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"Your letter is a deplorable specimen of bad writing": criticism and authority in responses to reader letters in *The Girl's Own Paper*, 1880

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Abstract: This article examines criticism in answers to reader letters in the 1880 volume of *The Girl's Own Paper*. The editors' responses are notable for regularly including criticism that lacks mitigation and/or contains features likely to increase the damage to the letter writers' face. I argue that these criticisms constitute a form of institutional facework, serving to establish and defend the editors' claims to both epistemic and deontic authority. Specifically, the editors position themselves as experts with the epistemic authority to issue firm verdicts, often without explanation or justification. Moreover, they claim the right to determine what kind of behavior is acceptable, an aspect of deontic authority that has not yet been discussed in depth. Finally, the editors use criticism to defend or reclaim authority when they feel it has been called into question. Through these criticisms, the editors construct an asymmetrical relationship with readers characterized by unequal rights to face protection. This data set is thus especially interesting as a source of insight into how participants (often implicitly) make claims about what kind of facework is owed to whom.

Keywords: criticism; assessments; face; epistemic authority; deontic authority

1 Introduction

This article explores the functions of criticism in editors' interactions with readers in the 1880 volume of *The Girl's Own Paper* (*GOP*). Published by the Religious Tract Society under the editorship of Charles Peters, the *GOP* was an extremely popular literary and general interest magazine targeting working- and middle-class girls and young women. In addition to serialized fiction, short stories, and poetry, each issue contained a variety of nonfiction articles, recipes, and instructions for needlework

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and other crafts. In the final section of each issue, titled either "Answers to Correspondents" or "Correspondence", the editors responded to letters from readers. While some readers apparently wrote simply to praise the magazine, many others sought advice on a wide variety of topics.

The editors' responses are notable for regularly including criticism that lacks mitigation and, in many cases, contains features likely to exacerbate the threat to letter writers' face (see Goffman 1967: 5). This is quite a surprising finding given that readers were, after all, paying customers. It might have been assumed that the editors would seek to develop a positive relationship with readers in order to encourage their identification with the magazine and retain their business (cf. Beetham 1996; Moruzi 2012; Warren 2000). Far from demonstrating a desire to leave readers with a positive impression of the interaction, however, these criticisms show a noticeable willingness to cause offense. In the coming analysis, I will attempt to make sense of this choice by identifying the functions of this criticism. Specifically, I will seek to explain (a) what institutional goals this criticism serves; and (b) what role it plays in establishing, enhancing, and/or defending the *GOP's* claims to authority.

While numerous studies have analyzed criticism in present-day interactions (e.g., Copland 2011; Donaghue 2018, 2020; Turan and Aptoula 2023; Vásquez 2004), this topic has not yet been widely explored in a historical context. Existing research on facework in 19th-century English has focused predominantly on requests, with a particular emphasis on the increasing prominence of "non-imposition" politeness strategies during this period (e.g., Culpeper and Demmen 2011; Jucker 2012). By documenting criticism in a 19th-century British girls' magazine, this research serves as a first step in understanding some of the realizations and functions of criticism during this era. This article also expands on existing work highlighting the central role of social status in 19th-century speakers' judgments about appropriate linguistic choices (e.g., Dossena 2019; Shvanyukova 2019). Moreover, it considers how ideologies of age and gender influenced beliefs about what kind of facework was owed to whom.

2 Literature review

2.1 Criticism, face, and (im)politeness

For the purposes of this analysis, I have adopted Tracy et al.'s (1987: 56) definition of criticism as "a negative evaluation of a person or an act for which he or she is deemed responsible". As criticism is quite closely entwined with considerations of face and (im)politeness, I will begin by briefly outlining my approach to these two concepts. Following Goffman (1967: 5), I treat face as a public, social resource that is negotiated

in interaction; to use Ting-Toomey's (1994: 1) phrasing, face is "a claimed sense of self-respect in an interactive situation".

It is worth emphasizing that a mutual effort to protect face should not necessarily be considered the default expectation (e.g., Beebe 1995; Copland 2011; Harris 2001; Mills 2003, 2005; Mullany 2008; Penman 1990; Tracy 2008), nor should deliberate damage to face be assumed to be, as Culpeper (1996: 359) says, "a haphazard product of say a heated argument". Rather, face-aggravating behavior may be deployed deliberately and strategically to serve specific goals (e.g., Archer 2008; Johnson and Clifford 2011; Lakoff 1989). This point is especially relevant in the case of institutional speakers, who may view this kind of face aggravation as part of fulfilling their professional responsibilities (e.g., Culpeper 1996; Johnson and Clifford 2011).

In considering the relationship between criticism and face, I follow other authors (e.g., Arundale 2006; Locher and Watts 2005; Watts 2003) in taking the position that no utterance is inherently face threatening. Rather, as Chang and Haugh (2011: 2948–2949) say, "whether an action is face-threatening, and the degree of face-threat, depends on the evaluations and responses of participants in particular interactions relative to their interpersonal histories and broader sociocultural expectations". For example, while name-calling and expletives are generally viewed as face threatening (see Tracy 2008; Tracy and Tracy 1998 on "context-spanning face attacks"), these kinds of apparent insults can serve to strengthen social bonds when used in a lighthearted manner in certain contexts (e.g., Daly et al. 2004; Haugh and Bousfield 2012; Hay 2002). Moreover, both societal and individual values – and their perceived relevance in a particular context – affect the extent to which a negative evaluation is perceived as face threatening. For example, the statement "you have poor posture" is likely to be much more face threatening from a casting director to a ballet dancer than from a physical therapist to a patient. Indeed, if the patient attaches no particular value to "good" posture, or if slouching is a deliberate part of his self-presentation, this statement may not be face threatening at all.

While there is not a one-to-one relationship between criticism and face threat, negative assessments do make a participant's desire to be well thought of particularly salient (Frescura 2006; Tracy 2008). This link between criticism and face vulnerability is especially apparent in the ways various linguistic forms can be employed to reduce or enhance the risk to face. On the one hand, the face threat associated with criticism may be (and in many contexts, is expected to be) mitigated. Examples of mitigation strategies include indirectness and hedging (Copland 2011; Donaghue 2020, 2022; Hyland 1996; Kulbayeva 2020; Larina and Ponton 2022), self-denigration (Copland 2011; Itakura and Tsui 2011), humor (Donaghue 2022), apologies (Itakura and Tsui 2011), justifications (Ho 2017), pairing criticism with praise (Copland 2011; Ho 2017; Larina and Ponton 2022) and emphasizing that the criticism is a subjective opinion (Larina and Ponton 2022; Myers 1989). On the other hand,

criticism may contain features that increase the likely damage to face, including intensifiers and emphatic structures (Lai 2024; Ren 2019), taboo words (Lai 2024; Ren 2019; Tracy 2008), moral judgments (Kulbayeva 2020), and constructions that frame the criticism as objective fact (Larina and Ponton 2022).

Turning now to the relationship between face and impoliteness, the (perceived) intent to damage face has often been cited as a defining characteristic of impoliteness (e.g., Bousfield 2007: 2186–2187; Culpeper 2008: 36; García-Pastor 2008: 101; Tracy and Tracy 1998: 227). Many authors have also viewed evaluations of (im)politeness as judgments about appropriateness (e.g., Angouri and Tseliga 2010; Beebe 1995; Locher 2004; Locher and Watts 2008; Watts 2003). As has been extensively documented, politeness norms vary significantly across cultures (e.g., House 2006; Isosävi 2020; Márquez Reiter 2000; Murphy and De Felice 2019; Ogiermann 2009; Schnurr and Chan 2009; Yeung 2000) and over time (e.g., Culpeper and Demmen 2011). Judgments about (im)politeness are also highly context-dependent; the same utterance may be evaluated differently depending on the established norms for a particular activity or community of practice (e.g., Angouri and Tseliga 2010; Culpeper 1996, 2011; Neurauter-Kessels 2011). This point is particularly relevant in evaluating the (im)politeness of criticism, as participants' understanding of the goals of the activity may affect judgments about the (in)appropriateness of any associated face threat. Specifically, in cases where feedback is considered an expected or necessary part of the activity, participants may orient to criticism as nonproblematic (see e.g., Copland 2011 on peer feedback for trainee teachers; Donaghue 2022 on supervisor-teacher feedback; Tracy 2008 on school board meetings). Even in situations where quite direct criticism is considered appropriate, however, certain kinds of face threats may be judged to "go too far", violating the boundaries of acceptable behavior (e.g., Copland 2011; Larina and Ponton 2022; Tracy 2008).

An inherent challenge in working with the kind of historical data analyzed in this article is the limited information available about how readers would have reacted to these criticisms. Similar examples in other British magazines from this period suggest that the criticisms in the *GOP* were relatively consistent with the norms for this genre (see Section 3.1). Nonetheless, it is always possible that (some) readers would have oriented to a particular criticism as, for example, unnecessarily harsh or overly personal – that is, norm-violating even in an activity where similar criticisms were not unusual. I have therefore found it most useful to discuss these criticisms in terms of their (likely) impact on face, and to avoid drawing definite conclusions about their (im)politeness.

2.2 Strategic impoliteness, power, and authority

The coming analysis will explore how criticism serves the institutional goals of making, strengthening, and defending claims to authority. Before considering authority in more depth, I will briefly discuss some relevant insights from research on the related concept of power. Following Stevanovic and Peräkylä (2012: 297), I use "power" to refer to the *ability* to affect others' actions and/or beliefs, and "authority" to describe the *right* to do so.

(Im)politeness research has long emphasized a link between face aggravation and power (e.g., Brown and Levinson 1987; García-Pastor 2008; Locher 2004; Locher and Bousfield 2008; Mullany 2008; Schnurr et al. 2008). For example, speakers with more power may be free to be impolite without consequence, while those with less power may be prevented from responding in kind or subject to retaliation if they do so (e.g., Bousfield 2008; Culpeper 1996, 2008; Penman 1990). Thus, impoliteness is not simply a "reflection" of power, but also a means of actively asserting it.

When it comes to authority, I follow other authors (e.g., Heritage and Raymond 2005; Raymond and Heritage 2006; Stevanovic 2017; Stevanovic and Peräkylä 2012, 2014) in adopting the philosophical distinction between epistemic and deontic domains. Epistemic authority refers to authority rooted in knowledge and experience (Heritage and Raymond 2005; Heritage 2012, 2013), while deontic authority has been defined as "[an individual's] right to determine others' future actions" (Stevanovic and Peräkylä 2012: 315). Or, as Stevanovic and Peräkylä (2012: 298) put it, "epistemic authority is about *knowing* how the world 'is'; deontic authority is about *determining* how the world 'ought to be'" [original emphasis].

In criticisms, the most obviously relevant form of authority is epistemic authority. When making an assessment, a speaker claims not only the necessary knowledge and experience to make a judgment, but also the right to express it (Heritage 2012; Heritage and Raymond 2005; Raymond and Heritage 2006). Unsolicited criticisms thus involve a particularly strong claim to epistemic authority (cf. DeCapua and Huber 1995; Donaghue 2022; Locher and Hoffman 2006; Vehviläinen 2009 on solicited advice).

Participants are generally aligned in the view that institutional speakers have superior epistemic authority on matters involving professional judgments (see, e.g., Peräkylä 2002 on doctors and patients; Henricson and Nelson 2017; Vehviläinen 2009 on academic supervisors and students). However, there may be differences between the authority afforded by institutional roles and the authority participants actually claim in interaction – what Heritage (2012) refers to as epistemic *status* and epistemic *stance*, respectively. For example, speakers in less powerful roles may assert their own claims to epistemic authority, as when teachers resist supervisors' criticism

(Donaghue 2020, 2022) or parents challenge teachers' views of best practice in the classroom (Caronia 2023). On the other hand, speakers whose institutional roles afford them stronger claims to epistemic authority may deliberately downgrade these claims in order, for example, to encourage reflection or participation (Turan and Aptoula 2023; Van der Meij et al. 2022). Speakers may index these upgraded or downgraded claims through specific features in their turn construction. For example, hedges like "it seems", "maybe", or "kind of" indicate a downgraded claim to epistemic authority, while a declarative assertion makes a stronger claim (Donaghue 2020; Heritage and Raymond 2005; Raymond 2000; Turan and Aptoula 2023; Vásquez 2004).

As I will argue in Section 5, criticism may also involve a claim to deontic authority. As with epistemic authority, assertions of deontic authority involve a dual claim: a claim about what should be done, and a claim about who has the right to decide this. Again, the deontic *stance* speakers express may differ from the deontic *status* stemming from their social and/or institutional roles. Stevanovic and Peräkylä (2012: 299) note, "[s]peakers with strong deontic rights in a domain might not need to display those rights, for example, by 'commanding,' while speakers with fewer deontic rights might be willing to inflate their authority with more assertive directives". Again, then, speakers may index stronger or weaker claims to authority through specific linguistic choices. For example, framing a proposed action as contingent on another participant's agreement involves a weaker claim to deontic authority than simply announcing a decision (e.g., Stevanovic 2011, 2013; Stevanovic and Peräkylä 2012).

Thus far, research on deontic authority has focused primarily on the right to make decisions about specific actions in the relatively near future – for example, cantors and pastors making plans for church activities (Stevanovic 2011; Stevanovic and Peräkylä 2012), a teacher managing a student's behavior and performance during a violin lesson (Stevanovic 2017), or parents and teachers negotiating how best to meet a child's needs (Caronia 2023). In this article, however, I will consider the right to make pronouncements about what "ought to be" (Stevanovic and Peräkylä 2012: 298) in a broader sense: the right to determine what standards of behavior or performance are desirable or acceptable (cf. Donaghue 2020: 406).

Finally, although existing work has noted that the negotiation of authority is likely to have implications for face (e.g., Stevanovic 2013, 2017; Stevanovic and Peräkylä 2014; Vásquez 2004), this topic has not yet been explored in depth. Moreover, existing discussions of authority and face have focused primarily on facework designed to mitigate the damage to face. For example, Stevanovic (2017) notes that an assertion of deontic authority may be "disguised" as epistemic authority in an effort to protect face, while Vásquez (2004) observes that supervisors' downgraded epistemic claims may indicate an orientation to the interpersonal delicacy of

providing feedback. In this article, however, I will discuss how criticism that fails to protect face – or appears to deliberately aggravate face – serves to claim both deontic and epistemic authority.

3 Historical context

3.1 *The Girl's Own Paper* and its readers

The examples discussed in this analysis are taken from the correspondence section of the 1880 volume of *The Girl's Own Paper*. As this was the first year the magazine was in print, this volume is a particularly interesting source of insight into the work of constructing an identity for this new periodical. The *GOP* was published by the Leisure Hour Office, a division of the Religious Tract Society in which the RTS's evangelical agenda was deliberately de-emphasized. Driven by a desire to provide an alternative to the sensational romance- and crime-focused "penny dreadfuls" that were a popular form of inexpensive literature during this period, the Leisure Hour office aimed to publish "moral" literature with widespread commercial appeal. Consistent with this mission, the early volumes of the *GOP* avoid overt religious instruction, instead using both fiction and non-fiction to promote a model of Christian girlhood emphasizing traditional femininity and devotion to home and family (see Beetham 1996; Mitchell 1995; Moruzi 2012; Rodgers 2016).

While the *GOP* reader is typically depicted as a girl or unmarried young woman in her teens or early twenties, the correspondence section indicates that the actual readership extended beyond this age range and, judging from repeated questions about whether boys could participate in the magazine's contests, was not entirely female. Moreover, though the majority of the *GOP*'s content appears to assume a lower-middle-class reader, its marketing strategy targeted both middle- and working-class buyers (Moruzi 2012), and references to correspondents in domestic service confirm that working-class young women were reading and interacting with the *GOP*.

The "Answers to Correspondents" section appears at the end of each issue in a noticeably smaller font than the rest of the text. The readers' letters are not published; only the editors' responses appear in print. As a result, it is not always clear what the letter writer has asked. Some responses are particularly opaque, with answers like "Yes" or "The accent is on the first syllable" that would be decipherable only to the addressee (Correspondence 1880a: 96, Answers 1880b: 159). On the other hand, would-be correspondents are regularly reminded to check whether their questions have already been answered, suggesting that readers other than the

addressee were expected to read the printed responses. Letter writers' occasional references to previous responses show that this was indeed the case (see Example 5).

Most letter writers use pen names (e.g., flower names or titles like "A Constant Reader") or initials or first names, which may also be pseudonyms. This anonymity has clear implications for the face at stake in these criticisms, as the face threat is presumably less severe than it would be if the recipients were identified by name (see, e.g., Neurauter-Kessels 2011). However, the public nature of the criticism is still likely to have face implications; it should not be assumed that the face threat involved is identical to that of a criticism viewable only by the addressee.

Anonymity is also a significant consideration for the response writers. They refer to themselves simply as "we" in their responses; no names or pseudonyms are given. There is thus no information available about who wrote any given response or whether the same writer(s) consistently handled the correspondence section. For the sake of simplicity, I refer to these authors collectively as "the editors". Again, this anonymity has important implications for the face at stake in these interactions. Rather than working to protect or enhance their individual personal or professional face (Márquez Reiter 2009), the editors appear to be performing facework on behalf of *The Girl's Own Paper* as a whole. As others have pointed out, individuals may orient to the reputation of a group when performing facework (see, e.g., Spencer-Oatey and Xing 2000 on facework orienting to the reputation of a company or country; Ho 2017 on evaluation teams and jointly written reports). While the reputation of a company certainly has implications for individual members' face (Spencer-Oatey 2005), my focus here is on how staff members collectively perform facework designed to protect the *GOP*'s "claimed sense of self-respect" (Ting-Toomey 1994: 1) as an institution – more specifically, as a for-profit company with an economic stake in creating a successful brand (cf. Page 2014 on corporate apologies; Moruzi 2012; Warren 2000 on the importance of brand identity for periodicals during this period). I will thus speak of the facework in question as "institutional facework".

3.2 Genre conventions, gender, and age

The anonymity of the response writers also adds a layer of complexity to an analysis of the influence of time- and place-specific gender norms on these interactions. The 1880 volume of the *GOP* contains a few remarks from "the editor" written in third person using masculine pronouns (Charles Peters' name appears only as part of a longer "list of contributors"). However, it does not appear safe to assume that readers believed that the editor himself was the author of the printed responses. The responses are typically quite terse and do not allow much room for the development of a clear "voice" on the part of the author(s), especially when compared to other British

periodicals with a more conversational style like *The Englishwoman's Domestic Magazine* and *The Young Englishwoman*, where responses are written under clearly gendered personas with distinct personalities (see Beetham 1996, 2019). Moreover, an illustration on the correspondence page in an April number of the *GOP* appears to deliberately create the impression that the (male) editor passes reader letters on to be answered by a team of female writers. The illustration depicts four women seated at a table, approached by a young clerk holding a basket overflowing with letters. The caption reads, "Please, ladies, the editor wishes trustworthy and kind answers to these few notes immediately. Printer's waiting" (Answers 1880f: 240). In addition, given the highly gendered nature of the topics of most replies – detailed advice about housekeeping, embroidery, fashion, hairstyles, etc. – readers may have assumed that authors writing authoritatively on these subjects were likely to be women.

Moreover, evidence from other British magazines during this period suggests that direct, unmitigated criticism was not necessarily inconsistent with a feminine persona. For example, the High Anglican magazine *The Monthly Packet* promotes a very conservative model of womanhood, and editor Charlotte Yonge's persona of "Arachne" is nurturing and motherly (Moruzi 2012; Walton 2016). Nonetheless, her critiques of young women's essays include the kind of unmitigated criticism of interest in this article, with assessments like "meagre" or "hardly worthy of the subject" (Spider 1878: 408, 1879: 305).

Another question arising from this data set is the extent to which these criticisms may have functioned as a form of entertainment. Based on the small text size and inconspicuous placement of the correspondence section, the *GOP*'s self-fashioning as an elevating moral influence, and the lack of obvious displays of verbal wit or humor (cf. Culpeper 2005; Dynel 2011), entertainment does not appear to have been a primary goal in these criticisms. Rather, as will be discussed in the coming analysis, the editors appear to have considered it their right – and likely their responsibility – to evaluate readers' performances and to instruct them in how they should behave.

A closer look at readers' investment in their handwriting – by far the most common subject of criticism in this data set – appears to support a reading that the editors saw value in providing honest, if face-threatening, feedback. Requests for handwriting assessments appear regularly in British periodicals targeting both boys and girls during this period, to the point that several magazines announced that they would no longer answer questions on this topic due to the volume of requests (e.g., Correspondence 1880c: 288; Our drawing-room 1875b: 120; To correspondents 1874a: 207). Letters (ostensibly) from readers provide hints about their motives for enquiring and the likely face implications of a negative evaluation. For example, readers request advice for improving handwriting after having been unable to attend school, ask whether handwriting is "too much like a school-girl's", or seek a second opinion on handwriting that has been described as "look[ing] so servanty" (Our drawing-room 1875c: 240, 1875a:

59, 1869: 336). This evidence suggests that handwriting was considered indicative of maturity, education, and/or social class. The quality of one's handwriting could also have economic implications, as evidenced by regular opinions in *The Young Ladies' Journal* on whether a reader's handwriting is suitable for a particular profession such as teaching, law copying, or office work (e.g., Notices 1874: 799; To correspondents 1874b: 223). Similarly, answers to *GOP* readers about potential careers occasionally mention poor handwriting as a disqualifying factor (e.g. Answers 1880c: 192, 1880e: 223). It thus appears likely that the *GOP* editors believed that criticism of readers' handwriting served a genuine pedagogic function.

While an in-depth comparison is beyond the scope of this article, a brief look at criticism in similar magazines published in the UK during this period is useful in developing a sense of how far *GOP* readers would have oriented to these criticisms as typical or expected. As noted above, there is certainly precedent for unmitigated and/or face-aggravating criticism in other magazines targeting girls and young women during this period. For example, in *The Young Englishwoman* and *The Young Ladies' Journal*, handwriting is evaluated as "slovenly", "decidedly bad" or "very defective", and readers and their questions are described as "silly", or "ridiculous" (Notices 1876a: 367; Our drawing-room 1867: 502; To correspondents 1872a: 223, 1872b: 271). Like the *GOP*, both magazines also refuse to answer certain questions, sometimes accompanying these refusals with additional criticism, as in: "We advise you to try to regain your senses, as we fear you have lost them, for a time, at least, or you would not have wasted paper and a postage-stamp in writing so absurd a letter" (Notices 1876b: 495; cf. Example 4).

Differences in gender norms are certainly identifiable when comparing the *GOP* to *The Boy's Own Paper* (*BOP*), also published by the Religious Tract Society. For example, evaluations of boys' handwriting more frequently mention its suitability for a particular career, and they lack references to gendered aesthetic qualities like "beauty" or "grace" (cf. Example 1). *BOP* editors also seem to have had a much greater tolerance for outspokenness from their readers (see, e.g., answer to IGNUS OPUS, Correspondence 1880b: 256), while *GOP* readers were expected be "modest", "ladylike", and "unassuming" (see Example 5). Nonetheless, similar examples of unmitigated and "aggravated" criticism appear in the *BOP*, including judgments with moral connotations like "Your letter is simply a disgrace to a young man of twenty" (Correspondence 1880e: 768; cf. Examples 4 and 5).

The "defensive" criticism discussed in detail in Section 5.2, where the editors criticize readers in response to questions about needlework patterns or directions, does not appear to be typical in girls' magazines. On the contrary, in *The Young Englishwoman*, "Sylvia's" response to a comment about a "vague" crochet pattern treats the criticism as a valid topic of discussion and concedes a great deal to the letter writer: "The directions are not so full as usual, but I have just managed to do a pattern

from them. It makes a pretty little pattern, though not exactly like the illustration, I confess" (Our work-room 1875: 657; cf. Examples 6 & 7). Interestingly, the *BOP* does include dismissals of readers' questions comparable to those in the *GOP*, with responses like the following: "We have nothing to add to the directions already given. The 'spectres' should appear on bright days, but artificial light is best. Read the article again" (Correspondence 1880d: 512). This evidence suggests that while unmitigated and/or face-aggravating criticism was not unusual in periodicals aimed at younger readers, there may have been an element of "house style" at play in determining exactly what forms of criticism were considered appropriate.

4 Methodology

The data set consists of the "Answers to Correspondents" or "Correspondence" columns from 39 issues of the *GOP,* a total of 51 pages. The version consulted was a bound edition of volume 1 of the *GOP* digitized on the HathiTrust archive. After a close reading of each correspondence section in the volume, responses containing clear negative assessments, both implicit and explicit, were manually transcribed. The responses were then loosely grouped into categories according to the topic(s) of the criticism. To allow for discussion of patterns within categories, the analysis focuses on cases where there were multiple examples of criticism on the same topic. The following categories meeting this criterion were chosen for analysis: criticism of handwriting (47 examples), criticism of the letter writer's tone (3 examples), and "defensive" criticism in response to a perceived face threat (7 examples). Representative examples for each category were then selected for discussion. These examples are analyzed using a general discourse analytic approach drawing on (im)politeness theory.

A fundamental challenge in working with this kind of data is the fact that these mediated, asynchronous written interactions are only partially viewable. The editors' printed response can be considered a second turn in a dialogue where the first turn, the readers' original letter, is not available for analysis. It has been extensively demonstrated that authority is negotiated in interaction across multiple turns (e.g., Caronia 2023; Donaghue 2020; Heritage and Raymond 2005; Peräkylä 2002; Raymond and Heritage 2006; Stevanovic and Peräkylä 2012, 2014). Nonetheless, the construction of single turns can provide important information about speakers' claims to authority (see discussion of "upgraded" and "downgraded" constructions in Section 2.2 and Svennevig 2021 on deontic authority claims on signs). I have therefore focused on analyzing the face- and authority-related claims that are identifiable in these single turns.

5 Analysis

5.1 Evaluating performance and determining acceptable behavior

The most common criticisms in the "Answers to Correspondents" section are negative assessments of letter writers' handwriting. In some cases, readers appear to have asked for such assessments; in other cases, it appears more likely that the criticisms were unsolicited. Consider the following excerpt:

Example 1 You wish to have our opinion of your handwriting. We regret to say that it is vulgar, being written sloping backwards; coarse, being two sizes too large; inartistic, having no beauty and grace of form, and decidedly unladylike. (Answers 1880d: 208)

In this example, the opening sentence, "You wish to have our opinion of your handwriting", explicitly indicates that this is a solicited assessment. By asking the editors for an opinion, the reader has oriented to them as experts with a superior claim to the knowledge required to evaluate her handwriting. In making this assessment, then, the editors both accept and reinforce the claim to epistemic authority that the reader has already afforded them.

Although the editors acknowledge that the reader has requested an *opinion*, the assessment is delivered using the declarative construction "it is…". The lack of opinion markers such as "we think" frames the assessment as an objective fact. In addition to potentially increasing the severity of the face threat (Larina and Ponton 2022), this construction involves a stronger claim to epistemic authority (cf. Garcés-Conejos Blitvich et al. 2013). The editors claim the right to render a verdict rather than simply advance an opinion, making no concession that a different conclusion might be reasonable or valid. This framing is especially notable as this assessment includes not only statements about correctness, but also aesthetic judgments. While size and, especially, direction of slope can be more-or-less "objectively" compared against an accepted standard, claiming the right to judge what is or is not artistic, beautiful, graceful, or ladylike involves a much stronger claim to epistemic authority. These latter judgments also involve more of a claim about what *should be* (cf. Stevanovic and Peräkylä 2012: 315), and thus a claim to deontic authority. By characterizing qualities like "inartistic", "vulgar", "coarse", and "unladylike" as defects, the editors make an implicit claim about what readers' handwriting – and by implication, readers themselves – should be like.

In this example, the negative assessment is prefaced by the mitigator "we regret to say". While it seems unlikely that this apologetic introduction would significantly

reduce the severity of the face threat (cf. Deutschmann 2003; Leech 2014), this phrase can be said to show some evidence of orientation to the letter writer's face needs. Even such minimal nods towards face protection are noticeably scarce in this data set. Of the 47 responses I have identified as clear negative assessments of handwriting, only 3 contain features that could be considered attempts to mitigate the damage to face.

The majority of criticisms of handwriting take the form of simple declaratives with no apparent concern for letter writers' face. These assessments are often very brief, sometimes comprising the entire response, sometimes included among answers to additional questions. The following examples are typical (note that "writing" generally refers specifically to handwriting in these responses):

Example 2 (a) No, we certainly do not admire your handwriting. (Answers 1880k: 592)
(b) Your writing is poor. (Answers 1880l: 607)
(c) Your writing is very ugly, and requires punctuation. (Answers 1880j: 495)

The "no" prefacing 2a indicates that the reader has raised the topic of her own handwriting in some way. In 2b and 2c, there is no indication whether the letter writers asked for an assessment. In either case, these assessments involve a claim to the requisite expertise to distinguish "good" handwriting from "bad", and, especially in the case of unsolicited assessments, the right to express this judgment. By phrasing these assessments as simple verdicts, the editors also make a claim that their assessments do not require explanations or justifications; rather, their judgment should be accepted based on their authority alone (cf. Stevanovic and Peräkylä: 2012). The claim to epistemic authority is softened somewhat in Example 2a, where the phrasing "we certainly do not admire" acknowledges that the assessment is a subjective opinion (though the use of "certainly" may convey a sense that this verdict is self-evident[1]). The editors again make a stronger claim to epistemic authority in Examples 2b and 2c by presenting their opinions as fact. As in Example 1, the criticism in 2c makes a particularly strong claim to epistemic authority by including the aesthetic judgment of "ugly". Once again, (lack of) beauty in handwriting is framed as an objective characteristic rather than a subjective preference for one style over another.

These examples also provide important evidence about how the editors construct their obligations regarding readers' face needs. By making these negative assessments without mitigation, the editors claim the right to issue criticism without acknowledging any responsibility for protecting the recipient's face. Moreover, even

1 Thank you to an anonymous reviewer for pointing out this reading of "certainly".

if minimal mitigation like that in Example 1 is viewed as a sincere attempt to minimize the damage to face, the frequency of unmitigated examples positions this mitigation as a gracious concession rather than something that is owed. The use of the litotes "we […] do not admire" in Example 2a, creates a similar impression, conveying a sense that the editors could say something more overtly face threating but are generously refraining from doing so (cf. Johnson and Clifford 2011).

An important question when considering very brief assessments like those in Example 2 is whether this lack of attention to readers' face may be due to space constraints. While limited space may well have been a factor, the fact that these criticisms were published at all provides insight into what the editors believed was acceptable. In other words, if the editors had considered it important to avoid offending readers, they could have chosen not to publish criticism unless sufficient space were available to include mitigating features. Moreover, the longer "exacerbated" criticisms below provide further evidence that the editors' willingness to threaten readers' face cannot be attributed solely to space constraints.

The following examples involve criticisms that contain additional features likely to increase the severity of the face threat. These criticisms are particularly interesting because while the claims to epistemic authority are quite similar to those in Examples 1 and 2, these exacerbating features involve more of a claim to deontic authority. Consider the following example:

Example 3 K. C. sends us no less than ten questions in one letter. None of these are commenced with a capital letter, nor a number, nor, indeed, is there a single stop in the whole epistle […] Your letter is a deplorable specimen of bad writing, and ignorance of punctuation and grammar. (Answers 1880g: 255)

As in previous examples, the editors claim both the requisite knowledge to assess the reader's writing and the right to express this (likely unsolicited) judgment. Once again, framing this assessment as an objective fact rather than a subjective opinion involves an upgraded claim to epistemic authority.

In Examples 1 and 2, the face threat associated with the criticism could conceivably be understood as a byproduct of achieving a primary goal of delivering an (honest, accurate) assessment (cf. Goffman 1967: 14 on "incidental" face threats). In this response, however, the editors use additional face-aggravating features to make a claim about the right to determine what is acceptable. They not only characterize the letter writer's handwriting as "bad", but also describe her letter as "deplorable". In addition to increasing the likely damage to the letter writer's face (cf. Kulbayeva 2020 on judgments with negative moral connotations), this description makes a claim about deontic authority. Specifically, by framing "bad" handwriting, punctuation, and grammar not simply as errors, but as a cause for shame, the editors

claim the right to determine values and set expectations. Furthermore, the characterization of the latter two categories of errors as "ignorance" makes a claim that the letter writer herself has fallen short of an acceptable standard, one the editors have the right to define.

In addition, the opening sentence of this response, "K.C. sends us no less than ten questions in one letter", serves as a form of indirect criticism. The marked emphasis in the phrase "*no less than* ten" suggests that this number is inappropriately high, implying that the letter writer should have known better than to ask so many questions at once. This opening thus serves as an indirect claim to a form of deontic authority that will be explored in more detail below: the right to determine how readers should behave when addressing the editors. A similar example of criticism with additional face-threatening features can be seen below.

Example 4 You have asked us a lot of absurd questions, which of course we do not intend to answer; but, before consigning your letter to the waste paper basket we wish to ask you to learn the spelling of the following easy words: raspberry (you had it rasberry), whose (whos) amiss (amis), right (write!). Also we might mention that you mix the singular number with the plural, punctuate in the wrong places, omit capital letters, and write a disgraceful hand. It would be wiser of you to try to improve your education instead of "reading jollie novels." (Answers 1880h: 288)

In responding with unsolicited criticism instead of a relevant answer, the editors make a particularly strong claim to both the right to make assessments (epistemic authority) and the right to decide how readers should interact with the *GOP* (deontic authority). Like Example 3, this criticism includes a negative moral judgment: "disgraceful". Again, the editors claim the authority not only to judge correctness, but also to determine what constitutes an acceptable standard and what merits censure. Given the incongruity between the formality of the phrase "we might mention" and the criticism that follows, this can be considered an instance of mock politeness, likely to increase the damage to face rather than mitigate it (cf. Culpeper 1996, 2011). Additional features likely to exacerbate the damage to face include: the mocking strategy of quoting the letter-writer's spelling error in "'reading jollie novels'", the characterization of the misspelt words as "easy", and the inclusion of an exclamation point when quoting the misspelt homophone, "('write!')". In this response, then, the editors not only accept no responsibility for mitigating face threats, but also claim the right to deliberately increase their severity.

This criticism also involves a claim about what should be valued and prioritized: "It would be wiser of you to try to improve your education instead of 'reading jollie novels'". Here, although the claim to deontic authority is weaker than a construction

like "You must try to improve…" would be, the editors claim the right to tell the reader what she should do. The response makes a further claim to deontic authority in its criticism of the letter writer's questions: "You have asked us a lot of absurd questions, which of course we do not intend to answer; but, before consigning your letter to the waste paper basket…". By printing this response, the editors make a strong claim not simply about power, but about rights. The editors clearly have the *power* to refuse to answer the letter writer's questions; there is no conceivable way she could force them to do so. However, by publishing a reply characterizing the questions as unworthy of an answer, especially one using the phrase "which *of course* we do not intend to answer", the editors frame their refusal as natural and legitimate. That is, they claim the *authority* to refuse to answer certain questions, and, by characterizing "consign[ment]…to the waste paper basket" as the appropriate fate for the letter, to do so in a particularly face-threatening way. Through this criticism, the editors thus claim the deontic authority to determine who is worthy of their time and deserving of access to their expertise. Similar claims to deontic authority can be identified in the following criticism:

Example 5 You quote our comments on the bad writing and spelling of many of our correspondents; allow us to observe that you write a very crabbed little hand yourself, and it slopes the wrong way too. We must also observe that whether deficient in the accomplishments of spelling accurately or not, the general tone of the letters we receive is modest and ladylike, and decidedly far less assuming than your own. (Answers 1880i: 383)

This example is particularly interesting as indirect evidence of how at least one reader reacted to some of the editors' criticisms. Based on the phrasing "You quote our comments on the bad writing and spelling of many of our correspondents" and the editors' strong negative reaction, it appears quite likely that the letter included a negative assessment of previously printed criticisms. If this reading is correct, the criticism of this letter writer's handwriting is particularly noteworthy. The editors offer no apology for their previous criticisms, no justifications or explanations about why they feel the associated face threats were necessary or permissible. On the contrary, they double down on the criticized behavior, making the same sorts of negative assessments about the letter writer's own handwriting. Moreover, the mock-polite introduction "allow us to observe" and the phrasing "you write a very crabbed little hand *yourself*" both suggest that the letter writer has not raised the subject of her own handwriting. The editors thus make a particularly strong claim about their right to criticize, at the same time making it clear that this same right does not extend to readers.

The editors also claim the right to determine what kind of tone readers should adopt, using an unfavorable comparison with other letter writers: "the general tone of the letters we receive is modest and ladylike, and decidedly far less assuming than your own". Through this comparison, the editors promote a particular ideal of how readers should behave: modest, ladylike, and unassuming. Identifying these traits as praiseworthy serves to construct and promote a very hierarchical relationship, one in which readers and editors have significantly different responsibilities towards one another.

5.2 "Defensive" criticism

The final category of criticism to be explored in this article is what I have termed "defensive" criticism: criticism used to defend against a perceived threat to the *GOP*'s institutional face. Specifically, these criticisms respond to challenges to the editors' epistemic authority. Consider the following excerpt:

Example 6 You have not read our instructions for tracing with the least attention; they could not be more plainly expressed. (Answers 1880a: 111)

This example is a clear case of an institutional goal – specifically, the desire to protect institutional face – taking priority over any concern for the letter writer's face. The editors' response begins with a criticism of the reader: "You have not read our instructions for tracing with the least attention." This is followed by an assertion defending against any implication that the editors were at fault for publishing directions that were not sufficiently clear: "they could not be more plainly expressed." This criticism thus serves to protect the editors' claims to epistemic authority, reasserting their right to be considered experts with the knowledge and judgment to provide clear directions. A very similar criticism can be seen in the following example:

Example 7 The long stitch about which you inquire in the octagon basket and satchel needs no further explanation, as the illustration shows clearly what it is. Put in the needle at the back, and put it in again at the front; this will make one long stitch. The patterns have been chosen for their extreme simplicity, and all necessary explanations have already been supplied, if not in letter-press, at least in our illustrations. They only require common attention. (Answers 1880b: 159)

Once again, this response indicates that a reader's question about directions – this time about a decorative embroidery stitch – has been interpreted as face threatening. This response contains more extensive defenses against the implication that

the original directions were not sufficiently clear: "the long stitch…needs no further explanation", "the illustration shows clearly what it is", "the patterns have been chosen for their extreme simplicity", and "all necessary explanations have been supplied". The final defensive claim ends with the slight concession, "if not in letterpress, at least in our illustration", acknowledging that there was no written explanation of the stitch. However, this is followed by the claim, "They only require common attention". Like Example 6 this criticism defends the editors' claims to epistemic authority against any implication that the directions they provided were not sufficiently clear (in this case, by insisting that written directions were not necessary because the letter writer should have understood the stitch from the illustration). Again, they characterize the letter writer's uncertainty as her own fault, implying that she has failed to pay even "common" attention. Through this "defensive" criticism, the editors claim the deontic authority to determine how readers should interact with the *GOP*, positioning themselves as experts whose judgment it is not acceptable to question. That the editors would risk alienating readers through this kind of criticism – especially readers who were sufficiently engaged with the magazine to be using the patterns and writing to ask for clarification – says something especially significant about the importance of both deontic and epistemic authority to the *GOP*'s institutional face.

6 Conclusions

In this analysis, I have argued that the face-threatening and/or face-aggravating criticisms in the "Answers to Correspondents" section constitute a form of institutional facework on behalf of the *GOP*. Specifically, they serve to protect and enhance the editors' reputation as experts and to construct a relationship with readers characterized by asymmetrical deontic rights.

This research expands on discussions of how face-threatening linguistic choices may be used to advance institutional goals (e.g., Bousfield 2008; Culpeper 1996; Donaghue 2022; Johnson and Clifford 2011; Lakoff 1989; Mullany 2008). Much of the existing research on the strategic use of unmitigated or exacerbated face threats has focused on environments like courtrooms (Archer 2008; Culpeper 1996; Johnson and Clifford 2011; Lakoff 1989), political debates (García-Pastor 2008; Harris 2001; Jaworski and Galasinski 2000; Locher 2004), or army training (Bousfield 2008; Culpeper 1996, 2008), where conflict is expected and/or where relationship-building is not a priority. While research focusing on more cooperative relationships has also found that participants may be willing to risk face in order to achieve institutional goals, participants in these types of interactions typically attempt to mitigate the

damage to the recipient's face (e.g., Copland 2011; Donaghue 2022; Ho 2017; though see Donaghue 2018; Kulbayeva 2020 for examples of exceptions).

This study, in contrast, identified numerous instances of unmitigated and/or exacerbated criticism in a context where conflict was not obviously fundamental to the activity. On the contrary, it might have been expected that building relationships with readers – specifically, leaving readers with a positive impression of the interaction so that they would be more likely to continue subscribing to the magazine – would be a primary goal. In their criticisms of letter writers, however, the editors consistently prioritized a different institutional goal: protecting and enhancing the *GOP*'s institutional face by making, defending, and reinforcing claims to both epistemic and deontic authority. Notably, face threats were not simply accepted as an unavoidable byproduct of pursuing institutional goals; rather, they were actively leveraged as a tool for achieving those goals.

These findings demonstrate that while discussions of face and criticism often focus on the impact on the recipient's face, criticism also has important implications for the assessor's own face. This aspect has previously been discussed in terms of the risk to the criticizer's face if the criticism is judged to be inappropriate (Ho 2017). However, there appears to be additional insight to be gained from further exploring how participants may use deliberately face-threatening criticism as a strategy for enhancing their own face.

These findings also suggest numerous opportunities to further our understanding of 19th-century pragmatics and the evolution of norms regarding criticism and mitigation. The unmitigated and/or face-aggravating criticisms discussed in this article noticeably differ from present-day norms in educational contexts where feedback on topics like handwriting, values, or behavior towards authority figures is likely to occur. There is thus a potentially fruitful avenue for future research in exploring the evolution of feedback norms over time, especially in speech directed at children or young people.

In addition, existing work on (im)politeness has discussed how participants evaluate behavior in terms of accepted norms (Angouri and Tseliga 2010; Beebe 1995; Locher 2004; Locher and Watts 2008; Mills 2002, 2003, 2005; Mullany 2008; Schnurr et al. 2008; Watts 2003). This research highlights the opportunity to look more closely at how participants construct these norms in the first place, especially in institutional contexts. As argued above, the editors in this study used criticism to construct a hierarchical relationship with readers, one characterized by unequal rights to face protection. This pattern suggests that there is value in exploring not only how interactants perform both self- and other-directed facework, but also how they make claims about what kind of facework is owed to whom.

This research also adds to the emerging discussion on the relationship between face and the exercise of authority, a topic which has only briefly been discussed thus

far (Stevanovic 2013, 2017; Stevanovic and Peräkylä 2014; Vásquez 2004). While existing work has focused on attempts to mitigate face threats when exercising authority (Stevanovic 2017; Vásquez 2004), this study has provided examples where face-threatening constructions are used to strengthen claims to authority. For example, constructions that have been identified as face threatening, such as framing assessments as objective facts (Larina and Ponton 2022) or making judgments with negative moral connotations (Kulbayeva 2020), involve stronger claims to epistemic and deontic authority, respectively. The latter category of criticism also involves a more abstract form of deontic authority than has so far been discussed in detail: the right to determine values, priorities, and acceptable standards. There thus appears to be considerable potential for further research into the relationship between facework and the negotiation of authority. For example, it would be particularly interesting to explore how speakers construct turns when wishing to *both* make strong claims to epistemic authority *and* protect fellow interactants' face. In addition, while this article has focused on criticism, there is also potential insight to be gained from analyzing the role of positive feedback in claiming the right to determine what "ought to be" (Stevanovic and Peräkylä 2012: 298; cf. Manes 1983 on compliments as statements about values).

These findings also raise questions about how these kinds of face attacks would affect public perception of a brand today. Existing research has noted that less powerful speakers may use strong deontic claims to boost their authority, while more powerful speakers may not need to "command" (Stevanovic and Peräkylä 2012). This raises the interesting possibility of a point at which an inappropriately strong deontic stance could in fact undermine an institution's authority if it is perceived as an attempt to exercise more authority than the institution can legitimately claim. It would be useful to explore the extent to which some form of established power or authority is required for certain deontic claims to be perceived as legitimate. Moreover, it seems likely that changes in social norms over time – e.g., the extent to which social status is foregrounded and deference is considered desirable or expected – would affect the extent to which the institutional facework strategies identified in this article would be effective in the present day.

Finally, the possible role of entertainment in these interactions merits further exploration. The criticisms in the *GOP* are noticeably reminiscent of negative assessments on "exploitative" reality TV shows, where face attacks serve the goal of entertaining audiences (see, e.g., Culpeper 2005; Garcés-Conejos Blitvich et al. 2013; Lorenzo-Dus 2008). As discussed in Section 3.2, entertainment does not appear to have been (acknowledged as) a primary goal in these criticisms. However, it is certainly possible that readers derived entertainment from them. It would thus be useful to explore whether these kinds of semi-public criticisms, and readers'

reactions to them, may have played a role in the evolution of genres where criticism is explicitly marketed as entertainment.

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