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NAVIGATING POWER AND SOCIAL DYNAMICS: POLITENESS STRATEGIES IN
JOHN KEATS' LESSER-KNOWN WORK *OTHO THE GREAT*

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Abstract:

John Keats, a prominent figure of the Romantic movement, is widely recognized for his poetic works. However, his dramatic compositions, particularly "Otho the Great," co-written with Charles Brown, have not garnered equal scholarly attention. This paper explores the politeness strategies employed in "Otho the Great," providing insight into Keats's understanding and use of language within the framework of 19th-century social norms and conventions. Through the lens of politeness theory developed by Penelope Brown and Stephen Levinson, the paper examines how characters navigate face-threatening acts and maintain social harmony through bald on-record, positive politeness, negative politeness, and off-record strategies.

Research questions addressed include:

- *How do characters in Otho the Great utilize politeness strategies to navigate power dynamics?*
- *In what ways do gender and social hierarchy influence the use of politeness strategies in the play?*
- *How do these strategies reflect the broader themes of power, loyalty, and ambition in Keats's work?*

The analysis of politeness strategies in Otho the Great reveals the complex interplay of power, gender, and social norms in the characters' interactions. It underscores the intricate ways Keats and Brown navigate these dynamics, enriching our understanding of the play and Keats's literary legacy. This study highlights the nuanced and powerful use of language in "Otho the Great," offering a deeper appreciation of Keats's contribution to the dramatic arts.

Keywords: *John Keats, Politeness Strategies, Power Dynamics, Gender, Social Norms, etc.*

Introduction:

John Keats, a central figure of the Romantic Movement, is celebrated for his odes and poetry, including *Ode to a Nightingale*, *Ode on a Grecian Urn*, and *To Autumn*. However, less attention has been paid to his dramatic works, particularly *Otho the Great*. Co-written with his friend



Charles Brown, this lesser-known play is often overshadowed by Keats's more famous works. This paper aims to explore the politeness strategies employed in *Otho the Great*, shedding light on Keats' understanding and use of language within the framework of 19th-century social norms and conventions.

Otho the Great is a historical tragedy set in 10th-century Germany, focusing on the reign of Otho II. The play delves into themes of power, ambition, betrayal, and the complexities of human relationships. Despite its historical setting, the play reflects Keats's romantic sensibilities, particularly in its exploration of human emotions and the intricate dynamics of interpersonal communication.

The play follows the political and personal struggles of Emperor Otho II as he deals with internal strife and external threats to his reign. Characters such as Ludolph, Conrad, and Erminia are intricately woven into the narrative, each contributing to the unfolding drama with their own ambitions, loyalties, and personal conflicts. This complex interplay of characters provides a rich ground for examining the politeness strategies used to navigate their relationships and social hierarchies.

Politeness theory, as developed by sociolinguists Penelope Brown and Stephen Levinson, provides a framework for understanding how individuals manage face-threatening acts (FTAs) in communication. According to Brown and Levinson, face refers to an individual's self-esteem or emotional needs, divided into positive face (the desire to be liked and admired) and negative face (the desire to be autonomous and free from imposition).

Politeness strategies are techniques used to mitigate FTAs and maintain social harmony. These strategies include:

- Bald on-record: Direct and unambiguous communication, often used when the speaker has more power or the situation requires clarity.
- Positive politeness: Strategies that emphasize camaraderie and solidarity, appealing to the listener's positive face.
- Negative politeness: Strategies that show deference and respect, acknowledging the listener's desire for autonomy.
- Off-record: Indirect communication that leaves room for interpretation, often used to avoid direct confrontation or imposition.

Analysis of Politeness Strategies in *Otho the Great*:

Bald On-Record Strategies:

In *Otho the Great*, bald on-record strategies are employed primarily in situations of authority and urgency. For example, in moments of crisis or when issuing commands, characters such as Otho use direct language to assert their dominance and ensure compliance. This is evident in Otho's interactions with his subordinates, where his position as emperor necessitates clear and unequivocal instructions. In Act I, Scene II, Otho commands his officers to prepare for an imminent threat:

Otho: Follow me quickly! We have no time to lose.

This direct command leaves no room for ambiguity, highlighting Otho's authoritative role and the urgency of the situation. Such bald on-record strategies are essential in maintaining control and ensuring swift action in critical moments.



Similarly, in Act IV, Scene I, when Otho confronts a rebellious noble, his language is unequivocal:

Otho: You dare defy me? Kneel and beg for mercy.

The use of bald on-record language here underscores Otho's power and the seriousness of the insubordination, leaving no space for negotiation or misinterpretation.

Positive Politeness Strategies:

Positive politeness strategies are used to foster camaraderie and express solidarity among characters. These strategies often involve compliments, expressions of interest, and inclusive language. For instance, Otho's interactions with his allies and loved ones reveal his attempts to maintain positive relationships and bolster morale. In Act II, Scene III, Otho addresses his loyal friend and advisor, Ludolph:

Otho: Your loyalty, my friend, is a beacon in these dark times. Together, we shall prevail.

Here, Otho's use of complimentary language and inclusive terms like 'together' serves to strengthen bonds and encourage cooperation. This positive politeness helps to reassure Ludolph of his value and reinforce their alliance.

Additionally, in Act III, Scene II, Otho seeks to motivate his troops before a crucial battle:

Otho: Brave soldiers, your courage is unmatched. Today, we fight not just for our kingdom, but for each other.

The appeal to the soldiers' positive face through praise and the emphasis on collective identity ("for each other") serves to boost morale and foster a sense of unity and purpose.

Negative Politeness Strategies:

Negative politeness strategies in *Otho the Great* are employed to show deference and respect, particularly in hierarchical relationships. Characters often use formal address, hedging, and indirect language to acknowledge the autonomy and status of their interlocutors. In Act I, Scene IV, Ludolph approaches Otho with a suggestion, carefully framing his advice to show respect:

Ludolph: My liege, if it pleases you, might I suggest an alternative course of action?

By using phrases like 'if it pleases you' and 'might I suggest,' Ludolph demonstrates respect for Otho's authority while presenting his own opinion in a non-imposing manner. This negative politeness strategy allows Ludolph to express his views without challenging Otho's status.

In Act II, Scene IV, Erminia, seeking to influence Otho's decision, uses similar deference:

Erminia: My lord, your wisdom surpasses all, and I humbly seek your guidance.

Erminia's language emphasizes Otho's superior status and her own deference, illustrating the gendered expectations of politeness in their interactions. This approach allows her to present her request without appearing presumptuous or challenging Otho's authority.

Off-Record Strategies:



Off-record strategies involve indirect language, hints, and implications, allowing characters to convey messages without explicit statements. This can be seen in the play's more nuanced dialogues, where characters navigate sensitive topics and potential conflicts through suggestion rather than direct confrontation. In Act III, Scene IV, Conrad, wary of openly criticizing Otho's plans, speaks indirectly:

Conrad: It is said that fortune favors the bold, yet prudence has its own merits.

Conrad's statement implies a critique of bold actions without directly challenging Otho's decisions, thereby maintaining a level of politeness and avoiding open conflict. This off-record strategy allows Conrad to voice his concerns while preserving social harmony. Similarly, in Act IV, Scene III, Auranthe uses an indirect approach to express her fears to Otho:

Auranthe: I have heard whispers, my lord, of unrest among the nobles. It may be wise to tread carefully.

By framing her concerns as 'whispers' and suggesting caution, Auranthe avoids directly accusing or alarming Otho, using off-record strategies to communicate her message subtly.

Politeness and Power Dynamics:

The use of politeness strategies in *Otho the Great's* is closely tied to the play's exploration of power dynamics. Characters' social status, relationships, and the context of their interactions influence their choice of politeness strategies. For example, Otho's use of bald on-record commands reflects his authoritative position, while his positive politeness towards allies reveals his need to maintain loyalty and support. Otho's interactions with his subordinates, allies, and adversaries illustrate the delicate balance of power and politeness. In scenes where his authority is unchallenged, Otho employs direct commands and bald on-record strategies. However, in interactions with trusted advisors or during delicate negotiations, he shifts to positive or negative politeness strategies to foster cooperation and maintain respect.

Conversely, characters of lower status, such as Ludolph and Conrad, often employ negative politeness strategies to navigate their interactions with Otho. This balancing act between respect for authority and the need to express opinions highlights the complexity of their relationships and the nuanced power dynamics at play. In Act II, Scene V, Ludolph, aware of Otho's temper, carefully suggests a different approach:

Ludolph: My liege, your judgment is unparalleled, yet perhaps a different path might yield better results?

By acknowledging Otho's superior judgment while subtly offering an alternative, Ludolph manages to convey his suggestion without undermining Otho's authority. This delicate use of negative politeness reflects the power dynamics and the need for diplomatic communication.

Gender and Politeness:

Gender also plays a role in the politeness strategies observed in *Otho the Great*. Female characters, such as Erminia and Auranthe, often use a combination of positive and negative politeness strategies to assert their influence while adhering to the social expectations of the time. Their speech frequently includes expressions of deference and respect, reflecting the gender norms



of 19th-century society. In Act III, Scene I, Erminia, aware of her position and the expectations placed on her, addresses Otho with a blend of respect and subtle persuasion:

Erminia: My lord, your wisdom surpasses all, and I humbly seek your guidance. Might I propose a humble suggestion, in service of our cause?

Erminia's language emphasizes Otho's superior status and her own deference, illustrating the gendered expectations of politeness in their interactions. By framing her suggestion as a humble request, she navigates the power dynamics and gender norms effectively. Auranthe, similarly, uses politeness strategies to influence Otho while maintaining her perceived role. In Act IV, Scene II, she approaches Otho with caution and tact:

Auranthe: Dearest Otho, your strength is our shield. Yet, I fear that caution may serve us well in these turbulent times.

Auranthe's language combines praise with a gentle suggestion, balancing her influence with the need to uphold the social norms of deference expected of women in her position. This nuanced use of politeness highlights the interplay of gender and power in their interactions.

Thematic Implications of Politeness:

The politeness strategies in *Otho the Great* not only reflect the characters' relationships and social hierarchies but also underscore the play's broader themes. The tension between power and loyalty, the complexities of human emotion, and the consequences of ambition are all mirrored in the characters' use of language. Politeness strategies serve as a lens through which these themes are explored, revealing the intricate dance of communication and manipulation that defines the play's narrative. Otho's reliance on direct commands and authority demonstrates the burdens of leadership and the challenges of maintaining power. His shifts to positive politeness with trusted allies reflect his need for loyalty and support, revealing his human vulnerabilities beneath the emperor's facade. Ludolph and Conrad's use of negative politeness and off-record strategies illustrates the delicate balance of expressing dissent while respecting authority. Their careful navigation of power dynamics and politeness reveals the complexities of loyalty and ambition within the court.

Female characters like Erminia and Auranthe use politeness to assert their influence subtly, highlighting the gendered expectations and constraints they navigate. Their strategic use of language to achieve their goals underscores the themes of power, manipulation, and the often-hidden strength of women in a patriarchal society.

Conclusion:

Otho the Great, though not as celebrated as John Keats's other works, offers a profound insight into the dynamics of power, gender, and social norms through the lens of politeness strategies. By examining the nuanced ways in which characters such as Otho, Ludolph, Conrad, Erminia, and Auranthe navigate their relationships and hierarchies, we uncover the intricate dance of communication that Keats and his co-writer Charles Brown have crafted.

The analysis of politeness strategies—bald on-record, positive politeness, negative politeness, and off-record—reveals the complexity of human interactions in the play. Otho's direct commands highlight the burdens of leadership and the necessity of clear authority in moments of crisis. In contrast, his use of positive politeness with allies underscores the need for loyalty and



emotional support in sustaining his reign. Characters like Ludolph and Conrad, who employ negative politeness and off-record strategies, illustrate the delicate balance of expressing dissent and maintaining respect within the court, reflecting the complexities of loyalty and ambition. The female characters, Erminia and Auranthe, navigate their influence through a blend of positive and negative politeness, revealing the gendered expectations of 19th-century society. Their strategic use of language underscores the themes of power, manipulation, and the subtle strength required to operate within a patriarchal framework.

Keats' exploration of these themes through politeness strategies not only enhances our understanding of *Otho the Great* but also enriches his literary legacy. The play's intricate portrayal of social interactions and the use of language as a tool for managing power and relationships demonstrate Keats's deep understanding of human nature and communication.

In conclusion, *Otho the Great* serves as a testament to Keats's versatility and his ability to delve into the dramatic arts with the same sensitivity and insight that characterize his poetry. By shedding light on the politeness strategies within the play, we gain a deeper appreciation of Keats's work and his contribution to literature, revealing the enduring relevance of his exploration of social dynamics and human interaction. This analysis not only highlights the play's literary merit but also offers a valuable perspective on the subtleties of language and politeness in navigating the complexities of power, loyalty, and gender.

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