [...]
   
 Now telle on, gentil Roger by thy name.
- (8) F 702, H: Franklin  
 “Telle on the tale withouten wordes mo.”
- (9) C 319, H: Pardoner  
 “Telle us som myrthe or jsper right anon.”
- (10) B<sup>2</sup> 706, H: Sir Thopas  
 Telle us a tale of myrthe, and that anon.”
- (11) H 103, H: Manciple  
 Telle on thy tale, Manciple, I thee praye.

The Host employs the bare imperative to all the ‘thou’ characters, which threatens hearer’s negative face more than any other form of address. The Host gives the ‘thou’ characters no chance to demur as, observed in (6) between the Host and the Reeve, ‘It were al tyme to biggynne’ (A 3908).

Example (7) functions as showing solidarity. In the dialogue between the Host and the Miller, the Miller says to the Host, ‘A litel jape that fil in oure cite’ (A 4343). This use of ‘oure’ insists common ground,<sup>11</sup> which exemplifies positive politeness strategy.<sup>12</sup> In (8), the Host rushes the Franklin to tell his tale as ‘withouten wordes mo’. In (9), The Host calls the Pardoner ‘beel amy’ (C 318), which is ‘used derisively’.<sup>13</sup> This way of calling implies that the social distance of the Host is higher than that of the Pardoner, and for this reason, the Host makes the directive bare imperative. In (10), Chaucer appears in the guise of a bad poet named Sir Thopas. It seems that the Host, as he dissuades him from narrating his tale, which he considers ‘drasty speche’ (B<sup>2</sup> 2113). This is closely related to Chaucer’s self-image. Although the Host addresses the Manciple with ‘thy’ as shown, he adds the hedge ‘I thee

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<sup>11</sup> Brown and Levinson, p. 103.

<sup>12</sup> Brown and Levinson (p. 61) defines positive face as ‘the positive consistent self-image or “personality” (crucially including the desire that this self-image be appreciated and approved of) claimed by interactants’.

<sup>13</sup> Benson, p. 194.

praye', which functions as 'expressing deference, earnestness, etc.',<sup>14</sup> which softens the illocutionary force.

(ii) Ye characters

- (12) B<sup>1</sup> 33–34, H: Man of Law  
“Sire Man of Lawe”, quod he, “so have ye blis,  
Telle us a tale anon, as forward is
- (13) D 853–56, H: Wife of Bath  
Do, dame, telle forth youre tale, and that is best.”  
[...]  
“Yis, dame,” quod he, “tel forth, and I wol heere.”
- (14) D 1289, 1300, H: Friar  
Telleth youre tale, and lat the Somonour be.”  
[...]  
“Tel forth youre tale, leeve maister deere.”
- (15) E 1240–42, H: Merchant  
“Now,” quod oure Hoost, “Marchant, so God yow blesse,  
Syn ye so muchel knowen of that art  
Ful hertely I pray yow telle us part.”
- (16) F 1–3, H: Squire  
“Squier, com neer, if it youre wille be,  
And sey somewhat of love, for certes ye  
Konnen theron as muche as any man.”
- (17) B<sup>2</sup> 447–51, H: Prioress  
“My lady Prioress, by youre leve,  
So that I wiste I sholde yow nat greve,  
I wolde demen that ye tellen sholde  
A tale next, if so were that ye wolde.  
Now wol ye vouche sauf, my lady deere?”

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<sup>14</sup> *MED* (*preien*, v. (1), 5.).

Although (12), (13), (14), and (16) employ bare imperatives in the same way the examples in group (i) do, the imperative in (14) includes the inflectional ending ‘-eth’. Singular imperatives had no inflectional ending, and plural imperatives had the inflectional ending ‘-eth’. The plural form was used ‘when addressing an individual, in a similar way as with the second person pronouns’,<sup>15</sup> and Burnley calls this ‘a stylistic distinction’.<sup>16</sup> The distinction disappeared in the fifteenth century,<sup>17</sup> and Chaucer does not employ it regularly. Although the distinction is supposedly caused by ‘metrical rather than stylistic’ consideration,<sup>18</sup> Chaucer adds the ending in association with ‘ye’ forms since there is no inflection in the singular form. It assumes, therefore, that this inflection includes a pragmatic implicature: to add politeness.

Example (15) uses the hedge ‘I pray yow’. The phrase ‘so God you blesse’ also functions as a politeness marker. Although the phrase could be considered metrical filler, it is not a fixed phrase in *CT*. This suggests that the phrase’s function as a politeness marker is more important than its use as a metrical filler.

Example (17) can be considered the most polite request in the dialogue between the Host and the pilgrims.<sup>19</sup> The Host employs a conditional clause and subjunctive clauses to avoid all use of the imperative when speaking to the Prioress. He also applies ‘wol ye’, which categorises hearer-based directives, more polite than speaker-based directives referred in the quotation (1). This usage signifies that hearer-based directives appear in Chaucer’s period, despite Jucker’s argument that the directives did not appear until the fifteenth century.<sup>20</sup> The use of ‘wol ye’ as the directive is illustrated in the reply of the Prioress, ‘Gladly,’ (B<sup>2</sup> 452).

### (iii) Thou-to-Ye characters

(18) B<sup>2</sup> 4000–01, H: Nun’s Priest

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<sup>15</sup> Simon Horobin, *Chaucer’s Language*, 2nd edn (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013), p. 120.

<sup>16</sup> Burnley, p. 33.

<sup>17</sup> Olga Fischer, ‘Syntax’ in *The Cambridge History of the English Language*, ed. by Norman Blake, 6 vols (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992–2001), II (1992), pp. 207–398 (p. 249).

<sup>18</sup> Simon Horobin, *The Language of the Chaucer Tradition* (Cambridge: Brewer, 2003), p. 111.

<sup>19</sup> Horobin, *Chaucer’s Language*, p. 159.

<sup>20</sup> Andreas H. Jucker, ‘Politeness in the History of English’, in *English Historical Linguistics 2006: Selected Papers from the Fourteenth International Conference on English Historical Linguistics (ICEHL 14), Bergamo, 21-25 August 2006. Volume II: Lexical and Semantic Change*, ed. by Richard Dury, Maurizio Gotti and Marina Dossena (Philadelphia: Benjamins, 2008), pp.3–29 (pp. 20–21).

“Com neer, thou preest, com hyder, thou sir John!  
Telle us swich thing as may oure hertes glade.

(19) H: Canon’s Yeoman

(a) G 654

Telle how he dooth, I pray thee hertely,

(b) G 697

“Ye,” quod oure Hoost, “telle on, what so bityde.

(20) H: Parson

(a) I 29

Telle us a fable anon, for cokes bones!”

(b) I 68–69

“Sire preest,” quod he, “now faire yow bifalle!

Telleth,” quod he, “youre meditacioun.

The Host uses the address ‘thou’ in (18), (19a), and (20a). In (18), however, the Host calls the Nun’s priest ‘sir’. The address term expresses intimacy.<sup>21</sup> The Host employs the bare imperative in the same way he did with the characters addressed as the ‘thou’ characters.

The Host switches to the ‘ye’ form in (19b) and (20b). The Host uses imperative with the plural ending ‘Telleth’ as shown in (14).

(iv) Ye-to-Thou characters

(21) E 19–20, H: Clerk

Speketh so pleyn at this tyme, we yow preye,

That we may understonde what ye seye.

(22) H: Monk

(a) B<sup>2</sup> 3114–15

“My lord, the Monk,” quod he, “be myrie of cheere,

For ye shul telle a tale trewely.

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<sup>21</sup> Benson, p. 935.

(b) B<sup>2</sup> 3982–83,

Wherefore, sire Monk, daun Piers by youre name,  
I pray yow hertely telle us somewhat elles;

The Host addresses other characters using ‘ye’ in dialogues (21) and (22). The imperative in (21) includes the plural ending ‘-eth’ as examined in (14) and (20b). The hedge ‘I pray yow’ uses in (22b) as shown in (15). The use of ‘shul’ in (20a) also works to add politeness. The word has many usages,<sup>22</sup> and this ambiguity works to add politeness.

#### 4. Conclusion

The Host in *CT* carefully chooses directive expressions in relation to the social distance and the power. These factors are observed by T/V distinction and the address terms such as ‘dame’ and ‘sir’. Through the analysis of Thou-to-Ye characters and Ye-to-Thou characters, I propose that he selects the expressions depending on the situation.

Chaucer employs the different directive expressions: imperative, hedges, and hearer-based directives. The imperative inflection ending ‘-eth’ functions to add politeness although previous studies argue that the inflection is used to fulfil metrical requirements. As the Host avoids using bare imperative in his dialogue with the Prioress, which is regarded as the most polite dialogue in *CT*, the bare imperative threatens the hearer’s negative face, much as it does in present-day English. The hedges such as ‘I pray yow’ and ‘so God yow blesse’ are inserted not to threaten hearer’s negative face, and their use is similar to the use of ‘please’ in present-day English. This paper observes the germination of the hearer-based directives, ‘wol ye’ in Chaucer’s period despite claims that the hearer-based directive expressions do not appear until the fifteenth century.

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<sup>22</sup> See *MED* (*shulen*, v. (1)).

