

# A Pragmatic Analysis of Cont(r)acts in Congreve's *The Way of the World*

Valentina Rossi

eCampus University of Novedrate  
(valentina.rossi1@uniecampus.it)

## Abstract

The present essay analyses selected dialogues drawn from William Congreve's *The Way of the World* (1700) from a pragmatic perspective. By focusing on the utterances spoken by the main characters, Mirabell and Millamant, I intend to demonstrate that emotions affect language and irreversibly shape both the reputation and the relationships of the individuals. The essay is organised into two sections: the former illustrates Brown and Levinson's Politeness Theory, Leech's maxims and Culpeper's super-strategies; the latter analyses the speech exchanges of the lovers throughout the comedy. In the final remarks, I argue that Congreve's masterpiece can be considered as a mirroring representation of the social and cultural background of late seventeenth-century England.

---

## Introduction

The hypothesis underpinning the research is that face can be affected by internal factors – namely the ones that depend on the speakers' choices, such as the recurs to im/politeness – and/or external factors that can be inferred by the context – for instance, the social and cultural background in which the language is used *in situ*.

The essay is organised as follows: Section 1 illustrates the methodology and focuses on Brown and Levinson's Politeness Theory, Leech's maxims and Culpeper's Impoliteness Theory; Section 2 presents a qualitative analysis of the linguistic peculiarities displayed by Millamant and Mirabell, the protagonists of William Congreve's *The Way of the World* (1700). Indeed, the gorgeous heiress and the rake employ conflictive language since the beginning of the comedy – to hide their mutual feelings from the others, according to the coeval social manners – reaching an *apex* in the so-called *proviso* scene (4.1.160-234)<sup>1</sup>.

In the conclusions, I remark that the pragmatic elements explored in the present study may be influenced by the social rules, the ethical conventions as well as the economic and

---

<sup>1</sup> All quotes from Congreve's *The Way of the World* are drawn from the 2020 Methuen edition by Roberts. The line numbers are provided between parentheses after quotes in the text.

dramatical background of late Restoration England.

### Methodology

Managing social interactions can be considered a key area of pragmatics, with several studies exploring the ‘what,’ the ‘who’ and, above all, the ‘why’ of relations (see Spencer-Oatey 2011: 3566-3567). From the second half of the twentieth century onwards, the speech exchanges have often been studied in light of Erving Goffman’s concept of “face” (1967: 5), later refined in Brown and Levinson’s Politeness Theory, arguably considered “the work which most effectively established the field” (Bousfield 2018: 288-289; see also Locher, Graham 2010: 5). In their pivotal work, *Politeness: some universals in language usage* ([1978]1987), the scholars distinguished a “positive face,” mainly related to the desire to be accepted by the others, from a “negative face,” which covered the desire to exert one’s freedom without impediments (see Brown, Levinson 1978: 61); furthermore, they argued that, overwhelmingly, people engaged in a conversation “maintain each other’s face” (Brown, Levinson 1978: 60). Nevertheless, interactions might be undermined by the so-called Face-Threatening-Acts (hereafter FTAs), that is, “those acts that by their nature run contrary to the face wants of the addressee and/or of the speaker” (Brown, Levinson 1978: 65).

In order to avoid the risk of damaging (or losing) face, Brown and Levinson theorised a series of strategies based on politeness, according to which the performer of an FTA could either deliver the attack on- or off-record; whether the message was intended to be conveyed on-record, the speaker might have spoken baldly or, conversely, employed a “redressive” strategy, namely an action “that [attempted] to counteract the potential face damage of the FTA by doing it in such a way, or with such modifications or additions, that [indicated] clearly that no such face threat [was] intended or desired” (Brown, Levinson 1978: 69-70)<sup>2</sup>. Moreover, considering politeness as a socially constructed phenomenon, the scholars introduced the following variables: 1) social distance between S and H: “the degree of familiarity and solidarity they share;” 2) relative power of S and H: “the degree to which the speaker can impose their will on the hearer;” 3) ranking of imposition attached to the speech act in the culture: “the degree of expenditure of goods and services by the hearer; the right of the speaker to perform the act; and the degree to which the hearer welcomes the imposition” (Brown, Levinson 1978: 74).

Analogously, politeness was at the base of Leech’s studies; in 1983, he theorised six maxims of interaction in the conviction that they would facilitate conversation:

- (I) TACT MAXIM
  - (a) Minimise cost to other [(b) Maximise benefit to other]
- (II) GENEROSITY MAXIM
  - (a) Minimise benefit to self [(b) Maximise cost to self]
- (III) APPROBATION MAXIM
  - (a) Minimise dispraise of other [(b) Maximise praise of other]
- (IV) MODESTY MAXIM
  - (a) Minimise praise of self [(b) Maximise dispraise of self]
- (V) AGREEMENT MAXIM

---

<sup>2</sup> The redressive strategies aimed to preserve both S and H’s claim for membership were labelled as Positive Politeness; those employed to protect the interactants’ freedom of action were related to Negative Politeness (see Brown, Levinson 1978: 70; 101-129).

- (a) Minimise disagreement between self and other
- [(b) Maximise agreement between self and other]
- (VI) SYMPATHY MAXIM
- (a) Minimise antipathy between self and other
- [(b) Maximise sympathy between self and other] (Leech 1983: 132).

Based on four parameters – cost/benefit, optionality, indirectness, authority/social distance – the Politeness Principle so conceived helped interlocutors manage their potential conflictive face wants with sociality rights. More specifically, tact and generosity maxims enabled the speaker to omit the cost of offers, requests, invitations, promises and other commissives/impositives; approbation and modesty maxims helped the speaker limit criticism or contempt towards the hearer, performing self-dispraise if needed; lastly, agreement and sympathy maxims could reduce antipathy and disagreement between the interlocutors.

In time, the politeness models illustrated above faced numerous criticisms, mainly on the ground that they both seemed arranged around an *a priori* system which “[forced] researchers to ignore what may be the central face-concerns for the individual interactions” (Tracy, Baratz 1994: 291; see also, among others, Spencer-Oatey 2009: 137; Culpeper, Haugh and Kádár 2017: 20; Grainger 2018: 4-5) and neglected conflictive interactions. On this matter, Jonathan Culpeper’s studies about Impoliteness marked a turning point in the linguistic domain.

Conversely to Brown and Levinson, he argued that, occasionally, people use language to offend deliberately, with no regard for the others’ faces (see Culpeper 1996a: 23). To explore such phenomenon in depth, he theorised a series of super-strategies centred upon conflictive utterances to shed light on *how* things are said rather than *what* is said:

1. BALD ON-RECORD IMPOLITENESS: “the FTA is performed in a direct, clear, unambiguous and concise way in circumstances where face is not irrelevant or minimised;”
2. POSITIVE IMPOLITENESS: “the use of strategies designed to damage the addressee’s positive face wants;”
3. NEGATIVE IMPOLITENESS: “the use of strategies designed to damage the addressee’s negative face wants;”
4. OFF-RECORD IMPOLITENESS: “the FTA is performed by means of an implicature but in such a way that one attributable intention clearly outweighs any others;”
5. WITHHOLD POLITENESS: “the absence of politeness work where it would be expected” (Culpeper 1996b: 352).

In the following section, the principles of politeness and impoliteness as presented above will be employed to analyse selected excerpts of Congreve’s *The Way of the World*.

### Analysis

Mirabell is a reformed rake<sup>3</sup>, now desperately in love with Millamant, the most beautiful nubile woman in London. Arguably, they are the most relevant characters of *The Way of the World*, as they are the so-called “gay couple” whose marriage concludes the comedy and seals the happy ending.

---

<sup>3</sup> “his [Mirabell] relations with Mrs. Fainall have quite clearly been conducted in the rakish style, but in the pursuit of marriage Mirabell has reformed himself into a more orthodox, if also lucid, gallant suitor, which is not incompatible with his widely remarked status of *honnête homme*” (MacKenzie 2014: 264; see also Turner 1987: 66-67).

Their relationship is immediately addressed in the opening act by Fainall – the male deuteragonist of the play – who, by invading the protagonist’s privacy (NI3), utters: “Something has put out of humour. [...] Confess. Millamant and you quarrelled last night after I left you. My fair cousin has some humours that would temp the patience of a stoic” (1.1.11; 14-16). The gentleman refers to the night before, when Mirabell had to reluctantly leave a public house so that his beloved and her friends may initiate the so-called “cabal-night” – a very exclusive social event where people aimed at “[sitting] upon the murdered reputations of the week” (1.1.46-47). Indeed, the cold-heartedness displayed by the young lady “joining in the Argument” (1.1.30) vexed Mirabell (“I withdrew without expecting her reply”, 1.1.33-34); despite that, he still has feelings for her and informs Fainall of that:

[...] I like her with her faults – nay, *like her for her faults* [P2]. Her follies are so natural, or so artful, that they become her [P2]; and those affectations which in another woman would be odious, *serve but to make her more agreeable* [P2]. I’ll tell thee, Fainall, she once used me with that insolence that in revenge I took her to pieces, sifted her and separated her failings [...]. The catalogue was so large that I was not without hopes one day or other to hate her heartily; to which end I so used myself to think of ’em that at length, contrary to my design and expectation, [...] *they are grown as familiar to me as my own frailties*, and in all probability in a little time longer I shall like ’em as well (1.1.133-138; 139-142; 144-146; my emphasis).

Leech’s maxims qualify as efficient pragmatic tools to analyse Mirabell’s speech: by employing the approbation and the modesty one, he maximises praise for a woman that he loves despite her faults (“I like her with her faults – nay, *like her for her faults*”; “those affectations [...] *serve but to make her more agreeable*”), while admitting his deficiency at the same time (“*they are grown as familiar to me as my own frailties*”). Moreover, the complimentary words he addresses to Millamant exemplify his exaggerated interest in her.

Nevertheless, the utterances the lovers direct towards each other when they first meet on the stage – in Act II – are characterised by an offensive, conflictive and rancorous tone:

**Table 1:** Act 2, Scene 1, vv. 275-277; 280-282; 285 (my emphasis)

275 MIRABELL: Here she comes, <i>I</i> ’faith, full sail, with her <i>fan spread</i> and her 276 <i>streamers out</i> , and a <i>shoal</i> of fools for tenders. Ha, no, I cry her 277 mercy. [...]	[OFF-R]
280 <b>You seem to be unattended</b> , madam. <b>You used to have the beau</b> 281 <b>monde throng after you, and a flock of gay fine perukes hovering</b> 282 <b>round you.</b> [...]	
285 MILLAMANT: Oh, <b>I have denied myself airs to-day.</b>	[NI2]

Millamant’s appearance on the stage is preceded by Mirabell’s harsh comment: an offence conveyed off-record, intended to underline the frivolity and opulence peculiar of the young lady *in absentia*<sup>4</sup>. Shaming can be detected in Mirabell’s lines, “You seem to be unattended, madam.

<sup>4</sup> The evocation recalled by Mirabell exploits a powerful literary cross-reference: indeed, as Sestito (2002: 44) and Papetti (1995: 15; 22) remark, the terms related to the nautical domain contained in the lines “Here she comes [...] with her *fan spread* and *streamers out*, and a *shoal* of fool for tenders” remind of Cleopatra, the Shakespearean character who met Mark Antony’s eyes for the first time while she was on board of her luxurious

You used to have the *beau monde* throng after you, and a flock of gay fine perukes hovering around you,” aimed at putting the stress on Millamant’s outsized personality. However, the girl sagaciously counterattacks: by uttering “I have denied myself airs to-day,” she performs Leech’s modesty maxim to minimise the praise of herself. However, the utterance can also be considered a refined NI2 strategy meant to ridicule Mirabell’s statement – for being incorrect – and remark her relative power<sup>5</sup>; as Al-Ghalith (2011: 283; 285-286; see also Gill 1996) argues, she is an independent woman who does not need to be surrounded by people to be considered worthy:

She is a far cry from the simple character types who preceded her. She is fully aware of her own precarious position and is staunchly determined to define her role and gain control of her life in a libertine and skeptical world much like our own [...] Congreve creates a woman character who is highly educated, yet she is not made the object of satire. She is assertive in her insistence on a marriage ideal, yet she is never wicked.

In point of fact, banter characterises most of her discourses with Mirabell: this latter performs primarily negative impoliteness to hurt his beloved’s face so as to defend his reputation and hide his true feelings; on the other hand, Millamant fiercely argues with her suitor to test his love, demand respect and esteem. Their remarks are meticulous and witty, as the following excerpt demonstrates:

**Table 2:** Act 2, Scene 1, vv. 328-344

328	MIRABELL: [...] <b>your true</b>	[NI5]
329	<b>vanity is in the power of pleasing.</b>	
330	MILLAMANT: Oh, <b>I ask your pardon for that.</b> One’s cruelty is one’s power, and	[PI7]
331	when one parts with one’s cruelty, one parts with one’s power;	
332	and when one has parted with that, I fancy one’s old and ugly.	
333	MIRABELL: Ay, ay; <b>suffer your cruelty to ruin the object of your power, to</b>	[NI2]
334	<b>destroy your lover</b> --and then how vain, how lost a thing you’ll	
335	be! Nay, <b>’tis true; you are no longer handsome when you’ve lost</b>	
336	<b>your lover: your beauty dies upon the instant. For beauty is the</b>	[NI5]

---

galley afloat the Cydnus – as poetically described by Enobarbus (*AC*, 2.2.200-228). Furthermore, the correlation between Millamant and the Egyptian queen portrayed by the Bard finds confirmation in the final part of Act I of *The Way of the World*, specifically in Witwoud’s lines: “’Tis what she will hardly allow anybody else. Now demme, I should hate that, if she were as handsome as Cleopatra. Mirabell is not so sure of her as he thinks for” (1.1.396-398). Other subtler references to the erratic personality displayed by both the Old Serpent of the Nile and Lady Wishfort’s niece can be retraced in Mirabell’s words: “[...] To think of a whirlwind, though ’twere in a whirlwind, were a case of more steady contemplation, a very tranquility of mind and mansion. A fellow that lives in a windmill has not a more whimsical dwelling than the heart of a man that is lodged in a woman. There is no point of the compass to which they cannot turn, and by which they are not turned, and by one as well as another; for motion, not method, is their occupation” (2.1.419-426), which recalls Mark Antony’s desperate “But that your royalty / Holds idleness your subject, I should take you / For idleness itself” (*AC*, 1.3.94-96) as well as Enobarbus’ comment “We cannot call her winds and waters sighs and tears; they are greater storms and tempests than almanacs can report” (*AC*, 1.2.154-156). Such elements can be interpreted as Congreve’s attempt to embellish the comedy of manners by drawing from the English early modern repertoire. Moreover, it is worth remembering that, being John Dryden’s pupil, Congreve collaborated with his mentor on the staging of the former’s famous *All for Love* (1668), therefore he was familiar with the tragic story of Antony and Cleopatra.

<sup>5</sup> “The scene in which the two meet at St. James’s Park demonstrates the control that Millamant has in courtship. Here, she not only mocks Mirabell for his exclusion from the cabal the previous night – an exclusion that she, in large part, contributed to – but she also takes pains to explain this ‘cruelty’” (Bender 2013: 12).

337 **lover's gift:** 'tis he bestows your charms: - your glass is all a cheat.  
 338 The ugly and the old, whom the looking-glass mortifies, yet  
 339 after commendation can be flattered by it, and discover beauties  
 340 in it: for that reflects our praises rather than your face.  
 341 MILLAMANT: Oh, the vanity of these men! Fainall, d'ye hear him? If they did  
 342 not commend us, we were not handsome! **Now you must know**  
 343 **they could not commend one if one was not handsome. Beauty**  
 344 **the lover's gift!** [PI7]

Mirabell's privileged impoliteness output strategy is NI5, "put the other's indebtedness on record," which metaphorically serves to underline the fact that Millamant's peculiarities – her beauty and fame, for instance – depend on men's wooing. Furthermore, He does not treat the young lady seriously, as in lines 333-334. Conversely, she strongly disagrees with her beau in lines 330 and 342-344, for instance, as she does not intend to be objectified by men. Thus, she opts for a PI7 strategy, "seek disagreement," to deny what her lover says and revindicate her independence. Furthermore, differently from Mirabell who, in Act I, employed Leech's maxims to celebrate Millamant despite her faults (1.1.133-136), she subverts the Politeness Principle by attacking him:

Mirabell, if you persist in this offensive freedom *you'll displease me* [BR]. I think I must resolve after all not to have you. We shan't agree. [...] And yet you distemper in all likelihood will be the same, for we shall be sick of one another. I shan't endure to be reprimanded nor instructed. 'Tis so dull to act always by advice, and so tedious to be told of one's faults – *I can't bear it* [BR]. Well, *I won't have you*, Mirabell (2.1.383-385; 386-391; my emphasis).

Her language is explicit ("you'll displease me"; "I can't bear it"); indeed, she performs bald on-record impoliteness and exploits social distance to set boundaries and protect her negative face, therefore her freedom to act without impediments ("I shan't endure to be reprimanded nor instructed. 'Tis so dull to act always by advice, and so tedious to be told of one's faults"). Moreover, throughout the dialogue, she maximises disagreement between her and Mirabell and emphasises the cost that such relationship has to herself. Hence, she is resolved to cease the intercourse: "I won't have you, Mirabell." Nonetheless, as the plot unravels, the lovers' speeches showcase their progressive falling in love (see Caldwell 2015: 197; Thomas 1992: 25-26): the sharp language and the relative power displayed in Act I and II is gradually dimmed in the final part of the comedy, in favour of a more complaisant attitude.

In Act IV, the couple tries to set controversies apart and reach a compromise in the famous *proviso* scene. The privacy of a room in Lady Wishfort's house lets them straightforwardly discuss the terms of a hypothetical marriage. The initial part of the dialogue presents a courageous Millamant, defender of her "will and pleasure" (4.1.150):

Table 3: Act 4, Scene 1, vv. 157-190 (my emphasis)

157 MILLAMANT: [...] Positively, Mirabell, **I'll**  
 158 **lie a-bed in a morning as long as I please.** [PI1]  
 160- [...] And d'ye hear, I won't be called names after I'm married; positively **I won't be called**  
 162 **names.** [PI5]  
 163 MIRABELL: Names?

164	MILLAMANT: Ay, as wife, spouse, my dear, joy, jewel, love, sweet-heart, and the	
165	rest of that nauseous cant, in which men and their wives are so	
166	fulsomely familiar--I shall never bear that. Good Mirabell, <b>don't</b>	[PI3]
167	<b>let us be familiar or fond, nor kiss before folks</b> , like my Lady Fadler	
168	and Sir Francis; <b>nor go to Hyde Park together the first Sunday in</b>	[PI3]
169	<b>a new chariot</b> , to provoke eyes and whispers, and then never to be	
170	seen there together again, as if we were proud of one another the	
171	first week, and ashamed of one another ever after. <b>Let us never</b>	[PI3]
172	<b>visit together, nor go to a play together</b> , but let us be very strange	
173	and well-bred. Let us be as strange as if we had been married a	
174	great while, and as well-bred as if we were not married at all.	
175	MIRABELL: Have you any more conditions to offer? Hitherto your demands are pretty	
176	reasonable.	
177	MILLAMANT: Trifles; as <b>liberty to pay and receive visits to and from whom I</b>	[PI2]
178	<b>please; to write and receive letters, without interrogatories or</b>	
179	<b>wry faces on your part; to wear what I please, and choose</b>	
180	<b>conversation with regard only to my own taste; to have no obligation</b>	[PI2]
181	<b>upon me to converse with wits that I don't like</b> , because	
182	they are your acquaintance, <b>or to be intimate with fools</b> , because	[PI3]
183	they may be your relations. <b>Come to dinner when I please, dine</b>	[PI1]
184	<b>in my dressing room when I'm out of humour, without giving a</b>	
185	<b>reason. To have my closet inviolate; to be sole empress of my tea</b>	[PI2]
186	<b>table, which you must never presume to approach without first</b>	[PI2]
187	<b>asking leave.</b> And lastly, wherever I am, <b>you shall always knock</b>	[PI1]
188	<b>at the door before you come in.</b> These articles subscribed, if I	
189	continue to endure you a little longer, <i>I may by degrees dwindle</i>	
190	<i>into a wife.</i>	

The main strategy emerging from the “articles subscribed” is positive impoliteness. The authoritative and detailed clauses that she recites aim to limit or neutralise Mirabell’s relative power (“I’ll lie a-bed in a morning as long as I please”); be unconcerned and unsympathetic (“I won’t be called names”), especially when in public (“don’t let us be familiar or fond, nor kiss before folks”); dissociate from him, particularly during public events (“nor go to Hyde Park together the first Sunday in a new chariot”; “Let us never visit together, nor go to a play together”); exclude her future husband from selected leisure activities (“liberty to pay and receive visits to and from whom I please; to write and receive letters [...] to wear what I please, and choose conversation with regard only to my own taste; to have no obligation upon me to converse with wits that I don’t like [...] or to be intimate with fools”); and forbid any interjection (“Come to dinner when I please, dine in my dressing room when I’m out of humour, without giving a reason”; “To have my closet inviolate; to be sole empress of my tea-table, which you must never presume to approach without first asking leave. [...] you shall always knock at the door before you come in”)<sup>6</sup>.

Millamant covers some relevant aspects of marital life, from public to private matters. Her goal is to claim that she neither intends to change nor renounce her freedom because of marriage: if Mirabell is willing to accept such a condition, she will consider his offer (“*I may by degrees*

<sup>6</sup> “Millamant wished primarily to preserve her own liberty and an identity separate from her husband’s. In 1700 it could not be a legal identity, affording her control of property; marriage took that possibility away from the single woman. Congreve, recognizing the extent to which Millamant’s legal status will ‘dwindle’ once she marries (IV.i.226-27), gives her courtship the form of a legal document” (Bacon 1991: 431).

*dwindle into a wife*" ). The male party consents, provided that she accepts the following rules:

**Table 4:** Act 4, Scene 1, vv. 196-204; 207-215; 219-234 (my emphasis)

<p>196 <i>Imprimis</i>, then, I covenant that your acquaintance  197 be general; that you admit no sworn confidant or intimate of  198 your own sex; no she friend to screen her affairs under your  199 countenance, and tempt you to make trial of a mutual secrecy.  200 No decoy-duck to wheedle you a fop-scrumbling to the play in  201 a mask, then bring you home in a pretended fright, when you  202 think you shall be found out, and rail at me for missing the play  203 and disappointing the frolic which you had to pick me up and  204 prove my constancy. [...]</p> <p>206 <i>Item</i>, I article, that you continue to like your own face as long as  207 I shall, and while it passes current with me, that you endeavour  208 not to new coin it. To which end, together with all vizards  209 for the day, I prohibit all masks for the night, made of oiled skins  210 and I know not what—hog’s bones, hare’s gall, pig water, and  211 the marrow of a roasted cat. In short, I forbid all commerce  212 with the gentlewomen in what-d’ye-call-it court. <i>Item</i>, I shut  213 my doors against all bawds with baskets, and pennyworths  214 of muslin, china, fans, atlases, etc. <i>Item</i>, when you shall be  215 breeding - [...]</p> <p>219 I denounce against all strait lacing, squeezing for a shape, till  220 you mould my boy’s head like a sugar-loaf, and instead of a  221 man-child, make me father to a crooked billet. Lastly, to the  222 dominion of the tea-table I submit; but with proviso, that you  223 exceed not in your province, but restrain yourself to native and  224 simple tea-table drinks, as tea, chocolate, and coffee. As likewise  225 to genuine and authorised tea-table talk, such as mending of  226 fashions, spoiling reputations, railing at absent friends, and so  227 forth - but that on no account you encroach upon the men’s  228 prerogative, and presume to drink healths, or toast fellows; for  229 prevention of which, I banish all foreign forces, all auxiliaries to  230 the tea-table, as orange-brandy, all aniseed, cinnamon, citron,  231 and Barbados waters, together with ratafia and the most  232 noble spirit of clary. But for cowslip-wine, poppy-water, and all  233 dormitives, those I allow. These <i>provisos</i> admitted, in other  234 things I may prove a tractable and complying husband.</p>	<p>[NI3] [NI5]</p> <p>[NI3]</p> <p>[NI3]</p> <p>[NI3]</p> <p>[NI3]</p> <p>[NI3]</p> <p>[NI5]</p> <p>[NI3]</p> <p>[NI3]</p>
--	--

Conversely to his beloved, Mirabell’s privileged strategy is negative impoliteness, as his goal is to impose his will and authority upon the future bride. To claim his suppositions with an inflexible tone, the suitor exploits legal terminology and Latinism such as *Imprimis*, *item*, *proviso(s)* (see Davis 2011: 520). Considering that the clauses can be interpreted as a series of limitations on Millamant, so that she can behave accordingly<sup>7</sup>, it is fair to assume that he invades her personal space and often associates her with negative aspects by explicitly using the pronouns “I” and “you” – both occurring 12 times. In this respect, the recurs to the singular first- and second-person pronoun significantly departs from Millamant’s linguistic choices. As a matter of fact, with the sole exception of the last clause (“you shall always knock at the door before you come in”), she

<sup>7</sup> Some examples: “I covenant that your acquaintance be general; that you admit no sworn confidant or intimate of your own sex”; “I covenant that your acquaintance be general; that you admit no sworn confidant or intimate of your own sex”; “I article, that you continue to like your own face as long as I shall” “I prohibit all masks for the night”; “I forbid all commerce with the gentlewomen in what-d’ye-call-it court”; “I shut my doors against all bawds”; “I denounce against all strait lacing”; “I banish all foreign forces”; “I submit; but with proviso, that you exceed not in your province”.



never uses the pronoun “you” but opts for “I” (13 occurrences), “us” (4 occurrences), “we” (3 occurrences) or avoids pronouns by using the infinitive<sup>8</sup>. On the contrary, Mirabell straightforwardly directs his FTAs towards the target – as in the utterances introduced by the verbs to covenant, to article, to prohibit, for instance – so to emphasise the power he will exert upon his spouse soon.

Furthermore, Mirabell too addresses attention to both public and private life, but differently: while Millamant worries about her public face once she will be married – as the reference to Hyde Park demonstrates –, and her individuality when she lives with her husband – she mentions her dressing room, her closet and tea table, to provide some examples –, Mirabell’s provisions aim to cherish the intimacy of the couple, protect the familiar nucleus from dangerous interferences such as erratic friends, inappropriate clothes, exceeding in alcohol; administer the domestic economy (“I shut my doors against all bawds with baskets, and pennyworths of muslin, china, fans, atlases”) and consider the possibility to have children (“when you shall be breeding”). The ‘contract’ recited in the *proviso* scene is then sealed with a party kissing the other’s hand and the lovers’ confessions: “I am all Obedience” (4.1.259), says Mirabell to his beloved; “If Mirabell shou’d not make a good Husband, I am a lost thing; for I find I love him violently” (4.1.265-266), admits Millamant when talking with Mrs Fainall. Love is no longer off-record; the union is finally officialized in Act V, when Lady Wishfort – Millamant’s tutoress – provides her consent:

LADY WISHFORT:

Well, sir, take her, and with all the joy I can give you.

MILLAMANT:

Why does not the man take me? Would you have me give myself to you over again?

MIRABELL:

Ay, and over and over again, (*kisses her hand*) for I would have you as often as possibly I can. Well, heaven grant I love you not too well, that’s all my fear (5.1.516-522).

### Conclusive Remarks

The present study has analysed the speech exchanges between Mirabell and Millamant in William Congreve’s *The Way of the World*; special attention has been devoted to the *proviso* scene. The results of the qualitative investigation have demonstrated that the lover’s utterances are predominantly impolite; the witty characters attack each other’s face, being they entangled in an uncanny yet intriguing “hateful love,” until the final acts of the play, when they display a more complaisant attitude and publicly confess their mutual feelings.

Nonetheless, the *topoi* here discussed comply with both the social rules and the economic background that were proper of England during the reign of William of Orange and Mary II Stuart (see Van Voris 1965; Braverman 1985; Kroll 1986; Snider 1989: 378; Rosowski 2001: 388; 406). In his masterpiece, Congreve arranged the amorous relationship under the influence of John Locke’s *Two Treatises of Government* (1690) – which emphasised the notions of “contract” and

---

<sup>8</sup> As in the following lines: “to write and receive letters”; “to wear what I please, and choose conversation with regard only to my own taste; to have no obligation upon me”; “to be intimate with fools”; “Come to dinner”; “dine in my dressing room”; “To have my closet inviolate”; “to be sole empress of my tea table”.

“consent”<sup>9</sup> – and significant economic events that occurred in late seventeenth-century London, such as “the Glorious Revolution in 1688, the establishment of the Bank of England and the National Debt in 1694, and the recoinage in 1696” (Bender 2013: 2); indeed, the raising emphasis on property and its (adverse) effects upon both peoples’ sense of self and their relationships with the others are *de facto* epitomized by the gay couple, whose “courtship takes the form of negotiation over the forms of courtship, performed in the figural, but taxonomically accurate, vocabularies of both pre-mercantile gallantry *and* mercantile economics” (Mackenzie 2014: 263, italics as in the original; see also Myers 1972: 88). Furthermore, the lovers’ witty bargain satisfied the 1690s audience’s expectations – being it composed of merchants and traders with a solid Puritan background who despised immodesty in favour of moderated libertinage, feminine independence and equity of the sexes<sup>10</sup> – and it seemed to lay the foundation for the ‘sentimental’ plays proper of the eighteenth-century literature (see, among others, Neri 1961: 16).

In conclusion the coeval context and the dramatical tendencies ineluctably impinged on Congreve’s style and inspired him to stage a sophisticated yet realistic portrait of the English elitist society, configuring *The Way of the World* as a literary landmark that marked the apex as well as the beginning of the decline of late early modern theatre.

### References

- Al-Ghalith A., “Congreve’s Comedy Heroine: Progress Toward Self-Awareness”, *Midwest Quarterly*, 52, 2011, pp. 283-292.
- Bacon J.L., “Wives, Widows, and Writing in Restoration Comedy”, *Studies in English Literature, 1500-1900*, 31(3), 1991, pp. 427-443.
- Bender A.B., “Containing Identity in *The Plain Dealer* and *The Way of the World*”, *Eighteenth-Century Life*, 37(2), 2013, pp. 1-25.
- Bousfield D., “Face(t)s of self and identity in interaction”, *Journal of Politeness Research*, 14, 2018, pp. 287-305.
- Braverman R., “Capital Relations and *The Way of the World*”, *ELH*, 52, 1985, pp. 133-158.
- Brown P., Levinson S.C., *Politeness. some universals in language usage*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1978.
- Bush D., *The Early Seventeenth Century 1600-1660. Jonson, Donne, and Milton*, Oxford, Clarendon Press, 1962.
- Caldwell L., “‘Drink up all the water in the sea’: contracting relationships in Congreve’s *Love for Love* and *The Way of the World*”, *English Literary History*, 82, 2015, pp. 183-210.
- Congreve W., *The Way of the World*, edited by David Roberts, London and New York, Bloomsbury, 2020.

---

<sup>9</sup> David (1992: 34-35) argues: “his [Locke’s] exposition of the importance of contract in political society was to have a profound effect on many of his contemporaries, including Congreve. Congreve shared Locke’s view that although the world was an imperfect place, it could nevertheless be made habitable with the help of binding contracts. *The Way of the World*, for instance, presents an unvarnished image of society. [...] Without property and without contract, there would be no social relationships and hence no civil society.” On this matter, see also Macpherson’s seminal work (1962).

<sup>10</sup> As Bush remarks (1962: 160-162), late-Restoration theatregoers were significantly influenced by eminent moralists – such as Richard Blackmore and Jeremy Collier – and writers – Mary Astell, for instance. On the matter, see also Hume (1976, particularly pertinent are pages 380-431).

- Culpeper J., *Impoliteness. Using Language to Cause Offence*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1996.
- Culpeper J., "Towards an anatomy of impoliteness", *Journal of Pragmatics*, 25, 1996, pp. 349-367.
- Culpeper J., Haugh M., Kádár D.Z. (eds), *The Palgrave Handbook of Linguistic (Im)politeness*, London, Palgrave Macmillan, 2017.
- Davis V., "Dramatising the Sexual Contract: Congreve and Centlivre", *Studies in English Literature*, 51, 2011, pp. 519-543.
- Dobrée B., *William Congreve*, London, The British Council and the National Book League by Longmans, Green & Co., 1963.
- Gill P., "The Way of the World: Telling Differences in Congreve's *The Way of the World*", in K.M. Quinsey (edited by), *Broken Boundaries. Women and Feminism in Restoration Drama*, Lexington, The University Press of Kentucky, 1996, pp. 164-181.
- Goffman E., *Interaction Ritual. Essays on Face-to-Face Behavior*, New York, Pantheon Books, 1967.
- Grainger K., "'We're not in a club now': a neo-Brown and Levinson approach to analyzing courtroom data", *Journal of Politeness Research*, 14(1), 2018, pp. 19-38.
- Hume R.D., *The Development of English Drama in the late Seventeenth Century*, Oxford, Clarendon Press, 1976.
- Kaufman A., "Language and Character in Congreve's *The Way of the World*", *Texas Studies in Literature and Language*, 15, 1973, pp. 411-427.
- Kroll R.W.F., "Discourse and Power in *The Way of the World*", *ELH*, 53, 1986, pp. 727-758.
- Leech G.N., *Principles of Pragmatics*, London and New York, Longman, 1983.
- Locher M.A., Sage L.G. (eds), *Interpersonal Pragmatics*, Berlin, Mouton de Gruyter, 2010.
- MacKenzie S.R., "Sexual Arithmetic: Appetite and Consumption in *The Way of the World*", *Eighteenth-Century Studies*, 47.3, 2014, pp. 261-276.
- MacPherson C.B., *The Political Theory of Possessive Individualism: Hobbes to Locke*, Oxford, Clarendon Press, 1962.
- McCloskey S., "Knowing One's Relations in Congreve's 'The Way of the World'", *Theatre Journal*, 33, 1981, pp. 69-79.
- Myers W., "Plot and Meaning in Congreve's Comedies", in B. Morris (edited by), *William Congreve*, London, Ernest Benn Limited, 1972, pp. 73-92.
- Neri N., *Introduzione a W. Congreve, The Way of the World*, Bari, Adriatica, 1961.
- Papetti V., *Introduzione a W. Congreve, Così va il mondo*, Milano, BUR, 1995.
- Rosowski S.J., "Thematic Development in the Comedies of William Congreve: The Individual in Society", *SEL*, 16, 1976, pp. 387-406.
- Sestito M., *Storia del teatro inglese. La Restaurazione e il Settecento*, Roma, Carocci, 2002.
- Snider R., "Professing a Libertine in *The Way of the World*", *Papers on Language and Literature*, 25 (4), 1989, pp. 376-397.
- Spencer-Oatey H., "Face, identity and interactional goals", in F. Bargiela-Chiappini, M. Haugh (eds), *Face, Communication and Social Interaction*, London, Equinox, 2009, pp. 137-154.
- Spencer-Oatey H., "Conceptualising 'the relational' in pragmatics: Insights from metapragmatic emotion and (impoliteness comments)", *Journal of Pragmatics*, 43, 2011, pp. 3565-3578.

Thomas D. , *William Congreve*, London, MacMillan, 1992.

Tracy K., Baratz S., "The case for case studies of facework", in S.T. Toomey (edited by), *The Challenge of Facework*, Albany, State University of New York, 1994, pp. 287-305.

Turner J., "The Properties of Libertinism", in R.P. Maccubin (edited by), *'Tis Nature's Fault: Unauthorized Sexuality During the Enlightenment*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1987, pp. 75-87.

Van Voris W.H., *The Cultivated Stance: The Designs of Congreve's Plays*, Dublin, Dolmen Press, 1965.

### List of Abbreviations

<b>BR</b>	Bald-On Record
<b>FTA</b>	Face-Threatening-Act
<b>H</b>	Hearer
<b>OFF-R</b>	Off-Record
<b>NI2</b>	Condescend, scorn, ridicule
<b>NI3</b>	Invade the other's space
<b>NI5</b>	Put the other's indebtedness on record
<b>P2</b>	Exaggerate (interest, approval, sympathy with H)
<b>PI1</b>	Ignore, snub the other
<b>PI2</b>	Exclude the other from activity
<b>PI3</b>	Dissociate from the others
<b>PI5</b>	Use inappropriate identity markers
<b>PI7</b>	Seek disagreement
<b>S</b>	Speaker