Politeness in Arabic papyrus letters

Applicants

Eligible proposals must have at least two applicants from Humanities, preferably with an interdisciplinary approach.

Supervisor Name	Discipline
Marina Terkourafi (LUCL)	Sociolinguistics, sociopragmatics
Petra Sijpesteijn (LIAS)	Arabic philology and history

Project description

Historical politeness studies is a growing field which has not been employed in Arabic philology and Arabic papyrology. This is mainly due to academic disciplinary compartmentalization including at Leiden University. While the study of written historical documents remains dominated by philological and historical methods, sociopragmatic historical politeness models continue to be mainly fed by European language data. In this project we will bring these two disciplines together aiming for academic insights for both fields while training MA students from two different Leiden programmes to apply sociopragmatic methods to historical Arabic texts.

We will design a focused sociopragmatic analysis of edited Arabic papyrus letters to distinguish patterns in epistolary linguistic strategies using sociopragmatic politeness models.

Sociopragmatic politeness models identify variables that determine linguistic strategies of communication, including the relationship between correspondents, the kind of request, and the cultural background of the communicators. Examining medieval Arabic letters within this framework contributes to the historical study of politeness and provides insights into a specific historical society. These two fields will be continuously involved during the project in team discussions of background literature and implications within each academic domain.

A corpus of ca. 100 published, edited, and translated Arabic papyrus letters from the 7th-9th century CE will be selected from the on-line Arabic Papyrology Database (https://www.apd.gwi.uni-muenchen.de/apd/project.jsp). Using methods and criteria developed in sociopragmatics the students will tag the papyrus letters identifying sociolinguistic politeness markers using a custom-made spreadsheet. We consciously apply a 'bottom-up' method including all kinds of epistolary genres and focusing on the features of the letters' text while constantly adjusting our distinctions and categories as we include more materials. We aim to describe patterns of use in the letters

studied and test the adequacy of sociopragmatic politeness models to account for such patterns, contributing to advancing knowledge in both our respective fields.

300 words

Research Trainee Profile
The research trainees (advanced BA or MA) will identify linguistic components in edited Arabic papyrus letters that represent politeness strategies. One student will have a background in pragmatics, while the other has advanced Arabic language skills.

As a team we will design a custom-made spreadsheet identifying categories and distinctive phrases and expressions, based on a joint examination of a couple of papyrus letters in translation and using historical politeness studies. The research trainees will then tag selected Arabic papyrus letters according to these categories. They will work on Arabic papyri in translation and in the original language in a fully integrated way, as translations have to be checked with the Arabic originals and identifications of speech acts have to be coordinated. During the project regular team meetings will ensure that necessary adjustments are made to the spreadsheet to represent appropriate categories and distinctions.

The project will be academically challenging for the student trainees as they will be introduced to disciplinary approaches, methods and skills that are unfamiliar to them. This allows them to evaluate their own material and discipline anew. While discourse analysis is well represented in area studies including Arabic studies, students work thereby predominantly on contemporary materials and hardly ever on historical material. The student trainees will work together independently of the PIs to whom they will report in regular team meetings having to formulate their evaluation of the project's set-up and progress, so that they will develop cooperative and independent research skills.

Each proposal requests two Research Trainees. Describe the general tasks of the research trainees, how these tasks are academically challenging to the research trainees, whether they need any preliminary knowledge (regarding the topic and/or research methods) and which skills the research trainees should have. Also specify which type of students are eligible to apply (3ʳᵈ year Ba, Ma, ResMa).

Collaboration
A growing number of studies apply sociopragmatic politeness models to historical written texts (cf. the special issues of the *Journal of Historical Pragmatics* entitled 'Politeness in and across Historical Europe' published in 2023; and 'Politeness in Ancient Languages' published in 2019). These historical politeness studies are, however, dominated by European languages and Arabic philologists do not include politeness in their analytical framework. Both PIs have, however, from their respective disciplinary background and expertise, explored sociolinguistic practices in the Islamic world in a historical perspective.[1] Due to their specific disciplinary skill sets, however, these studies remained necessarily limited to an indirect disciplinary implementation through secondary readings and lacked first-hand primary data and methodological input.

Arabic papyri require specialized reading and interpretation skills. Due to the circumstances of their discovery and the state of preservation, they often lack information on their historical context,

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[1] Marina Terkourafi, "From Politeness1 to Politeness2: Tracking norms of im/politeness across time and space," *Journal of Politeness Research* 7 (2011): 159-85; Petra Sijpesteijn, "Maintaining friendship and commercial relations in 8ᵗʰ-century Egypt: Three letters from Abū Yūsuf to Abū Yazīd," in a special issue of *The Medieval Globe* entitled "Medieval Strategies of Entreaty," eds. Carol Symes and Petra M. Sijpesteijn (forthcoming 2024).

including information on the interlocutors' identity and background, the place and exact moment when they were produced and any follow-up on the events described in the letters. This has meant that papyrology has overwhelmingly remained the domain of philologists and historians limiting the involvement of other disciplinary expertise. Reversely, historians and philologists refrain from systematic analysis of their data on formal linguistic distinctions. Building on the PIs joint interest, this project aims to provide a truly interdisciplinary environment to analyse philologically challenging Arabic papyri with sociopragmatic methods providing the PIs with a data and skillset for future research.

300 words
If applicable: Describe how your research improves collaboration and cross-pollination between the disciplines involved (max. 300 words)

Deliverables
The project will result in a limited database of tagged papyrus letters which can serve the PIs in future research. We also intend to publish our results in a co-authored article (involving if possible the students as co-authors).

Enumerate intended project results: papers, research proposals or otherwise. (max 200 words)

Planning
Provide a breakdown of the project into phases with tentative timing (max 150 words)

February: Team meeting to discuss background literature on pragmatics, (im)politeness theories and Arabic papyrus letters in translation to design custom-made spreadsheet
Sijpesteijn selects papyrus letters in Arabic Papyrology Database
Student Trainees start to tag letters in translation and Arabic
March & April: Student Trainees tag letters in translation and Arabic, Sijpesteijn on hand to supervise any issues related to papyri; Terkourafi on hand to handle any issues related to pragmatics
May: Team meeting to evaluate spreadsheet categories and distinctions and to identify initial patterns
May-August: Student Trainees continue tagging of letters for spreadsheet
February-August: Terkourafi and Sijpesteijn meet regularly to discuss methodology and evaluate findings for publication

Student Application
Provide information on how to apply e.g. required documents for application (resume, motivation letter etc.) and an email address where student applications should be sent to.

Interested students should write a short motivation letter indicating (1) that they have the necessary Arabic linguistic or disciplinary skills to execute the research and (2) that they have time to do so besides their other activities and responsibilities to p.m.sijpesteijn@hum.leidenuniv.nl and m.terkourafi@hum.leidenuniv.nl.