

<https://helda.helsinki.fi>

Polite society language practices : Letters to the Editor on
p̄y medical issues in The Gentleman s Magazine

Taavitsainen, Irma Aini Johanna

John Benjamins
2019

Taavitsainen, I A J 2019 , Polite society language practices : Letters to the Editor on
p̄y medical issues in The Gentleman s Magazine . in I Taavitsainen & T H
Modern English Medical Texts : Writing medicine in the eighteenth century . John Benjamins
, Amsterdam , pp. 129-144 . <https://doi.org/10.1075/z.221.07taa>

<http://hdl.handle.net/10138/325380>
<https://doi.org/10.1075/z.221.07taa>

acceptedVersion

Downloaded from Helda, University of Helsinki institutional repository.

This is an electronic reprint of the original article.

This reprint may differ from the original in pagination and typographic detail.

Please cite the original version.

Polite society language practices: Letters to the Editor in *The Gentleman's Magazine*

Irma Taavitsainen

Abstract

This chapter presents a pragmatic study on polite society language practices. Politeness, sociability, and concern for public good have been pointed out as values underpinning the late eighteenth-century culture among gentility, and it was important to recognize one's own position in relation to others and act accordingly. Detailed assessments on how these qualities were expressed in language use are still few. The material of this study comes from the Letters to the Editor in *The Gentleman's Magazine* (GM), where issues of health were debated on a broad front. The diseases that come up in the material are mostly minor discomforts and everyday nuisances, but dietary advice and first aid tips were common, too. Polite speech acts prevail; fierce debates are also encountered, but impolite speech acts are mitigated or veiled in politeness. This chapter applies an ethnographic and socio-constructivist approach to politeness as a discursive practice, focusing on people's own notions of what was appropriate and desirable for smooth interaction in polite society. The method of analysis is qualitative and corpus-based. The GM provided a new means for literate people to keep abreast of the latest developments, and through these language practices, we have access to eighteenth-century opinions on what the polite society considered worth attention.

1. Introduction

Politeness, sociability, affability, benevolence, and liberality have been pointed out as values underpinning the late eighteenth-century culture of medico-gentility (Brown 2011: 74). These qualities are likely to be found in the language used in our corpus. According to social-constructionist historians, medical discourse for conceptualizing and experiencing illness and disease is perpetuated through shared experience and

varies according to societies and cultures (Withey 2011: 122). This view can be extended to the norms of polite interpersonal interaction in the letters to the editor of *The Gentleman's Magazine* (1731–1922; GM hereafter). This novel channel of communication was founded by Edward Cave (1691–1754) in January 1731 for “amusement and Intelligence” (preface to the inaugural issue). Cave adopted an editorial pseudonym “Sylvanus Urban”, and *Mr. Urban* is the address term that regularly occurs in the letters to the Editor throughout the century with few exceptions. Medical doctors formed an important part of the journal’s readership,¹ but home medicine provides the sociohistorical frame to communication about various ailments and illnesses and their cures in the GM. The household played the primary role in the care of the sick in managing issues of health, and this responsibility lies behind the shared advice for distributing knowledge of treatments that had proved helpful. Correspondence about health issues was lively, and much of it focused on medical advice from one reader to another, mediated through the journal and its Editor. Publishing brought this interpersonal communication to a more public sphere that involved many more parties than face-to-face situations in the family and with friends and servants (see Leong and Rankin 2011; Withey 2011; Chapter 6 in this volume). Private health issues were prominent in the GM at first but in the course of time towards the end of the century, in accordance with the spirit of Enlightenment, and the notion of public good gained ground. It was the leading motivation for several health care initiatives in society and forms a recurring theme in medical literature.

2. Aim and method

The aim of this chapter is to probe into the styles of writing and linguistic practices among educated members of society in communicating medical matters to each other in the GM. The focus of my analysis is on the pragmatic units of speech acts. Compliments expressing appreciation and good wishes, gratitude, and other positive feelings are common. Requests and responses to them are central in seeking and

¹ E.g. the correspondent of Example (12) was a surgeon, and (13) is by a London physician of the Royal College of Physicians (ODNB).

giving advice, and these are the core speech acts of medical communication in the GM. The focus of the present article is on people's own notions of what was appropriate and desirable for smooth interaction in writing, and metatextual passages in readers' letters to the Editor proved an important source for discovering the prevailing practices. This is labelled Politeness 1 in the relevant literature, whereas Politeness 2 deals more technically with politeness as positive or negative face work, according to Brown and Levinson's (1987) model,² or Watts's (2003) notions of polite and politic behaviour. Politeness for the eighteenth-century gentility was not face work as understood in Brown and Levinson's model of strategic behaviour, but recognizing one's own position in relation to others and the prevalent social norms, and acting accordingly (Culpeper and Demmen 2011). These aspects are approached through linguistic practices in the letters to the Editor in the GM, the first magazine to contain them (see also SCIENTIFIC JOURNALS category description). Conventions became established in the latter half of the century, and a novel genre was created. This is one of the first linguistic studies on the GM data, and applying a social-constructivist approach to politeness as a discursive practice is also novel. My method of analysis is qualitative and the examples have been selected by close reading to illustrate the norms and tendencies. The magazine provided a means for the audience to communicate with both the Editor and other readers. These people formed an active community interacting in the written form in multiple ways, as explicit references to previous authors and earlier texts show. The Editor had a central role, and the contributors regularly opened their letters with an address to Mr. Urban, though the intended recipient could be the author of a previous letter who had contributed to the contents or asked for advice. The real audience was much larger including all readers as unratified participants of communication. The first contribution from the floor about medical matters in the present selection dates from 1743, twelve years after the foundation of the magazine. The author expresses his appreciation of the new channel and its mission to promote public good, with an admonition that usefulness should be given priority when selecting items for publication. The eloquent cover letter is followed by a recipe:

(1) Mr Urban,

² See footnote 10 for a recent modification, which is relevant from the present point of view. See also Watts 2011.

AS Ease is of much greater Importance to the Afflicted than Amusement to the Disengag'd, I doubt not but the following Receipt will find a Place in your Magazine, (if Occasion require) even to the Postponing of a good Song. Yours, &c. J. E.

To cure the Tooth-Ach, By a very safe Method, which seldom fails. ...

(GM 1743: 310)

Four letters on medical matters from the floor are found in the twelve issues of the year 1755 and eleven in 1761.³ After this the number increases and dozens of letters were published by the end of the century.

3. Placing the language of eighteenth-century in its period context

The eighteenth century is characterized by politeness and the rise of the public spirit among the educated classes (see Klein 2002); it was a period in which expressions of politeness became conventionalized and mandatory in interaction between members of the established classes and for those aspiring to belong to them (Hickey 2010: 1). This century has also been singled out as a key period in the development of the English language through prescriptive measures especially as regards pronunciation and morphosyntax (see e.g. Fitzmaurice 2000; Tieken-Boon van Ostade 2010), but normative thinking extended to the macro level of discourse as well, in what could be said and what should be said, as my assessment shows. Such restrictions applied to communication in the GM and its medical texts reflect the “gentleman’s code of behavior and its associated rhetoric” (Wild 2006: 8).

In an overall survey of the development of prose style, McIntosh (1998) came to the conclusion that the beginning of the century is very different from its end: the early years are more in accordance with oral traditions with colloquial features, while

³ Letters to the Editor on other issues were outside the scope of this study.

the last decades show the influence of print culture with eloquent diction and increasing politeness. He calls this process “gentrification” and sees stylistic changes as responses to the prevailing cultural norms of written communication (McIntosh 1998: 23). In another diachronic study on the development of the eighteenth-century style, the focus is on the self-revelation and description of medical matters as verified in language use in doctor – patient correspondence (Wild 2006: 10). According to this account, the first decades were influenced by impersonal and objective language from the “new science”, but towards the mid-century a rhetoric of sensibility, based on a physiology that gave pre-eminence to the role of the nervous system, took over. The new trend can be witnessed in the lexis and phrasal expressions: it encouraged the idea of feeling and self-expression, subjectivity, and metaphorical view of illness in keeping with the “cultural vogue that held ultra-refined feeling to be the mark of cultivated society” (Wild 2006: 10). Personal identity became experiential and distinct from one’s societal role, rank and position, or religious affiliation. Yet another change took place in the final decades of the century in favour of self-conscious utilitarian prose which was largely derived from Scottish Enlightenment “to produce a more varied, less self-conscious and individual patient’s role” (Wild 2006: 10). This description is well in line with the overall development of style in the GM.

Another angle to eighteenth-century language use is provided by linguistic accounts on politeness in different periods of English. This line of study has received a great deal of attention lately starting from Anglo-Saxon times (Kohnen 2008a, 2008b) to Middle and Early Modern English (Jucker 2008, 2012), and the Victorian period (Culpeper and Demmen 2011). The general outlines of politeness in the history of English have already emerged with these studies, and it has been concluded that the various periods have their own codes that differ from period to period and also from the norms of modern society. The eighteenth century has been assessed in studies on language use in address and subscription terms in private correspondence (Nevala 2009), on lexical items like *civil*, *polite*, and *courteous* (Nevalainen and Tissari 2010; Jucker et al. 2012),⁴ and on polite speech acts based on handbooks on etiquette (Taavitsainen and Jucker 2010). Politeness in pleasant sociable interaction was the ideal of the educated social classes, and compliments characterize the century. In present-day language use they express positive evaluation of something attributable to

⁴ An assessment of the semantic field of politeness up to 1710 in the Helsinki Corpus.

the target (see Taavitsainen and Jucker 2008a), but in the eighteenth-century culture the notion has a much broader meaning than today including introductions, greetings, invitations, and expressions of good wishes, good intentions in general, and responses to these speech acts (Jucker 2012: 430).

4. The language of politeness and compliment culture

Polite language use involves taking the other party into account. Letters to the Editor, especially those that act as cover letters to some contribution submitted to the Editor for possible publication, provide an excellent source for tracing politeness in written interaction. Linguistic features of interpersonal language use include direct address, personal pronouns of the first and the second person, and expressive adjectives, and rhetorical devices to enhance the courteous style. Positive evaluation is a conventional way of being polite, and some speech acts like compliments and thanks are inherently polite as they enhance the recipient's self-esteem and positive feelings. My linguistic analysis of eighteenth-century compliments focuses on such other-oriented passages where the authors employ face-enhancing strategies of various kinds.⁵ Impolite speech acts are also discussed. They are often intertwined or embedded into polite speech acts to mitigate the potential frictions. Cover letters reveal motivations and contain explanations why the accompanying piece of writing should gain wider recognition.⁶

4.1 Compliments in the letters to the Editor

The published letters show a high degree of involvement with other members of the community. The author is present with the first person pronoun *I* (over a thousand instances), and *we* occurs as well. *You* refers regularly to Mr. Urban, and the collocation *your magazine* is common both in compliments and in requests for publication. Linguistic strategies comply with the prevailing norms of polite interaction in recognizing one's own position and taking the other party into account.

⁵ The more technical approach of Politeness 2 provides tools for defining linguistic strategies in more detail, and therefore I shall revert to some of this terminology in my analyses.

⁶ These strategic preambles show some resemblance to the metatextual genre of dedications.

Several contributions can be regarded as embodiments of the compliment culture with positive evaluation of the magazine, its Editor and readers. The Editor had a powerful position as he decided on the publication policy, and the praises were aimed at facilitating entry to the inner circle of contributors. The following short extract from 1792 summarizes essential features of these cover letters: they begin with direct address, pay compliments mentioning the excellency of *your magazine*, and finish with a polite request, in this example mitigated by wishes of its usefulness.

(2) **Mr. Urban**, February 17.

AS I imagine **your Magazine** contains **more original essays in science** than any other periodical publication, and is **more universally read** by persons of science than any other, **I have sent you** the following dissertation on the Gout, **with a desire that you will insert it in your Magazine; with a hope that it may be of use to many of my brother sufferers.**

(GM 1792: 102; emphases in all examples mine)

This example is from the very end of the century, but already by the middle of it the magazine was recognized as an efficient channel for disseminating medical knowledge. It was considered a trustworthy source of information, which was yet another reason for paying compliments to the Editor. News spread slowly compared to modern standards, and the importance and usefulness of having the right information is emphasized with a preamble “in order to set the matter in a true light”, the ensuing text was trusted to be “of infinite advantage to posterity” (GM 1755: 462). The core speech act is expressed with the verb *recommend*, hedged with the conditional for increased politeness:

(3) Mr Urban,

As your useful Magazine is become **the proper repository for every thing that tends to enlarge science, and preserve health, I would recommend particularly to your notice** the description lately published in France by Dr Pinard, of the epidemic disease which raged at Rouen in Normandy during the months of November and December 1753, and which alarmed all Europe...

(GM 1755: 462)

Communication was not one-sided. The Editor was in dialogue with the readers, as can be seen in his comment inserted in square brackets in the above letter. The recommendation has been turned to a “hint” but the sender is referred to as “our kind correspondent”, enhancing mutual appreciation. The author of the original account is paid a compliment for his “judicious” thoughts:

- (4) [In compliance with **our kind correspondent’s hint**, we have extracted from Dr Pinard’s curious letter all that relates to the cause, description, and cure of this distemper; but we must refer our medical readers to **the original for his judicious reflections and reasoning** upon so interesting a subject.] (GM 1755: 462)

In a similar vein, “great utility to mankind” is mentioned as the motivation in (5). The “distant cities and countries” must refer to America, one of the thematic areas in the GM (for the beginning of the letter, see Example (10) below). The Editor’s choice of contents is found particularly praiseworthy:

- (5) I chuse to put my papers into the channel of **your Magazine**, which has, for so many years, **with uncommon reputation**, conveyed, not only into multitudes of families, but into many distant cities and countries, **things of great utility to mankind; and thereby very much extended their usefulness.** (GM 1761: 493)

The following letter to the Editor begins with an account of the author’s own personal history as regards the GM, and his appreciation of the journal and its readership in eloquent terms and positively loaded lexis (*sincere admirer, observed with pleasure, obliging readiness, benevolence*). After the eloquent preamble, the request itself provides an anti-climax, as it is for a minor discomfort, “corns on the feet”. The request itself is called “address” and presented with an appeal to benevolence:

- (6) Mr. Urban, Dec. 31.

HAVING from a very early period of my life been a reader and **sincere admirer of your useful Miscellany**, I have frequently

observed with pleasure the obliging readiness with which your correspondents have answered those requests, either for information or relief, which have been addressed to them. Encouraged by the recent success of *A Mother of many Children*, and *A Medical Sufferer*, **I address myself to the benevolence of any of your numerous readers who are acquainted with a remedy for that almost universal and painful complaint**, corns on the feet.

(GM 1792: 1163)

4.2 Efficacy statements of recipes in terms of polite speech acts

Readers shared health advice and remedies that were personally tested and found useful, and metatextual passages about the journal and its readers give us glimpses of everyday life and practices. The GM recipes follow set generic conventions: they begin with the imperative form *take*, list the ingredients with measurements shortly, and give the manner of application in a concise form. Efficacy phrases, confirming that the desired result will be achieved in the future as it has been testified in the past, make an exception. They do not follow the set formula like *probatum est*,⁷ but the GM provides elaborate testimonies, e.g.: “This Medicine, however simple soever it may seem to some, is yet a fine emollient Remedy, ... and will be found to sheathe and soften the Asperity of the Humours...” (GM 1731: 314).⁸ In the following, the core speech act, again, is the request to have the letter published. To achieve the goal, the author guarantees the efficacy of the recipe and tells its history, finishing with an elaborate flourish of philanthropy. The speech act verb *flatter* is often mentioned in responses to compliments, playing them down, but here the verb is used as a self-oriented modesty phrase:

(7) Mr. Urban, Honiton, Nov. 4.

⁷ This was a common additional component in Middle English (see Taavitsainen 2001a).

⁸ Another fairly new feature is that recipes often finish with “notes” in accordance with the new trend of advertising medicines: “The Beech Oil, required in the above Receipt, is to be had at the Golden Ball the Corner of Burleigh-street in the Strand, for One Shilling and Six-pence the Vial” (GM 1731: 314).

AS it will ever give me pleasure to have it in my power to communicate to the public any thing that may **be of service to my fellow-creatures, let me beg the favour of you to insert in your next Miscellany the underneath recipe** for a Cancer, **which has never been known to fail** of a cure. It has been handed about this neighbourhood, **with great success**, by many gentlemen who have had **the happiness of mankind at heart**; and, **I flatter myself**, I shall not merit their disesteem by thus endeavouring **to render this valuable discovery more extensively useful**.

Yours, &c. John Feltham.

A Recipe for a Cancer, or any Tumour.

TAKE half a pint of the juice of ... (GM 1786: 948)

5. Thanking

The speech act of thanking expresses the speaker's feeling of gratitude towards something.⁹ It is a courteous, inherently polite speech act often mentioned as the second part with offers, invitations and compliments expressing "pos-politeness" (Leech 2014: 196).¹⁰ In the GM, thanking forms an essential part of polite interaction as a supportive interpersonal ritual in "appreciation moves" strengthening the social bonds, associated with ceremonial good behaviour (see Goffman 2010 [1971]; Aijmer 1996: 51). Thanking is not, however, very common compared to compliments, for example. Various expressions include *thank* (n. and v.), adjectives *grateful*, *thankful*, and *indebted*, and the verb *oblige*, frequently found in the concluding phrase connected with publishing requests, e.g. "and you will oblige, Yours, &c." (1767: 634). The community spirit is enhanced by references to previous contributions, as

⁹ According to Searle (1979: 15), the illocutionary point is specified by the propositional content about the state of affairs specified by sincerity conditions.

¹⁰ Leech (2014: 11) uses "pos-politeness" and "neg-politeness" for the key terms of Brown and Levinson's politeness model "to minimize confusion". Pos-politeness ascribes some positive value to the addressee, whereas neg-politeness has a mitigating function in reducing positive offence. Thus, polite requests express neg-politeness by reducing imposition.

e.g. “I Think the public much obliged to your correspondent who signs Z. ... for communicating the advantage he obtained against a stone in the kidneys” (1761: 354). Indirect thanking as conditional upon the publication of the letter expresses the illocutionary force of persuasion rather than gratitude.¹¹ It is a strategic device to enhance the urgency of the request (cf. modern “thanking you in advance”):

- (8) ...determined me, by the channel of your useful Magazine, to communicate to the public the above case, as similar to, and more recent, than those in the *Philosophical Transactions*; and to which, **if you please to give a place, you may possibly oblige** some others, as well as, Your constant Reader and Admirer, Rooke Thorold, Surgeon.
(GM 1792: 603)

Some more indirect expressions of gratitude are also found:

- (9) I will only add, that **it will give me a great satisfaction if this paper proves beneficial** to any that shall read it. Bagnio Court, July 30. The Lobb.
(GM 1761: 356)

In the following example, the same author shares useful advice for curing the whooping cough that raged in the neighbourhood. Religious feelings are also present, e.g. combined with an indirect request with gratitude to have the contribution published in the GM for philanthropic reasons; the speech act of blessing is also mentioned (twice):

- (10) This service* I shall endeavour to perform for the use of the poor, and of such other persons as cannot have better advice: And as with a desire, so **with the hope, that thro’ the divine blessing**, they may be **the happy means of preserving many lives** in behalf of several poor distressed families ... [*referring to publication]

(GM 1761: 493, see Example (5) above)

¹¹ I am grateful to Jane Demmen for this observation.

- (11) ...now cured, **I cannot better show my thankfulness to God for the ease I enjoy, than by desiring you to publish my case**, as it may be the happy means of relieving others who are in the same melancholy condition. **I bless God I am now easy and happy**, and am fully satisfied that I have got rid of a stone which gave me so much uneasiness for many years; ... I am your constant reader Z.

(GM 1761: 261, see also Example (5))

5.1 Requests

The core of correspondence in the letters to the Editor is built on requests and responses to them. The speech act of request is a face-threatening act violating the desire to go unimpeded (Brown and Levinson 1987: 67), and therefore various mitigating devices are needed. Early Modern English use of conventional politeness markers like *pray*, *beseech*, and later *please* (Busse 2002; see also Taavitsainen and Jucker 2008b: 8), but they are not found in the GM. Indirectness, e.g. as above in Example (10) with *desire*, is a common strategy for mitigating requests and the modern convention has been traced to the nineteenth century (Culpeper and Demmen 2011). It can be found even earlier, as these GM examples show. Two types of requests are common in the present material: pleas directed to the Editor to have the contribution published and pleas directed to the readers to obtain health advice in the form of tested cures and remedies.

Correspondence about topical issues was lively at times. Plants were important in medication and advice for cultivating medical herbs was appreciated and sought after. Descriptions of poisonous and healing plants occur in several issues throughout the century. The following elaborate passage contains other-oriented positive thoughts and its eloquence builds on the contrast of this “despised weed” and “nuisance” and its “invaluable” virtues. The text promises that the Editor will be rewarded by the feeling of pleasure in learning the contents of the letter and continues with the request

that he make it speedily public. The passage ends with praise of the beneficial effects of the plant:

(12) Dear Sir, 2d July, 1777.

... **will give you pleasure; but it will give you more** to read the following narrative of cures performed by a despised weed that grows on every ditch, and is a nuisance in every garden, **which I send with a request that you will make it as public as possible, and as speedily as you can**, because, the plant being now in bloom, I apprehend its juices will neither be so copious nor efficacious after its seeds are formed; and **I am very desirous that as many more proofs may be made of its virtues** as possible during the remains of the reason. This invaluable medicine ... (GM 1792: 603)

Seeking advice from other readers was a common motivation for writing to Mr. Urban. In the following letter, rhubarb is praised for its salubrious effects,¹² and credit is given to GM for spreading this knowledge. This speech act is followed by thanking as an indirect strategy of presenting a request for “a few short directions” about another useful plant which is presented indirectly with a hypothetical *if*-clause:

(13) Mr. Urban, June 14.

THAT useful and valuable medicine, Rhubarb, is now cultivated very generally in the common gardens of gentlemen, clergymen, and public gardeners; and **this has been obtained** in a great measure by short and fugitive communications in and **from your Magazine. It would be a grateful communication to many of your readers, if some of your correspondents would give a few short directions to cultivate the purging Senna**. In warm sheltered spots of ground, or in the green-house, there is a fair prospect of succeeding; ... (GM 1798: 463–464)

The same vein of thought continues in the following request. The wording “for the sake of mankind” belongs to the common stock of public good phrases in accordance with the eloquence of the period style, include eloquent diction with

¹² Treated in the GM earlier, too, e.g. in blank verse in 1765: 478.

parallelism in composition like *no skill in the composition – little art in the application*, accompanied by rhetorical questions:

- (14) ... if there is a remedy at all times near at hand, which **requires no skill in the composition, little art in the application, should not the gentleman, who happily thought of making the experiment, make the effect of it as public as possible? ... I hope, for the sake of mankind**, that he will send you a full account ... (GM 1792: 43)

A request that initiated a chain of letters in the last decade of the century shows how health problems were presented in a compassionate and polite way. At the beginning the author apologizes for his way of presenting his request and a plea for help, accompanied by the future act of thanking. The request is in the form of a polite question with *would*, which is an indirect formulation of the speech act.

- (15) Though not an old man, **allow me to trespass** a little more. Being very much troubled with the ascarides ...**I will thank any of your correspondents to assist me in getting rid of them... Would any of your readers convey**, through the channel of your Magazine, a method of effectually eradicating them (if possible), rather confirmed by experience than plausible theory, **he will most essentially oblige A Medical Sufferer**. (GM 1792: 804)

This request inspired equally polite answers in a quick pace and the discussion continued in the same considerate style. Strategies for giving advice vary from personal narratives (Example 16), to offering comfort by reminding the *Medical Sufferer* that the ailment is not fatal (Example 17), and to recipes that had proved helpful in similar cases (Example 18), presented by an *if*-clause and indirect thanking:

- (16) Oct 3 **I FEEL most sensibly** for *A Medical Sufferer*, p. 804; and **I think it my duty to tell him what cured me** of the small worms he complains of. Until I was sixteen, I was ... (GM 1792: 885)
- (17) Mr. Urban, Oct. 5. HAVING been a sufferer from *ascarides* above half a century, and having taken every reasonable remedy I could hear of, from *æthrops mineral*, when an infant, without effect, **I can give very little comfort** to *A Medical Sufferer*, p. 804, **except that, as he is**

not an old man, he may, however, arrive at old age notwithstanding the teasing disorder which he labours under ...from *A Fellow-sufferer*.

(GM 1792: 892)

- (18) Mr Urban, Nov. 3. **IF the following remedy, which I have known do good, should give a *Medical Sufferer* any relief, it will give me great pleasure.** TakeYours, &c. Meanwell. (GM 1792: 1082)

The same spirit of sharing useful knowledge for common good can be found in the first aid advice attached to reports on accidents. During the first decades in GM's history brief news of calamities, misfortunes and casualties were published in a concise form to satisfy readers' curiosity and reminded them of the haphazardness of life (see the category description).¹³ This changed towards the end of the century. Useful advice was added and first aid instructions for emergencies were regularly added to news about accidents:¹⁴

- (19) Mr. Urban, Nov. 20.

YOUR benevolence will not be averse to communicate to the publick the following fact through the channel of your valuable and diffusive Miscellany. My footman, in bringing up the urn for breakfast yesterday, fell with it on the stairs, **and scalded both his hands and arms all over in a dreadful manner.** His mistress had happened to mention in his hearing, but a few days before, **the great benefit which she and I had repeatedly experienced, from applying ink immediately to a burn.** The moment the young man met with his accident, he flew to the ink bottle, and spread its contents wherever the scald extended. In about an hour after, **the pain was gone; he was able to wait at dinner; and this morning he is perfectly well.**

Yours, &c. P. J.

(GM 1792: 1008)

¹³ Such pieces of hard news are only marginally relevant to the medical concerns, and therefore not included in LMEMT (see Taavitsainen 2015).

¹⁴ Another similar piece with an accident description and first aid advice is found in GM 1792: 707.

6. Impolite speech acts in politeness veil

Inherently impolite speech acts are also found in the letters to the Editor. Strategies in presenting potentially face-threatening requests vary. In some texts disagreement and criticism are embedded in polite speech acts and in some others they are formulated in a more dialogic way. Duty is often referred to, thus distancing the imposition, and in the spirit of enlightenment, public good is mentioned.

New methods were widely debated in various publication channels. Smallpox was a serious illness and inoculation a controversial issue. Arguments pro and con were presented on medical, ethical, and religious grounds. The following letter to the Editor begins with a programmatic declaration. The author advocates for progress in an optimistic spirit, appealing to duty in the preamble that serves to mitigate his sharp criticism. Rhetorical devices of parallel sentence structures and balancing acts with multiple viewpoints are in accordance with the period style.

(20) Mr URBAN,

IT certainly is the duty of every man to promote the happiness of his fellow creatures as far as comes within his power; to propagate useful knowledge, to cultivate a particular art or science, to clear up a doubt or difficulty in it, or to communicate the least improvement, are influences of a noble mind, whose endeavours merit the attention and respect of the public.

In this view I consider the *Remarks upon the Practice of Inoculation* in your *Magazine for April*, p. 147-8. And in this view I hope the anonymous author of them will consider me, **tho' I cannot approve of what he has advanc'd upon the subject...**

(GM 1750: 256)

The controversy continued in a letter from 1767. It contains an accusation veiled in the frame of thanking the benefactors of common good that “every lover of mankind” agrees with. The conflict is sharp and builds on the contrasts in vocabulary: *rejoice* >< *lament*, *preserve* >< *destroy*, etc.

(21) Mr Urban,

EVERY lover of mankind must rejoice that a method has been discovered of preserving multitudes from the **fatal effects of a most loathsome distemper** by inoculation.

It must, with all thankfulness, be acknowledged, that the inventors and improvers of it deserve to be ranked among the first benefactors of their fellow creatures. **But, whilst we gladly pay them this tribute of gratitude, we cannot but lament that this practice hath been abused and perverted to the destruction of many lives,** which might have been preserved. (GM 1767: 254)

Other topics were debated as well, e.g. medical nostrums were fiercely opposed by educated doctors. An ironical shade is present in the following example from the very last years of the century. Emotive language is used in wishes, exclamatory clauses, and sentimental style spiced with metaphorical language. A specific device of mitigating criticism is metatextual: by describing the letter as *friendly* the author tries to influence the recipient's view of it.

(22) Mr. Urban,

IN answer to **the benign enquiries of your medical philanthropist**, p. 647, whose empirical faith has passed such encomiums on **Ward's Drops**, may **these stubborn truths come not too late to unravel the dangerous clue of pharmaceutical nostrums!** When we hear a man exclaim of purifiers of the blood, **medical science will pity his ignorance;** but when **humanity usurps the throne of Truth, though conscious of the error, we admire the goodness and purity of his heart,** and forget to censure where correction is due. Such do I consider the queries of Homo, and as such will I consider them in **this friendly reply.** ...

(GM 1798: 739)

7. Public good, charity, and social welfare

The goal of promoting public good was already mentioned in the inaugural issue of the GM as the magazine was promised to “occasionally oblige the Readers with matters of Publick Concern” (preface to the volume for 1731). The theme pops up in various contexts throughout the century (see also Example (1) from 1743) but grows in strength towards the end of the century. Public good was the driving force for establishing new institutions and other initiatives to improve the miserable conditions of the poor. Topics with larger societal impact were discussed widely, as expressed in 1761:

(23) Mr Urban, **THE utility of public hospitals is universally acknowledged**, as they tender the welfare of such objects as are incapable of helping themselves. That now erected at the city of Oxford must be of two-fold advantage, as it cannot fail of improving the study of physic in that university, at the same time that it affords a powerful relief to the afflicted. ...

If it is deemed wisdom in societies to provide for the infirm and needy, surely it must be proportionably more so to provide for those who exhibit misery to us in the strongest light. To elucidate the truth of what is here advanced, ...

All that is aimed at is **the general good of mankind**; ...

Yours, &c. F. Y.

(GM 1761: 305)

Compassion is present and pseudonyms with the noun *sufferer* are frequent. The feeling of pity extends from individuals to the less privileged classes of society in poor relief initiatives. Progress was dependent on philanthropy and readers of the GM were appealed to for raising money for improvements in health care systems during the latter half of the century. The feeling of sympathy is strong, here expressed in rhetorical terms. The haphazardness of life is a common theme, found e.g. in the following appeal:

(24) ... WERE there no misery or distress in the world, there would be few occasions for exercising that **benevolence, which excites gratitude and thankfulness** on one hand, **and the tender emotions of sympathy and humanity** on the other, Conscious as we are, that **no one is exempt**

from the painful vicissitudes of life and that the blessed to-day may to morrow experience a bitter reverse; the child of woe is always an object of commiseration, and should excite in our hearts that kind of compassion, and obtain that aid from us, which we should look for, were such afflictions suffered to overtake us ...

(GM 1780: 25)

The trend grows even stronger towards the end of the century. An example from 1798 contains metatext with an explicit statement of a patriotic motivation of writing. The main speech act in the following is an accusation, but it is mitigated by attributing positive qualities to the person who has been misled to “a pernicious error” of recommending a remedy invented by a “foreign quack”. The phrasing reflects strong patriotic feelings and negative attitudes to “foreign”.

(25) Mr. Urban,

HAVING observed in your last, p. 945, an article, recommending the use of diluted vitriolic acid as a cure for Sea-scurvy, **I think it my duty, as a friend to my country**, whose welfare at all times, but particularly at this moment, depends on her Navy, **to combat what I conceive to be a pernicious error, into which your well-intentioned, though ill-informed, Correspondent has fallen.** This medicine, in consequence of the recommendation of **a foreign quack ...**

(GM 1798: 1028)

8. Conclusions

The GM letters to the Editor offer a picture of extensive lay participation in a new community of practice. Several turns were written in response to one another, and correspondence was lively, especially on some topical health issues and new methods to prevent diseases. They were debated and discussed on a broad front. The genre was new, and there is a clear line of development: the initiative came from the floor during the first decades but the latter half of the century was the period when the genre

became established and gained popularity that continues up to the present.¹⁵ Linguistic strategies comply with the prevailing norms of pleasant and sociable interaction with positive evaluation of the magazine, its Editor, readers and contributors. Polite speech acts like compliments and promises of future gratitude as a support move to requests prevail, and expressions of appreciation and good wishes are often intertwined with advice and warnings that could possibly be understood as face-threatening or imposing. Rhetorical figures increase in the course of the century and sentiments become foregrounded with a wide repertoire of emotive adjectives that show responses to the issues at hand (e.g. *admirable*, *ingenious*, *benevolent*; *alarming*, *dreadful*).

The polemical trend is connected with novel methods and innovations. New medical practices were debated on a broad front, and lay practices overlapped and interacted with professional concerns. Letters to the Editor take sides pro and con, the same way as articles in professional channels of publication, medical books, and professional journals; extracts of this material were also rendered in the GM, making it easy for the readers to follow what was taking place in the world of science (see the category description).

To sum up, the GM provided a new means for literate people to keep abreast of the latest developments, and it also acted as a channel for readers to participate in societal issues and bring forth more personal concerns. Through this magazine we have access to eighteenth-century opinions on what “anyone of rank, education, or presumption to reckon himself genteel” (Porter 1985a: 141) considered worth attention, and we have first-hand evidence of what readers of polite society considered an appropriate way of communicating about health issues. Letters to the Editor provide fruitful data for the ethnographic and social-constructivist approach for studying the development of politeness conventions in medical texts.

¹⁵ The formation of the genre and its conventions deserve further study on more extensive data.