THE LANGUAGE OF THE GODS: POLITENESS IN THE PROLOGUE OF THE *TROADES*[*]

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Euripides' *Troades*, set before the smoking ruins of Troy, begins with a speech by Poseidon (1–47). He explains that he has felt good will towards Troy ever since he and Apollo built its walls (4–7). This contrasts with his attitude in the *Iliad*, where he is proud of the walls (*Il.* 7.446–453; 21.446–447) but hostile to the Trojans on account of Laomedon's failure to pay for them (*Il.* 21.435–460).[1] He is mentioned as one of the three gods who have been unremittingly hostile to Troy (*Il.* 24.25–30; cf. Davies 1981; Macleod 1982: 88), but actually seems somewhat less so than Hera and Athena (*Il.* 8.198–207), in particular when he rescues Aeneas from Achilles (*Il.* 20.292–340). Euripides develops these Trojan sympathies. The chorus of *Andromache* reproaches Poseidon and Apollo for giving up to destruction the work which their hands had fashioned (*Andr.* 1009–18), implying that they might have been expected to protect it, and there is an unequivocally pro-Trojan Poseidon at *IT* 1414–15: "The ocean's ruler watches over Troy, august Poseidon, opposing Pelops' family" (tr. Cropp 1988). Apollo favours the Trojans in the *Iliad* despite Laomedon's treachery, and the apparent inconsistency (noted by Poseidon, *Il.* 21.458–460) may have been resolved by making them both pro-Trojan.

Poseidon goes on to mention the fall of Troy, with particular emphasis on the violation of altars (15–17). The Greeks are waiting for a fair wind to take them home to their wives and children with their booty (18–22). Poseidon leaves Troy, remarking that a deserted city can no longer worship the gods (25–27; cf. Aesch. *Sept.* 217–218; Pelling 1988: 303–304). He realizes that he has been defeated by Hera and Athena, deadly enemies of Troy since the judgement of Paris (23–24), and the final words of his speech attribute the destruction of Troy directly to Athena (46–47).

This mention of Athena prepares for her entry immediately afterwards, what Taplin (1977: 137–138) calls a 'talk of the devil' entry. Her dialogue with Poseidon begins as follows (48–58):

> Αθ. ἔξεστι τὸν γένει μὲν ἄγχιστον πατρὸς
> μέγαν τε δαίμον' ἐν θεοῖς τε τίμιον,
> λύσασαν ἔχθραν τὴν πάρος, προσεννέπειν;
> Πο. ἔξεστιν· αἱ γὰρ συγγενεῖς ὁμιλίαι,
> ἄνασσ' Ἀθάνα, φίλτρον οὐ σμικρὸν φρενῶν.
> Αθ. ἐπήνεσ' ὀργὰς ἠπίους· φέρω δὲ σοὶ
> κοινοὺς ἐμαυτῇ τ' ἐς μέσον λόγους, ἄναξ.

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[1] Cf. O'Neill 1941: 296–297; Scodel 1980: 65–66. The view that Poseidon is still pro-Greek in *Troades*, and that it is the walls of Troy rather than the Trojans themselves that he favours, is refuted by Erbse 1984: 62–63. The walls of a city are integral to its existence (cf. Croally 1994: 167–168).

Πο.   μῶν ἐκ θεῶν του καινὸν ἀγγέλλεις ἔπος,
      ἢ Ζηνὸς ἢ καὶ δαιμόνων τινὸς πάρα;
Αθ.   οὐκ, ἀλλὰ Τροίας οὕνεκ', ἔνθα βαίνομεν,
      πρὸς σὴν ἀφῖγμαι δύναμιν, ὡς κοινὴν λάβω.

ATHENA: May I address the one who is my father's closest relative, a god mighty and revered in heaven, renouncing our former enmity?
POSEIDON: You may, Queen Athena. When kinsfolk meet, it is no small comfort to the heart.
ATHENA: I thank you for your graciousness. I propose that we discuss a matter of common interest to us both, my royal lord.
POSEIDON: Do you bring some news perhaps, from a god, from Zeus or one of heaven's lesser company?
ATHENA: No; it is for the sake of Troy, where now we stand, that I have come, hoping to enlist your power (tr. Davie 1998).

This dialogue is extremely polite, as O'Neill (1941: 312) notes: "Athene speaks first, very stiffly and pompously, in fulsome diction [48–50] … Poseidon is completely the gentleman, and family ties mean a lot to him. His reply [51–52] is cordial and accommodating, but very reserved … He evinces a polite and restrained curiosity, and again expresses himself fulsomely [55–56]". These judgements are intuitively plausible, but could usefully be subjected to further analysis in order to establish in more detail the implications of the dialogue for the relationship between the speakers and the social structure within which they are represented as operating.

     Politeness has been helpfully analysed as a universal human phenomenon by Penelope Brown and Stephen C. Levinson (1987). The basic concept in Brown and Levinson's theory is 'face'. The term 'face' is familiar in English from such expressions as 'saving face' and 'losing face', but it is used in politeness theory in a somewhat specialized sense (derived from Goffman 1967). There are two kinds of face. The first, termed 'positive face', is the want to be approved of or admired. This want is assumed to be universal. The positive face of the hearer in a talk exchange would be threatened (e.g.) by criticism or abuse. The positive face of the speaker would be threatened (e.g.) by an apology or a confession. The second kind of face, termed 'negative face', is the want not to be imposed upon or impeded. This, too, is assumed to be universal. The negative face of the hearer would be threatened (e.g.) by a request or a threat. The negative face of the speaker would be threatened (e.g.) by expressing thanks or accepting an offer.[2] The seriousness of a face-threatening act depends not only on the view taken of the act itself in a particular culture, but also on both the relative power of speaker and hearer and the social distance between them.

     A distinctive feature of this theory is the argument that every act of politeness is oriented to a specific face-threatening act. Politeness is treated in terms of the rational choices of individuals, rather than in terms of obedience to rules. The cultural

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[2] Brown & Levinson (1987: 65-68) give a useful classification of face-threatening acts. The socio-linguistic terminology has partial equivalents in such Greek words as τιμή, αἰδώς, and ὕβρις.

specifications of politeness may vary, but the deep structure is universal. Politeness theory distinguishes two completely different types of politeness. Positive politeness offers redress to positive face (e.g., by expressions of interest, approval, sympathy, agreement, or affection). "Positive-politeness utterances are used as a kind of metaphorical extension of intimacy" (Brown & Levinson 1987: 103). Negative politeness is oriented to negative face, and thus aims to leave an 'out' (i.e., scope for evading or ignoring the face-threatening act) and to minimize the imposition (e.g., by indirectness, deference, or apologies).

Brown and Levinson's theory is by far the most influential model for the empirical study of politeness phenomena in a wide range of cultures. It provides remarkably sensitive tools for the analysis of dialogue, despite some problems with its more formal attempts to compute the weightiness of a face-threatening act and predict the appropriate politeness strategy. The main objection is that it assumes too individualistic a notion of face, and that negative face in particular has little meaning in more collectivist societies. Richard Watts (2003: 101–7) prefers Goffman's concept of face as something continually constructed in social interaction, as opposed to the Brown-Levinsonian notion of a pre-existing and relatively stable 'personality'. A related objection is that Brown and Levinson take a rather paranoid view of social interaction, with the constant need to negotiate face-threat by means of an elaborate set of strategies. The notion of the 'virtual offence' (see below) addresses one aspect of this objection, and a further response is that human behaviour can be analysed in terms of quite elaborate strategies even if those strategies are in practice formalized and even unconscious.

Literary works are a useful source of evidence for politeness phenomena even when experimental data are available, as of course they are not for ancient Greece (see Lloyd 2004: 75). Greek tragedy is particularly valuable in that it contains dialogue between high-status individuals in which the face of both speaker and hearer is often at stake. Brown and Levinson's theory relates politeness to the face of the speaker as well as that of the hearer, although this is often overlooked in practice, even by Brown and Levinson themselves. R. Brown & Gilman (1989: 161) thus write "Politeness means putting things in such a way as to take account of the feelings of the hearer", and Watts (2003: e.g., 12–17) treats "consideration for others" as basic to the concept of politeness. There is much to be gained from reinstating the face of the speaker in the analysis of politeness, and this might indeed do something to address the objections of Watts and others that Brown and Levinson overlook the social construction of face.

In this dialogue in *Troades*, the main face-threatening act is Athena's request for Poseidon's help. Any request potentially threatens the face both of the speaker and of the hearer, and the face-threat here is increased by the high status of the persons involved and by the social distance between them due to their enmity over Troy. Poseidon's negative face (i.e., his want not to be impinged upon or impeded) is threatened by Athena's request for assistance. Athena's own negative face is threatened by the possible obligations which she is incurring by her request. Her positive face is threatened by exposing herself to the possibility of rebuff from an enemy, and by admitting that she cannot achieve her ends unaided.[3]

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[3] Cf. O'Neill 1941: 312: "Athene is breaking the ice, but she is greatly concerned not to lose face in so doing".

Athena only arrives at her eventual request (65–66) by stages, ensuring that the face threat of any individual utterance is comparatively small. Her first step is negative politeness at its most extreme, asking permission to address Poseidon at all. Compare the following dialogue between Orestes, Electra, and the Dioscuri (Eur. *El.* 1292–97):

Ορ. ὦ παῖδε Διός, θέμις ἐς φθογγὰς
      τὰς ὑμετέρας ἡμῖν πελάθειν;
Κα. θέμις, οὐ μυσαροῖς τοῖσδε σφαγίοις.
Ηλ. κἀμοὶ μύθου μέτα, Τυνδαρίδαι;
Κα. καὶ σοί· Φοίβωι τήνδ᾽ ἀναθήσω
      πρᾶξιν φονίαν.

ORESTES: Oh sons of Zeus, is it permitted
           for us to approach and converse with you?
CASTOR: It is; this slaughter does not defile you.
ELECTRA: May I too share this discourse, Tyndareus' sons?
CASTOR: You too; to Phoebus I ascribe
           this act of murder.[4]

Orestes and Electra are of vastly inferior status to the Dioscuri, and have good reason to fear that they may pollute them. Later in *Troades*, Helen is likewise in a subordinate position, and in danger of her life, when she asks Menelaus to be allowed to defend herself (*Tro.* 903–904). These parallels suggest that there is an element of exaggeration in Athena's request, as she is of equal status to Poseidon and he is unlikely to refuse to speak to her. Politeness tends to be oriented to a pessimistic estimate of any given offence (the 'virtual offence'), and thus to have an inbuilt element of exaggeration.[5] One may thus say (e.g.) "I am extremely sorry to bother you" even when the probable inconvenience to the hearer is quite small. The hearer may correspondingly be offended if the apology is oriented to the actual inconvenience rather than to this exaggerated view of it. Politeness strategies have both a primary function (e.g., reducing the imposition) and the secondary function of signalling conventionally that the speaker is trying to be polite.[6]
Athena further reduces the imposition on Poseidon by addressing him in the third person "May I address the one who is...?" (48–50), thus avoiding 'nailing' him with a second-person singular pronoun. Compare Odysseus addressing Silenus (Eur. *Cyc.* 101): χαίρειν προσεῖπα πρῶτα τὸν γεραίτατον ("I offer greetings to the eldest first"). The third-person greeting τὸν γεραίτατον ("the eldest") avoids the second-person singular

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[4] This is the translation of Cropp 1988, with the his preferred speaker attributions and the restoration of L's ordering of the lines (along with L's μυσαροῖς in 1294). He rightly disagrees with Diggle's text here, which he prints in accordance with the practice of the Aris & Phillips Euripides series.

[5] Brown & Levinson (1987: 1–2, 33, 51 n. 7) adopt this concept of the 'virtual offence' from Goffman 1971: 108–109.

[6] Unanswerable introductory questions serve a similar purpose, e.g., Eur. *IT* 658 ("Pylades, do you have the same feeling as I do?"). Cf. Soph. *El.* 1098–1102 (with Lloyd 2005b: 236–238).

pronoun which would have threatened Silenus' negative face by emphasizing the immediacy of Odysseus' contact with him. Odysseus' politeness is also oriented to his own positive face, demonstrating that he is a superior character despite his embarrassing circumstances (cf. Lloyd 1999: 34–35). Contrast the prologue of *Alcestis*, a scene which is structurally similar to the prologue of *Troades* in that a god, in this case Apollo, delivers the opening speech and is then addressed by another god, Death (29–31):

τί σὺ πρὸς μελάθροις; τί σὺ τῆιδε πολεῖς,
Φοῖβ'; ἀδικεῖς αὖ τιμὰς ἐνέρων
ἀφορίζομενος καὶ καταπαύων;

What are *you* doing about these halls? Why are *you* hanging
about here, Phoebus? Are you once again committing the
injustice of encroaching on the infernal gods and suppressing
their prerogatives? (tr. Conacher 1988, his emphases).

Death threatens Apollo's negative face by 'nailing' him with second-person singular pronouns and direct questions. This is the language of an angry tyrant (e.g., *Med.* 271–276; Soph. *El.* 1445–47), or of a god addressing a mortal (e.g., *Hipp.* 1283–85; *Or.* 1625–8; *Bacch.* 912–914), and sometimes also used in contexts of extreme urgency (e.g., *HF* 1214–15; cf. Lloyd 2005b: 232–233). It is therefore very impolite for Death to address Apollo in this way, indicating his refusal to engage in civilized dialogue. This not only threatens Apollo's face but also degrades Death himself. Dale (1954: 54) writes: "he is not represented as a majestic infernal Power but as an ogreish creature of popular mythology, … snarling malignantly at Apollo, who treats him with a light disdain". Impoliteness threatens the face of the speaker as well as of the hearer.

      Another negative politeness feature is the nominalization ('nouniness') of the expression πρὸς σὴν … δύναμιν (58, "hoping to enlist your power", rather than "… you who are powerful"). Contrast the two English sentences "I am surprised that you failed to reply" and "Your failure to reply is surprising". The latter is more distanced, and thus more polite. "Intuitively, the more nouny an expression, the more removed an actor is from doing or feeling or being something; instead of the predicate being something attributed to an actor, the actor becomes an attribute (e.g. adjective) of the action" (Brown & Levinson 1987: 208). Athena's indirect mode of expression thus mitigates the threat to Poseidon's negative face. It also distances her from the threat posed to her own face by her request. This elaborate politeness is appropriate both to the intrinsic weightiness of the face-threatening act and to the status of those involved. Less well-judged is the Old Man's request to Creusa at *Ion* 739–740: τοῦ γήρως δέ μοι / συνεκπονοῦσα κῶλον ἰατρὸς γενοῦ ("Please be a healer of my old age by sharing the effort of my legs").[7] The Old Man is embarrassed by his physical frailty (742, 746), and

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[7] The translation is by Lee 1997, commenting in his note that it is "a strangely fulsome and somewhat pompous expression".

tries to distance himself from his request.[8] A similarly pompous impression is given by Agathon's response to Euripides' appeal for help, τίς οὖν παρ' ἡμῶν ἐστιν ὠφέλειά σοι; (Ar. *Thesm.* 183). Austin & Olson (2004: 117) translate "And what assistance canst thou have from *us*?", observing that it is an "overinflated" way of saying τί οὖν σ' ὠφελήσω; ("How can I help you?").

Compliments ("a god mighty and revered in heaven," 49) are a common form of positive politeness in the context of requests (e.g., *Hipp.* 267–270; Soph. *OT* 300–304). Another positive politeness strategy is to emphasize the relationship between the speaker and the hearer ("my father's closest relative," 48). Apollo thus begins his request to Hermes at *Ion* 29–36 by addressing him ὦ σύγγον' ('kinsman'), and Medea repeatedly identifies herself with the Chorus as a woman (e.g., *Med.* 259–266). That is why φίλος ('friend') is so common in requests, even when there is no particularly close relationship between speaker and hearer (e.g., *Med.* 1133; *Hipp.* 288, 473; *Andr.* 530–531, 842; *Hec.* 286; *Phoen.* 158; *Or.* 136–138; cf. Lloyd 2005b: 229 n. 8).

Poseidon's reply too is interesting from the point of view of positive politeness. O'Neill (1941: 312) writes: "His reply is cordial and accommodating, but very reserved. … The formality of these lines is shown by the title ἄνασσ'' Αθάνα, [Queen Athena], and by the fulsomeness of the diction". The first point to note here is that Poseidon threatens Athena's face by giving her permission to speak to him, although of course far less than if he had refused permission. "Formal acceptance of anything is intrinsically face-threatening to the speaker, who is explicitly committed to a debt or to a future course of action. Less obviously, it can also threaten the face of the hearer, by putting on record that (s)he has made a particular offer and implying that rejection was an option for the speaker." (Lloyd 1999: 36). In this case, it would plainly be out of the question for Poseidon to refuse to speak to Athena, so acceptance in itself is not especially polite. Politeness requires some redress to Athena's face, and this redress must be oriented to the 'virtual offence' (i.e., be somewhat exaggerated).

A good example of a polite response in a somewhat similar situation is Agamemnon's reply to Odysseus' introduction to his advice that Ajax should be buried (Soph. *Aj.* 1328–31):

> Οδ.   ἔξεστιν οὖν εἰπόντι τἀληθῆ φίλῳ
>   σοὶ μηδὲν ἧσσον ἢ πάρος ξυνηρετεῖν;
> Αγ.   εἴπ'· ἦ γὰρ εἴην οὐκ ἂν εὖ φρονῶν, ἐπεὶ
>   φίλον σ' ἐγὼ μέγιστον Ἀργείων νέμω.

ODYSSEUS: May a friend speak the truth and remain your partner no less
        than before?
AGAMEMNON: Speak; for otherwise I should not show sense, since I consider you my
greatest friend among the Argives (tr. Garvie 1998).

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[88] Long 1968: 80 sees the nouniness of Soph. *Trach.* 1212–13 "purely as a means of elevating the style", but there seems also to be some distancing from Heracles' disagreeable request. Cf. Soph. *El.* 469, an extremely polite request by Chrysothemis.

We see here a similar request for permission to speak, together with positive-politeness redress in the form of an emphasis on the relationship between the two speakers. Agamemnon's reply may seem at first sight to be surprisingly effusive, but he is aware of the vulnerability of Odysseus' face and takes correspondingly energetic steps to redress the face-threat (cf. Soph. *OT* 282–283; *OC* 464–465, 1414–15; Lloyd 2005b: 230–1). Poseidon does nothing of the sort, and indeed expresses the value which he places on kinship in a strikingly 'nouny' and roundabout way (lit. 'kin-meetings are no small cause-of-love for the heart'). His response may be favourable, but could have contained more polite exaggeration.

Athena correspondingly uses the rather reserved 'tragic' aorist to express her appreciation ("I thank you for your graciousness," 53; cf. Lloyd 1999: 39). Her expression φέρω … ἐς μέσον λόγους ("I propose that we discuss") suggests a formal and public arena (e.g., *Supp.* 439; Hdt 4.97.5; Dem. 18.139), distancing herself from her request. She does this so effectively that Poseidon assumes in his reply that she is bringing a message from someone else (another common meaning of φέρειν λόγους, e.g. *Hipp.* 1157). This negative politeness strategy is combined with the common positive politeness strategy of indicating that speaker and hearer have common interests and wants ("a matter of common interest to us both," cf. Brown & Levinson 1987: 103).

Poseidon's next couplet (55–56), begins with μῶν. The important discussion of this particle by Barrett (1964: 314–315) refutes the traditional view that it always introduces a question expecting a negative answer. Barrett proposes that the speaker may well expect a positive answer but is reluctant to accept that it is true. He cites this line for the reluctance weakening down into hesitation, so that "the particle then may mark the question as a mere guess". The extremely polite context of Poseidon's use of μῶν here raises the possibility that it is a pessimistic hedge, a common negative politeness gambit whereby the imposition on the hearer is reduced by the assumption of a negative response. Brown and Levinson (1987: 173–176) cite English expressions of the type "I don't suppose there'd be any chance of you …". μῶν can thus be used to prompt a response without expressing too strong an expectation of what that response will be. There are two examples in *Andromache*. Orestes replies to Hermione's statement that she retaliated against the rival for her husband's bed, μῶν ἐς γυναῖκ' ἔρραψας οἷα δὴ γυνή; ("Did you perhaps plot against her as women do?", 911). Peleus later responds to the Chorus's statement that Hermione was afraid that Neoptolemus would throw her out, μῶν ἀντὶ παιδὸς θανασίμων βουλευμάτων; ("Because of her plot to kill his son, perhaps?", 1058). The answers to these questions are fairly predictable, and there is no reason why the questioners should be reluctant to accept that they are true. The particle is appropriate to tactful prompting (cf. 906).

It is also more polite to offer alternative possible answers than to ask a straight question, since this reduces the negative face-threat (i.e., the imposition on the interlocutor) by simplifying the task of answering. Ion, for example, asks the Chorus: "Has Xouthos already left the sacred tripod and oracle, or is he still in the temple enquiring about his childlessness?" (*Ion* 512–13).[9] Contrast (e.g.) *Hec.* 484–485 or *Or.*

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[9] Tr. Lee, who remarks in his note (1997: 215): "The style here is formal and dignified". Cf. the "Am I right in thinking?" gambit (e.g., Soph. *El.* 660–665; Ar. *Plut.* 959–961),

375–376, where alternatives are not offered. Poseidon employs a negative politeness gambit which redresses, if only formally, the threat to Athena's face in her previous utterance. Poseidon offers more than Creon's habitual τί δ' ἔστι ("What is it?": Soph. *Ant*. 387, 991, 997), but still falls short of the level of redress offered (e.g.) by Agamemnon at Soph. *Aj.* 1330–1.

      Conacher (1967: 137) expresses a widely held view when he writes, "The most striking feature of the prologue is its picture of the gods as cruel and selfish in their awful decisions and fickle in their allegiances". The Trojans repeatedly complain that they have been betrayed by the gods (e.g., 469–71; cf. Parker 1997: 154–155), but the reasons for Athena's hatred are familiar enough even if they are nowhere mentioned in the play. Poseidon, while initially surprised by the apparent fickleness of her allegiances (59–60, 67–68), is soon satisfied when she explains why she wants to punish the Greeks. He himself is far from indifferent to Troy, and abandons it with resentment and regret. Nevertheless, Euripides is at pains to establish the distance between the world of gods and the world of mortals. The high status of Athena and Poseidon is emphasized, and it is no accident that this is perhaps the most polite dialogue in Greek tragedy.

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which similarly transfers the emphasis from second to first person (contrast "Who do you think that is?").

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