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Off-record politeness in Sophocles: The patterned dialogues of female characters

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Abstract: This paper tests the applicability of Brown and Levinson's concept of off-record politeness on a specific sub-set of patterned dialogues in Sophocles' extant tragedies, i.e., those involving the participation of female speakers. Brown and Levinson's framework still provides the most suitable model for empirical analysis, but with refinements concerning the interrelation between emic and etic politeness, the notion of face, the extension of analysis to longer stretches of conversation, and the absolute ranking of the super-strategies. The survey suggests that a strict connection between the use of off record and the mitigation of FTAs can be established quite straightforwardly and that the hearer's reactions to off record can help to identify the valid instances of the phenomenon. Moreover, it is argued that (a) female speakers frequently resort to off record, most notably in cross-sex interactions with men invested with high power; (b) few restricted categories of male speakers, i.e., strangers and lower-status characters, do use off-record politeness towards women; (c) off record in same-sex interactions among female characters is limited to when the imposition is of extraordinary seriousness.

Keywords: politeness, Sophocles, Greek tragedy, stichomythia, off record

1 Politeness in Greek and Latin literature: an overview

Within the relatively newly-born field of Historical Pragmatics, scholarly work on politeness and face-work applied to Ancient Greek and Latin literary and documentary texts has gone almost unnoticed among linguists. Still so, contributions have been significantly growing in number over the last two decades. Firstly, detailed diachronic and synchronic descriptions of Greek and Latin forms of address (Dickey 1995; 1996; 2001; 2002; 2004a; 2004b; Brown 2003;

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2006) have been offered, suggesting a relation between these usages and the relative social standings of the speakers in interaction. Secondly, behaviour in conversation rituals, e.g., greetings and farewells (Ferri 2008; Poccetti 2010) and the use of formulaic expressions such as 'yes', 'no', and 'please' (Krylová 2004; Ferri 2010; Dickey 2012) have been investigated, although in Latin only. Thirdly, some attention has been devoted to diachronic realizations of individual classes of speech acts, e.g., directives (Risselada 1993; Leiwo 2010; Denizot 2011), or individual types of face-threatening acts, e.g., insults (Lentini 2013). Fourthly, and most importantly, various aspects of linguistic politeness and face-work have been separately investigated, from a variety of different angles, into major literary genres and authors, e.g., Homeric epics (Minchin 2007; Scodel 2008), Attic Tragedy (Lloyd 1999; 2006; 2009; Battezzato 2012: 318–321), Menander's New Comedy (Sorrentino 2013), Cicero's letters (Hall 2005a; 2005b; 2009) and cross-examinations in Roman law-courts (Ferri 2014).

With the exception of Lentini (2013), all the aforementioned studies rely on Brown and Levinson's model of politeness as face-preservation (1987 [1978]) and equally accept its basic pragmatic foundations, i.e., Grice's Cooperative Principle (CP) and conversational implicature (1989: 22–40), and Speech Act Theory (Austin 1962; Searle 1969, 1975, 1976).[1] This paper will also make use of these methodologies, yet I preliminarily intend to qualify my acceptance of the whole framework in four respects.

Emic vs. etic dimension. A clearer awareness of the two dimensions of politeness$_1$ and politeness$_2$ is a much-needed corrective to Brown-Levinson's wholly etic framework (Watts et al. 1992: 3; Eelen 2001: 30–86). However, a mere shift of focus away from politeness$_2$ towards politeness$_1$, as suggested by discursive approaches (Mills 2003: 12–14; Watts 2003: 9), aside from being itself a problematic move for present-day languages (Haugh 2007; Terkourafi 2012: 618–620), does not work for historical politeness unless some crucial refinements in methodology are introduced. Politeness involves evaluative beliefs that are socially grounded within a specific culture and are expressed by specific sets of (meta)linguistic evaluators available to its insiders. On the one hand, to approach politeness by an emic perspective involves taking into account all these factors (Kádár and Haugh 2013: 93–96), whilst on the other hand, the etic perspective, not necessarily synonymous with a theoretical one, helps to systematize the different ways in which the social world is conceptualized by different relational networks (Kádár and Haugh 2013: 96–97). Within the field

1 For criticism against Brown-Levinson's framework, see Eelen (2001), Watts (2003), Terkourafi (2005, 2012), Leech (2014). A well-balanced review of politeness studies is offered by Culpeper (2011).

of Historical Pragmatics, the collection and analysis of empirical data located in the interactional context (Taavitsainen and Jucker 2010: 4), ideally with the aid of corpus-based methodologies (Jucker and Taavitsainen 2014: 6–7), remains the most productive way of looking at politeness phenomena in historical languages.

Face. Criticisms of Western-centrism have been levelled against the universalistic conception of face forwarded by Brown and Levinson (Kasper 1990: 195–196; Culpeper 2011: 403–404). In turn, the psycho-social configuration of Greek mentality, at least in Archaic and Classical Age (approximately from 8th to 4th century BCE) may suggest significant overlaps between the construct of face and the culturally-specific notions of *timē* and *aidōs*, whereas face-threat finds explicit correspondence in the Greek notion of *hybris* (Lloyd 2009: 185, n. 2).[2] Deeper investigation would be desirable to prove these parallelisms, but it seems that Brown-Levinson's framework might be provisionally applied, and very promisingly so, to Greek literary texts.

Micro-level vs. contextual analysis. Politeness, it is argued, cannot simply reside at utterance level, but should be assessed within longer stretches of dialogic interactions (Mills 2003: 38). Some shortcomings of Speech Act Theory had been already noted by Brown and Levinson (1987 [1978]: 11, 232–238), and this approach has been variously refuted. Despite some obvious pitfalls, however, an investigation of politeness based on Speech Act Theory still remains productive in Historical Pragmatics (Archer 2010: 402), on the condition that it is integrated with other methodologies, i.e., Conversation Analysis and its related notions of sequence and preference organization (Sacks et al. 1974; Sidnell and Stivers 2012).

Hierarchy and distribution of strategies. The absolute ranking of bald-on-record, positive/negative politeness, and off record, as suggested by Brown and Levinson (1987 [1978]: 60), has been validated (and nowhere seriously contradicted) by studies on Greek and Latin literature: it is even reinforced by my general findings on Sophocles. At utterance level, the four super-strategies are

2 Cairns (1993: 13) characterizes *aidōs* as a self-inhibitory and evaluative notion at the crossroads between honour and shame which serves "to accept one's status *vis-à-vis* others", and to recognize that a self-assertion beyond limits "would impinge to the honour of others" (see also Williams 1993). *Timē*, on which, to the best of my knowledge, a book-length discussion is still lacking, has to do with the defence of one's own preserve and esteem. Fisher (1992: 1) defines *hybris* as "the serious assault to the honour of another, which is likely to cause shame, and lead to anger and attempts at revenge". Additional vocabulary relevant to face and face-threats is also provided by derivatives and compounds of the three main words mentioned above, e.g., *atimia*, *anaideia*, and also by *aischynē* ('shame'), *sebas* ('reverence'), *phthonos* ('offence') and their cognates.

rarely mixed, except for the sporadic co-occurrence of positive-politeness in-group markers with other indicators of negative politeness or off record. Anyway, the issue of whether other specific outputs not listed by Brown and Levinson could be added to the realizations available for the super-strategies must remain in principle open-ended.

2 Patterned dialogue and off record in Greek drama

2.1 Tragic patterned dialogue: a formal description

For many reasons, theatrical and dialogic texts are a privileged field for the study of historical politeness and pragmatics (Jucker 2008: 896; Poccetti 2014). One of the earliest and best preserved instances of dialogic drama-scripts is provided by Attic drama (5th century BCE). Stichomythia is therein defined as a form of verbal exchange in which two characters alternatively speak one-line utterances in iambic trimeters or trochaic tetrameters (1 : 1 pattern). This restrictive definition comes from the lexicographer Pollux (*Onomasticon* 4.113, 2nd century CE), but modern scholars typically include under this same label instances of two-line (*distichomythia*: 2 : 2) or half-line (*antilabē:* ½ : ½) dialogues, as well as many related forms of line-by-line exchange (e.g., 2 : 1, 3 : 2, etc.).[3] Traditional definitions can be conveniently replaced with the univocal label of 'patterned dialogue', which I shall henceforth systematically adopt.

Patterned dialogue is a staple of all the surviving plays of Aeschylus, Sophocles, and Euripides. In Aeschylus, patterned dialogue is employed least frequently (ca. 11.8 % out of the total lines) and in very short runs characterized by extremely regular patterns. In Sophocles, we witness the highest usage of patterned dialogue (ca. 24.3 %), partly because of his several infractions to the regular pattern, and decidedly longer stretches than Aeschylus. Euripides' plays, in turn, have a slightly lower ratio than those by Sophocles (ca. 19.6 %), but contain regular patterns throughout and increasingly longer stretches of dialogues, especially in the plays later than 415 BCE. Three content-types have been recognized by scholars: (a) information-exchange, mostly in the form of questions and answers, (b) persuasion, (c) quarrel.[4] While other sub-types are

3 See Gross (1905); Schwinge (1968); Seidensticker (1969, 1971); Collard (1980, 2014); Rutherford (2012: 164–179); Schuren (2014: 1).

4 For references, see. n. 3.

classifiable under one or the other of these three headings[5], Sophocles and Euripides may have introduced patterned dialogues also on occasion of greetings and farewells. Moreover, Sophocles frequently mixed different typologies, i.e., information and persuasion. These and other innovations might suggest some evolution from an earlier formal rigidness towards a more convincing imitation of conversational informality, as well as a considerable expansion of the theatrical potentialities of patterned dialogue: however, their overall impact on the development of the genre need not be exaggerated.

The various techniques employed to create semantic and syntactical connection between consecutive turns (e.g., use of interactional particles, key-word repetition, piecemeal answers, etc.) have been considerably explored by scholars (Ireland 1974; Mastronarde 1979; Taragna 1997), yet without any strong orientation on pragmatics.[6] Most recently, however, the mechanism of turn-taking in Euripides' stichomythia has been compared (Schuren 2014: 11–49) with the systematics of talk-in-interaction proposed by Sacks et al. (1974). Differently from naturally-occurring conversations, patterned dialogue strictly forbids gaps or overlaps from one turn to another, more than one speaker talking at a time (even briefly), and discontinuous talk. It is also very much, though not too strictly, inhibitive in terms of turn-order, turn-size and turn-distribution variation, plays by Sophocles being in this respect considerably less rigid than those by Euripides. In addition, tragic patterned dialogue may be fruitfully analyzed with the help of Conversation Analysis in terms of clear-cut sequences of adjacency pairs, e.g., question-answer, request-accept/refusal, etc.[7]

2.2 Patterned dialogue and off-record language

Much of the dramatic effect produced by patterned dialogue arises from the gradual revelation of relevant pieces of information, quite often by means of sequential questions matched by repeatedly imperfect answers. Single conversational turns are occasionally incomplete in terms of syntax, so that they need to be filled up either by the hearer in their subsequent interventions or by self-

5 For instance, recognition-, cross-examination- and messenger-stichomythia fall under (a), while advice-, deception-, prayer-, action-, and 'death'-stichomythia (i.e., accompanying the killing of a character offstage), are variations of (b).

6 On particles and semantic/syntactic 'resonance' in Greek tragic dialogue see Drummen (2016: ch. 3).

7 On different applications of CA to Greek tragic dialogue, see now Drummen (2016: ch. 4) and Van Emde Boas (forthcoming).

completion on speaker's part in the following turn(s) (Mastronarde 1979: 52–73).

It is in such contexts that off record prominently occurs. According to Brown and Levinson (1987 [1978]: 211), a given utterance is off record "if it is done in such a way that it is not possible to attribute only one clear communicative intention to the act". The production of non-unambiguous utterances involves the presence of a trigger, i.e., some violation of Grice's CP, which helps the hearer to notice that some additional inference is needed. Brown and Levinson (1987 [1978]: 212) suggest that crucial for the understanding of the inference is "the reconstructed motive that led [the] S[peaker] to be indirect". Face-preservation, they argue, must be that motive, although it need not be the only one (Fraser 1990: 230; Terkourafi 2011; 2014).

The interrelation between off-record indirectness and politeness has been found to be significant in many languages, including Modern Greek (Sifianou 1993, 1997), and its validity has been successfully tested on the Homeric poems (Lloyd 2004). It is equally relevant to the ways in which patterned dialogue is constructed. More precisely, the speaker's recourse to off record is constantly signalled by the hearer's efforts to grasp the full implication of what has been said. In turn, those efforts are manifested through the communication of the hearer's imperfect understanding of the on-going state of affairs (SoA). For this and other reasons, at least in the considered corpus, off-record politeness is demonstrably a matter of the speaker's strategic behaviour and functions as an actual replacement of other expressions suggesting linguistic directness.

2.3 Description of the data-set and purposes of the investigation

In what follows, I shall apply Brown-Levinson's theorization of off record on a well-established formal device, patterned dialogue, which is very much distinctive of a single literary genre, i.e., Attic fifth-century tragedy. I will limit my investigation to a single author, Sophocles, and to the specific sub-class of female speakers, seen both in same-sex and cross-sex conversations. A handful of instances of off-record politeness in Sophocles' plays is discussed by Lloyd (2006: 235–238), and the present paper is ideally conceived as a systematic complement to his very brief treatment. It goes without saying that the actual behaviour of the Athenian fifth-century women in real life need not be strictly paralleled by the female characters portrayed in the surviving scripts of Greek tragedy. Even so, I am inclined to believe that, at least in Sophocles' plays, the distribution of politeness strategies among female characters would tend to

validate a number of widespread expectations concerning women's behaviour, notably their spatial confinement to the domestic environment, juridical minority, and reduced influence in the public sphere (Seidensticker 1995).

The considered corpus is made up of 49 patterned dialogues spread over six out of the seven extant tragedies by Sophocles (*Ajax*, *Antigone*, *Trachiniae*, *Oedipus Tyrannus*, *Electra*, *Oedipus at Colonus*).[8] The exact relative chronology cannot be ascertained, but all the plays are to be dated between 458 BCE (i.e., the production of Aeschylus' *Oresteia*) and 401 BCE (posthumous production of *Oedipus at Colonus*: Sophocles died in 405 BCE). The corpus itself consists of some 640 conversational turn-units, amounting to approximately 916 lines.[9] Within the corpus, some 88 turn-units (13.7 % of the corpus) yield evidence of off-record mitigation, a few of which remain of course doubtful. In the following, I shall deal with a sample of such occurrences according to the classification proposed by Brown and Levinson (1987 [1978]: 214).[10]

I wish to make three substantial points: (1) a strict connection between explicit flouting of the CP and mitigation of FTAs can be straightforwardly established in most cases; (2) the addressee's reaction proves crucial to recognizing the valid instances of off record and to assessing the dramatic effect achieved in the different contexts; (3) the calculation of risk relative to each FTA is regularly done by the speaker on a cost-benefit basis. This is motivated both by general considerations regarding the speaker's relative standing vis-à-vis the hearer, i.e., Brown-Levinson's Power (P) and Distance (D) variables, and by situational considerations, i.e., Ranking-of-Impositions (R_x) variable.

8 Henceforth cited by the relevant abbreviations: *Aj.*, *Ant.*, *Tr.*, *OT*, *El.*, *OC*. The seventh play, *Philoctetes*, does not include female characters.

9 Obviously, it is sometimes difficult to determine with precision the boundaries of patterned dialogue, e.g. when a character's speech ends with a question or a comment that clearly elicits the following conversation, or when the ending of the dialogue in fact constitutes the beginning of a new extended speech.

10 For the Greek text, see Lloyd-Jones and Wilson (1990). Translations are my own throughout: they are not intended to reproduce the artistry of the original, but merely to provide a guide for readers unfamiliar with Greek. For an English translation of Sophocles, see Lloyd-Jones (1994).

3 Off record in Sophocles' patterned dialogue: Discussion of examples

3.1 Violations of Relevance Maxim

In the opening of the *Antigone*, the title-character brings her sister Ismene on stage to communicate her decision of burying their brother Polynices in spite of the prohibition issued by Creon, their uncle and the new monarch of Thebes. Antigone firstly asks Ismene if she knows anything about the edict (*Ant*. 1–10), and having received a negative answer, reports the related events in a speech: Creon gave full honours to the other killed brother Eteocles, but condemned Polynices' corpse to not receiving proper funerals, additionally threatening stoning on transgressors (*Ant*. 31–36). Now Antigone instigates the patterned dialogue by addressing Ismene directly (*Ant*. 37–38):

(1) Αν. [...]
οὕτως ἔχει σοι ταῦτα, καὶ δείξεις τάχα
εἴτ' εὐγενὴς πέφυκας εἴτ' ἐσθλῶν κακή.

An. [...]
That's how things stand, and you'll quickly show
whether you were born noble or coward from noble parents.

There is no evident connection between the former resumptive clause and the alternative courses suggested by the latter. Antigone clearly wants Ismene to do something for her, something that, in Antigone's words, will prove Ismene's nobility. Only in this restricted sense, i.e., that Ismene will be stigmatized as a bad woman if she refuses cooperation, it could be argued that Antigone's speech "ends on a challenging note" (Griffith 1999: 139). Instead of coming to the point straightaway, Antigone alludes to the request by means of a hint-like utterance. Ismene in turn asks how she could be helpful "if things stand this way" (εἰ τάδ' ἐν τούτοις), possibly a clue of her non-cooperative attitude (*Ant*. 39–40). Antigone's off record depends on the high R_x underlying her FTA, and is only the first move towards the explicit revelation of the request, which comes at line 43. Because of their fuelling potential, hints are normally found at dialogue-beginnings.[11]

Like hints, association clues require stages of practical reasoning from the hearer, but these are grounded in her/his past knowledge. In *Trachiniae*, hav-

11 See also *Tr*. 76–77, *El*. 1179, *OC* 324–326, 328b and 387; cf. also *El*. 1192.

ing discovered that the robe she sent as a gift for Heracles is anointed with poisoned blood, Deianira rushes on stage to talk to the Chorus of Trachinian women (*Tr.* 663–665):

(2) Δη. γυναῖκες, ὡς δέδοικα μὴ περαιτέρω
πεπραγμέν' ἦ μοι πάνθ' ὅσ' ἀρτίως ἔδρων.
Χο. τί δ' ἔστι, Δηάνειρα, τέκνον Οἰνέως;

De. Ladies, how am I afraid that beyond the limits
things were done by me in all I lately did!
ch. What's on, Deianira, son of Oeneus?

In the previous episode Deianira had briefly discussed with the Chorus the possibility of sending the robe to Heracles, without receiving a clear encouragement to act. At this stage it is perfectly plausible for her to adopt indirectness in order to minimize the implication of bad news delivered to the Chorus and to avoid incurring criticism by her companions. The words "all I lately did" allude to well-known events of the recent past, but are not enough to get the Chorus understand the situation. Incidentally, the distancing force of the in-group marker "ladies", matched by the Chorus' "Deianira, son of Oeneus"[12], suggests a cautious shift back from previous acknowledgment of mutual friendship (see *Tr.* 223 ὦ φίλα γύναι, "dear woman", vs. *Tr.* 225 φίλαι γυναῖκες, "dear women"). Association clues, too, are usually found at dialogue beginning or whenever a new topic is introduced.[13]

The Relevance Maxim is also violated by presuppositions. Typical occurrences consist of utterances that are straightforwardly clear as for their propositional content, but not completely relevant once they are placed within their interactional context. In the *Ajax*, soon after Tecmessa's plea to Ajax not to leave behind his family and the Chorus' kind defence of her stance, Ajax stops any further discussion by requiring unquestioned obedience from his concubine. A conversation between the two is thereupon initiated (*Aj.* 529–532):

(3) Τε. ἀλλ', ὦ φίλ' Αἴας, πάντ' ἔγωγε πείσομαι.
Αι. κόμιζέ νύν μοι παῖδα τὸν ἐμόν, ὡς ἴδω.
Τε. καὶ μὴν φόβοισί γ' αὐτὸν ἐξελυσάμην.
Αι. ἐν τοῖσδε τοῖς κακοῖσιν, ἢ τί μοι λέγεις;

12 Jebb (1892: 103), approved by Easterling (1982: 157), reads this second vocative as a sign of the Chorus' "earnest sympathy", but the formality here matches Deianira's strategic distancing.

13 See *OT* 952–953, *El.* 1183, *OC* 402, 409.

Te. Well, dear Ajax, I shall obey in everything.
Aj. Then bring me my child, so I can see him.
Te. It was in fact for fear that I sent him away.
Aj. In the midst of these troubles, or what do you mean?

In (3) Tecmessa unequivocally professes obedience to Ajax (*Aj.* 529), but when it comes to carry out his instructions to bring Eurysaces on stage (530), she unexpectedly delays. To reject Ajax's request goes well beyond Tecmessa's intentions, as shown by the subsequent development of the conversation. Thus, she provides Ajax with the reason, i.e., fear (φόβοισι), why she is actually delaying, yet appositely leaving such reasons half unexplained, as if they were already fully known to the addressee. Following Denniston (1954: 357–358), scholars usually render the cluster καὶ μήν as "and yet", thus emphasizing Tecmessa's *faux pas*, but this might wrongly communicate Tecmessa unwillingness to satisfy Ajax's desire. Rather, καὶ μήν ("in fact") may be used here for "substantiating a required condition" (Denniston 1954: 353). In so doing, Tecmessa temporarily diverts the discussion onto a new topic, thereby trying to prevent Ajax's potential criticism of her behaviour.

Presuppositions, the most frequent violation of Relevance Maxim, are used to mitigate different FTAs, such as bad news, requests, and expressions of violent emotions.[14] Clear boundaries between association clues and presuppositions are often difficult to draw, as in the case of Oedipus' repeated off record allusions about Tiresias' prophecies in *Oedipus Tyrannus* (*OT* 744–745, 747–748, 767–768), which are not fully caught by Jocasta who was not present during the confrontation between Oedipus and the seer.

3.2 Violations of Quantity Maxim

Violations of Quantity Maxim are generally connected with the mitigation required by certain types of FTAs, most notably announcement of bad news.

Understatements consist in scaling a SoA lower than required by the situation. Teucer's Messenger in *Aj.* comes on stage to inform that the seer Calchas prophesied that Athena's wrath against Ajax will relent if he keeps within the hut for the present day. Approaching Tecmessa, he goes off record (*Aj.* 792–793):

14 See *Ant.* 515, 570, *El.* 387, 389, 1115–1116, 1185, 1201.

(4) Αγ. [...] Αἴαντος δ' ὅτι,
θυραῖος εἴπερ ἐστίν, οὐ θαρσῶ πέρι.
Τε. καὶ μὴν θυραῖος, ὥστε μ' ὠδίνειν τί φής.

Me. [...] as for Ajax,
if he is out, I am not confident about that.
Te. And in fact he is out, so that what you say pains me

The Messenger's words "I am not confident about that" mean that Ajax might be in great danger, but the point is made in such a way as to allow further questions by Tecmessa. Note that (4) does not merely imply a generically upper-bounding evaluation, but exactly the contrary SoA (Levinson 2000: 127–129).[15]

Overstatements are the opposite of understatements. In the prologue of *Tr.*, Deianira, distressed by the prolonged absence of Heracles, is summoned by the Nurse to send off her son Hyllus in search for his father (*Tr.* 49–60). Hyllus instantly appears on stage, and Deianira greets him (*Tr.* 61–64):

(5) Δη. ὦ τέκνον, ὦ παῖ, κἀξ ἀγεννήτων ἄρα
μῦθοι καλῶς πίπτουσιν· ἥδε γὰρ γυνὴ
δούλη μέν, εἴρηκεν δ' ἐλεύθερον λόγον.
Υλ. ποῖον; δίδαξον, μῆτερ, εἰ διδακτά μοι.

De. My child, my son, so even from those of lowly birth
words can fall out well: this woman,
despite being a slave, has spoken a word worthy of a free person.
Hy. What word? Instruct me, mother, if I am to be instructed.

The two statements that make up Deianira's utterance express the same basic idea: against expectations, the Nurse voiced thoughts that transcended her nature and status. Incidentally, Deianira's words sound extremely congratulatory towards the Nurse, but this is certainly not her primary concern at this point. Rather, she wants Hyllus to realize that she is about to assign him some task, which for the moment she leaves unexpressed. Not surprisingly, then, Hyllus promptly manifests his willingness to obey his mother, who in fact makes her request, as if it came from the slave herself, in the next turn (65–66). To be sure, it is not too extraordinary as a form of advice that Hyllus should inquire about his father's whereabouts, yet the off-record overstatement serves to attract the attention of the interlocutor and persuade him to take action.[16]

15 See also *Tr.* 314–315, 588–589, *El.* 1188.
16 See also *El.* 1174–1175, 1192, 1194, 1199, 1448–1449.

Tautology is attested only once in the corpus. In *OC* Ismene comes to Athens from Thebes to warn the old Oedipus that Theban ambassadors returning from Delphi reported about a new oracle admonishing that Thebans' survival would depend on their successful rescue and ultimate burial of Oedipus. After prolonged greetings, having noticed that Ismene is coming alone (except for a male attendant), Oedipus asks her about his sons, Eteocles and Polynices (*OC* 335–336):

(6) Οι. οἱ δ' αὐθόμαιμοι ποῦ νεανίαι πονεῖν; 335
Ισ. εἴσ' οὖπέρ εἰσι· δεινὰ τἀν κείνοις τανῦν.

Oe. And the brothers, where are the youngsters toiling?
Is. They are where they are: now things go bad for them.

In Example (6) Ismene is divided. On the one hand, she does not want to commit herself to a negative assessment of her brothers or to trouble Oedipus with more bad news. On the other hand, she cannot lie about them. The off-record tautology thus provides a valuable compromise solution. Still so, the absence of the brothers does not go unnoticed to Oedipus, and he immediately starts a violent tirade against the womanish ethos of his male offspring compared to the manly loyalty of his daughters.

3.3 Violations of Quality Maxim

The convention of truthfulness is a universal assumption of verbal interaction (Lewis 1969). For that reason, following a suggestion by Grice (1989: 371), a number of Neo-Gricean critics have emphasized the importance of Quality Maxim (Levinson 1983; Horn 1984). Assumption of truthfulness is no less crucial to tragic patterned dialogue, and violations of it are typically much more conspicuous than any other.

Contradictions occur at crucial turning points of the plot. In the third episode of *OT*, the Corinthian Messenger comes on stage to report the news of Polybus' death to Jocasta and Oedipus. After the elaborate greetings to the Chorus and Jocasta, he firstly mentions the task of his mission to the queen (*OT* 934–938):

(7) Αγ. ἀγαθὰ δόμοις τε καὶ πόσει τῷ σῷ, γύναι.
Ιο. τὰ ποῖα ταῦτα; παρὰ τίνος δ' ἀφιγμένος;

Αγ. ἐκ τῆς Κορίνθου. τὸ δ' ἔπος οὐξερῶ τάχα,
ἥδοιο μέν (πῶς δ' οὐκ ἄν;) ἀσχάλλοις δ' ἴσως.[17]
Ιο. τί δ' ἔστι; ποίαν δύναμιν ὦδ' ἔχει διπλῆν;

Me. Good news for your house and your spouse, lady!
Jo. What news is that? And from whom are you coming?
Me. From Corinth. As to the word I shall speak soon,
you may rejoice (how not?), and perhaps also feel sorrow.
Jo. What's it? How can it possess such a double power?

The Messenger's hesitation becomes transparent from the disturbed syntax of lines 936–937, which may also constitute a violation of the Manner Maxim (see Section 3.4). The two SoAs envisaged in these lines stand in clear contrast both to one another and with the elliptical statement of line 934. After all, how could the same news be delightful and painful at the same time? On the one hand, the Messenger alludes to the fact that Oedipus will become the new king of Corinth. On the other hand, his rise to the throne is motivated by sad news, i.e., Polybus' death. Off-record contradiction forces Jocasta into making an inferential question, thus putting the Messenger in a position of advantage for the rest of the dialogue. Except for bad news, contradictions can be occasionally used to mitigate disagreement.[18]

Irony is ostensibly subversive of the Quality Maxim, and therefore most suitable for accommodating FTAs addressed to the hearer's positive face. In the final scene of *Electra*, irony is exploited by the title-character to feign polite behaviour during her deadly entrapment of her father-in-law Aegisthus: see *El.* 1448–1449, 1455, 1457 (Finglass 2007: 529–532; Lloyd 2012: 575–576).[19]

Metaphors too can be effectively used as polite substitutes for a number of FTAs.[20] In *Ajax*, once the sailors have called Tecmessa on stage to inform her about the arrival of the Messenger, they use the metaphor of the razor's edge to preannounce the impending disaster (*Aj.* 786):

17 For the punctuation of *OT* 936–937, I follow Dawe (2006). Lloyd-Jones and Wilson (1990) put a dash before τάχα to signal the Messenger's supposed self-aposiopesis, but Lloyd-Jones' translation (1994) inconsistently presupposes Dawe's text. I have also enclosed πῶς δ' οὐκ ἄν; in brackets to signal their parenthetical nature.

18 See *Tr.* 666–667, *El.* 766–768, *OC* 420.

19 See also *Tr.* 395–396, *El.* 393, 770–771, 1039.

20 See *OT* 726–727 and possibly *Ant.* 88.

(8) Xo. [...]
ξυρεῖ γὰρ ἐν χρῷ τοῦτο μὴ χαίρειν τινά.
Ch. [...]
This shaves close to the skin, so that someone will not rejoice.

Rhetorical questions are doubtlessly the most frequent violations of the Quality Maxim.[21] I will mention here a case of short-circuited reduplication of the strategy. Within the same context of (1), once Antigone explicitly requires help from Ismene with the burial of Polynices, Ismene reacts hesitantly (*Ant*. 43–48):

(9) Αν. εἰ τὸν νεκρὸν ξὺν τῇδε κουφιεῖς χερί.
Ισ. ἦ γὰρ νοεῖς θάπτειν σφ', ἀπόρρητον πόλει;
Αν. τὸν γοῦν ἐμόν, καὶ τὸν σόν, ἢν σὺ μὴ θέλῃς,
ἀδελφόν· οὐ γὰρ δὴ προδοῦσ' ἁλώσομαι.
Ισ. ὦ σχετλία, Κρέοντος ἀντειρηκότος;
Αν. ἀλλ' οὐδὲν αὐτῷ τῶν ἐμῶν <μ'> εἴργειν μέτα.
An. (Consider) if you will cover the corpse with this hand
Is. Are you really thinking to bury him, what is forbidden to the city?
An. (I'll bury) my brother, and yours, if you don't wish to:
for sure I'll not be found betraying him.
Is. Wretched one, even if Creon disagrees?
An. But he can't keep me away from my beloved ones.

Nowhere does Ismene properly answer Antigone's request, made at *Ant*. 43. Rather, Ismene delays by means of two rhetorical questions, by which she skews both the bare request (*Ant*. 44) and Antigone's indirect criticism of her own supposedly poor attachment to Polynices (*Ant*. 47). While all this suggests that Ismene is genuinely anxious for Antigone's fate, it also unequivocally conveys the former's reluctance to take action, which will be appropriately expressed at *Ant*. 49 ("Alas, be wise, my sister, [...]"). Discourse markers sometimes push such questions on-record, as is the case at *Ant*. 44 with the cluster ἦ γάρ ("really"), requiring confirmation of what has been said (Van Erp Taalman Kip 1997).

21 See *Aj*. 265–267, *Ant*. 39–40, 521, *El*. 940, 1037, 1098–1099, 1108–1109, 1174–1175, 1202, *OC* 1427–1428.

3.4 Violations of Manner Maxim

By infringing the Manner Maxim, speakers promote, at varying degrees, linguistic obscurity, presentational disorder and prolixity.

Ambiguity might potentially involve any imperfect overlap between literal and implied meaning (Brown and Levinson (1987 [1978]: 225), so that conceptual refinements are obviously needed. In Ancient Greek, ambiguity is explicitly called into question whenever a *vox media* or other generic words allowing multiple semantic interpretations are employed. A paradigmatic case occurs in the encounter between the Messenger and Tecmessa in *Ajax* mentioned at (4) (see Section 3.2). Soon after Tecmessa's eager exit from the hut (see (8)), the Chorus pre-announce bad news (*Aj.* 789–791):

(10) Χο. τοῦδ' εἰσάκουε τἀνδρός, ὡς ἥκει φέρων
Αἴαντος ἡμῖν πρᾶξιν ἣν ἤλγησ' ἐγώ.
Τε. οἴμοι, τί φής, ἄνθρωπε; μῶν ὀλώλαμεν;

Ch. Listen to this man, as he comes bringing news
to us about the condition of Ajax at which I was pained.
Te. Alas, man, what do you say? Are we destroyed?

The word πρᾶξις ("condition") is quite neutral and not transparent enough to suggest a negative SoA, although the audience, unlike Tecmessa, well knows that in the preceding exchange with the Chorus the Messenger had already given detailed information about Calchas' prophecy. Like Jocasta (*OT* 952–953), the Chorus facilitates the communication between the two parties by tactfully introducing the content of the FTA to be done by the Messenger, while still leaving to Tecmessa the task of initiating the conversation. Unlike association clues, the core of the mitigation does not reside here in mentioning practical reasoning relative to the hearer's knowledge, but in leaving the content of the FTA purposefully ill-defined.[22]

Vagueness too escapes clear definition: it may equally pertain to the identity of the addressee or to the content of the FTA.[23] In *Electra*, once Chrysothemis eventually realizes that Orestes is dead, in so (wrongly) persuaded by Electra, the latter feels it is the appropriate moment to propose a plan to get rid of Clytemnestra and Aegisthus, the killers of Agamemnon (*El.* 938–944):

22 See also *El.* 391, 1451, 1453.
23 See also *Ant.* 41, *Aj.* 269, *El.* 410, 793, *OC* 331b, 332b, 336.

(11) Ηλ. οὕτως ἔχει σοι ταῦτ'· ἐὰν δ' ἐμοὶ πίθῃ,
τῆς νῦν παρούσης πημονῆς λύσεις βάρος.
Χρ. ἦ τοὺς θανόντας ἐξαναστήσω ποτέ;
Ηλ. †οὐκ ἔσθ' ὅ γ'† εἶπον· οὐ γὰρ ὧδ' ἄφρων ἔφυν.
Χρ. τί γὰρ κελεύεις ὧν ἐγὼ φερέγγυος;
Ηλ. τλῆναί σε δρῶσαν ἃν ἐγὼ παραινέσω.
Χρ. ἀλλ' εἴ τις ὠφέλειά γ', οὐκ ἀπώσομαι.

El. That's how things stand: if you'll obey me
you will lighten the burden of the present grief
Chr. Shall I ever make the dead raise up?
El. †That's not what I meant†: I am not that fool!
Chr. Then what do you command that I can warrant for?
El. That you dare to do what I advise
Chr. Well, if it helps, I shall not reject it.

Electra's request at *El.* 938–939 is completely relevant, informative and truthful. On the surface, being phrased as a positive-politeness offer, it also promotes cooperation between the sisters. Yet, the wording chosen by Electra does not specify what Chrysothemis should do to free herself from grief. Like Ismene, Chrysothemis cannot conceive physical vengeance as a means of liberation, hence her apparently odd question at line 940. At *El.* 943 Electra is again far from clear on what she is requiring from her sister. The double off record allows Electra to gain the floor for a detailed explanation of her plan, a task which she takes on in the ensuing extended speech (*El.* 947–989).

Overgeneralizations tend to be easily recognizable.[24] Commonplace formulations are not infrequent, as in *OT* 961 (an occurrence outside the corpus), where the Messenger, answering Oedipus' question about the circumstances of Polybus' death, replies with an euphemistic, quasi-proverbial statement, i.e., σμικρὰ παλαιὰ σώματ' εὐνάζει ῥοπή, "a small jolt puts aged persons to sleep". Sometimes, overgeneralizations may also be used to mitigate criticism of the hearer: at the end of their confrontation, Electra asks Chrysothemis whether she is not right to conceive her revenge plan against Aegisthus and Clytemnestra, to which Chrysothemis replies (*El.* 1042):

(12) Χρ. ἀλλ' ἔστιν ἔνθα χἠ δίκη βλάβην φέρει

Chr. But there are situations where justice brings harm

24 See *Tr.* 592–593, *El.* 320, 770–771, 791, 945, 1042.

Off-record displacement occurs whenever the speaker identifies a different target for their FTA than the addressee in order for the latter to hopefully notice that the FTA is in fact addressed to them. Tragic patterned dialogue employs distinctive ways to realize this strategy: for instance, characters may temporarily address to an absent or ill-defined third-party (*El.* 1181, *OC* 330b). While in some cases the addressees are Zeus or the gods generally (*OT* 738, *El.* 411), elsewhere the addressee is a mortal person, either living or dead (*El.* 788–790, 1209–1210). At a crucial stage in the recognition scene of *El.*, Orestes, still posing as a Phocian stranger, urges Electra to give back the urn, supposedly containing his own ashes, which he previously delivered to her sister, to which Electra reacts by addressing the urn itself (called by the name of Orestes) in the hope that the stranger will accept her refusal as if it were directly addressed to him. Off-record displacement also possibly accounts for one of the most controversial lines of Greek tragedy, *Ant.* 572, spoken by Ismene according to the manuscripts, but variously assigned to Antigone or the Chorus by a number of scholars (for a survey, see Davies 1986). In the presence of Antigone, Ismene is trying to convince Creon not to execute her sister: her main argument is that, in so doing, Creon will deprive his son Haemon of his soon-to-be bride (*Ant.* 568). Once Creon explicitly declares his hatred of bad women (*Ant.* 571), Ismene suddenly bursts out calling for Haemon who is still offstage:

(13) Ισ. ὦ φίλταθ' Αἷμον, ὡς σ' ἀτιμάζει πατήρ.
Is. Dearest Haemon, how your father dishonours you![25]

Lastly, ellipsis, possibly the most problematic strategy to be identified. The criteria given by Brown and Levinson (1987 [1978]: 227) contemplate both syntactical incompleteness and the fairly generic cases of FTAs being left half-undone. The first heading ideally comprises some occurrences of cooperative completion of syntax, intentional aposiopesis by the speaker and/or utterances interrupted by the addressee (Mastronarde 1979: 52–73). Alternatively, an utterance that is syntactically unobjectionable may be perceived as elliptical by the addressee, who may therefore explicitly record her/his dissatisfaction with it. An interesting case is the stranger/Orestes' question at *El.* 1191, picking up Electra's 'elliptical' words at 1190:

(14) Ηλ. ὀθούνεκ' εἰμὶ τοῖς φονεῦσι σύντροφος.
Ορ. τοῖς τοῦ; πόθεν τοῦτ' ἐξεσήμηνας κακόν;

25 Translation by Lloyd-Jones (1994).

El. Because I live with the murderers.
Or. Whose murderers? From where comes the evil you allude to?

Orestes' first question "whose murderers?" picks up Electra's syntax, requiring its saturation with a genitive. Still so, to what extent can Electra's utterance be judged incomplete? On the one hand, Electra has many good reasons to avoid revealing the information that she has been requested for by the unrelated interlocutor, which suggests that she may want to be deliberately obscure. On the other hand, however, Electra's utterance can be understood as syntactically complete, in which case it is Orestes who is anxious to go ahead with his questions. Elsewhere, the intention to be elliptical is declared by the speaker, what pushes the utterance on record.[26]

4 Conclusion

From the preceding analysis it has been found that a clear correlation between the flouting of Grice's CP and the desire to mitigate FTAs of various kinds can be safely established. In most cases, the off-record nature of the single utterances can be inferred by the imperfect understanding manifested by the hearer.

Concerning the distribution of off record in Sophocles' female same-sex and cross-sex patterned dialogues, three distinctive trends should be noticed:

a) Off-record politeness is peculiar to female characters in every interactional context, even more so in cross-sex interactions with male interlocutors endowed with high P: see (3), (5), (6), (13);
b) Off-record utterances addressed by male to female characters almost invariably come from unrelated strangers or from lower-status males, e.g., messengers: see (4), (7), (8), (10);
c) Off-record utterances exchanged in female same-sex conversations (low D and P) are invariably connected with an exceptional yet temporary increase of the R_x variable: see (1), (2), (9), (11), (12). The occasionally off-record language used by Oedipus, a high-P male character, towards his wife Jocasta can be explained away accordingly as a sign of high R_x, i.e., Oedipus' reluctance to talk about the taboo topic of parricide (and incest) mentioned by Tiresias.

26 See also *Tr.* 401, *OT* 934, 1071–1072, *OC* 1414.

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