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Politeness and impoliteness in Coptic documents

The correspondence of the monk Frange in 8th century Thebes

Abstract: The exceptional dossier of the monk Frange, who lived on the Theban mountain at the beginning of the 8th century, has preserved several hundred Coptic letters on ostrakon. In these letters, the monk goes from the most exquisite politeness to extreme rudeness. Playing on the codes of language and epistolography of his time, whose codes he does not hesitate to break, he expresses the full range of his feelings, from exalted joy to cold anger. In addition to the letters that Frange himself wrote are those written by a range of other individuals, among whom a number of women are prominent. This article presents the first examination of politeness in this corpus, focussing first on Frange's means of expressing politeness or rudeness in his messages, and second on the strategies employed by the women who wrote to him. Beyond politeness, these case studies also demonstrate how such an approach can provide significant contributions to understandings of the broader context in which such letters are produced.

1. Introduction¹

1.1. Frange's ostraca

In the early 2000s, excavations by the Université libre de Bruxelles (ULB) in Theban Tomb 29 (TT29), the tomb of Amenemope, vizier of Pharaoh Amenhotep II (18th Dynasty), brought to light Coptic remains of great importance, which reveal the reoccupation of the court and the tomb by Christian monks (Heurtel, 2003; Bavay, 2007). Hundreds of Coptic ostraca were discovered on this occasion, which make it possible to identify two different occupations: one from the seventh century and the other, richer and more extensive, from the first half of the eighth century. The occupant of the site during the latter occupation was a monk named Frange, who lived there for several years with his disciple Moses (Boud'hors & Heurtel, 2010, vol. 1: 9-32; Boud'hors & Heurtel, 2016).²

Frange worked as a weaver, a copyist, and a bookbinder, as the archaeological remains and texts have shown. He has left us a documentation that is exceptional in its scope and quality. As a matter of fact, he was an intellectual and a professional writer, with a good knowledge of literary texts, especially the Bible (Boud'hors & Heurtel, 2010, vol. 2: 62;

¹ We would like to thank the anonymous reviewers for their constructive comments regarding this study, especially in terms of additional methodological approaches to the material in question.

² The texts are referred to by the papyrological siglum O.Frangé; all papyrological sigla used in this article conform with the *Checklist of Editions*, available online at papyri.info/docs/checklist.

Delattre & Vanthieghem, 2014: 108-113; Delattre, 2019: 487; Piwowarczyk, 2022). Hundreds of letters written by and to him have been preserved, which he kept in his cell: Frange was obviously concerned with his written work, as evidenced by the fact that he kept copies of his messages or, more likely, he asked his correspondents to bring back the letters he sent, perhaps in order to check that his requests had been fulfilled, or even for archiving purposes (Boud'hors & Heurtel, 2010, vol. 1: 9). In addition to the letters that he himself wrote, there are also, to a lesser extent, the letters he received. This discrepancy between the number of letters sent and letters received may reflect a situation in which most of Frange's correspondents answered him orally, while he, as a monk, rarely travelled. A few dozen letters written by him and found in various places in the vicinity of his cell complete the corpus of his correspondence.

In all, we now have nearly one hundred letters addressed to Frange and more than four hundred letters written by him (Boud'hors & Heurtel, 2010; Boud'hors, 2011a). Such a collection, which includes so many letters written by a single individual, is quite exceptional and constitutes a rich source of information, which is particularly valuable for the study of ancient epistolography. Frange was indeed a scholar, who knew and mastered the epistolary codes to perfection, including their formal aspects, and did not hesitate to play on them (Delattre & Vanthieghem, 2020). The corpus thus contains a very wide range of letters, which express his entire spectrum of feelings, from exalted admiration to the coldest anger (Delattre, 2019; Delattre, 2023).

1.2. Politeness and Impoliteness in Coptic Letters

The evolution of the letter since Roman times has been traced by Jean-Luc Fournet, who has highlighted the importance of politeness, as manifest in particular in phraseology that depreciates the sender and exalts the recipient (Fournet, 2009). The epistolography of the Byzantine and early Arab periods seems to follow fairly strict rules, although geographic and chronologic factors result in some variation. Thus, at the beginning of Coptic letters, the sender greets the addressee with the verbs $\psi\iota\iota\iota\epsilon$, $\alpha\sigma\pi\alpha\alpha\epsilon$ (i.e., Greek $\acute{\alpha}\sigma\pi\acute{\alpha}\zeta\epsilon\sigma\theta\alpha\iota$), or $\pi\rho\omicron\sigma\kappa\upsilon\eta\epsilon$ (i.e., Greek $\pi\rho\omicron\sigma\kappa\upsilon\nu\epsilon\acute{\iota}\nu$). The final, farewell salutation is almost invariably $\omicron\gamma\chi\alpha\iota$ ($\epsilon\mu$ $\pi\chi\omicron\epsilon\iota\varsigma$), "Hail (in the Lord)".³ The sender – when male – regularly refers to himself as $\epsilon\lambda\alpha\chi\iota\sigma\tau\omicron\varsigma$ (i.e., Greek $\acute{\epsilon}\lambda\acute{\alpha}\chi\iota\sigma\tau\omicron\varsigma$), "very humble", while the recipient is described in more or less flowery and abstract terms, e.g., $\tau\epsilon\kappa\mu\tilde{\nu}\tau\mu\alpha\iota\iota\omicron\upsilon\tau\epsilon$ $\nu\omicron\varsigma\omicron\eta$, "your pious brotherhood", or $\tau\epsilon\kappa\mu\tilde{\nu}\tau\epsilon\iota\omega\tau$ $\epsilon\pi\tau\alpha\iota\eta\gamma$ $\kappa\alpha\tau\alpha$ $\varsigma\mu\omicron\tau$ $\nu\iota\mu$, "your honourable fatherhood in every respect".

In Frange's corpus, in addition to letters, there is a significant body of writing (or "school") exercises. These texts show both a certain stability of these formulas and the care taken to learn them. The epistolary *topoi*, ready-made formulas for greeting correspondents or their entourage, for wishing them good health, etc., are frequent and contribute to the proper conduct of exchanges. Thus, late antique letters seem to be fairly

³ Biedekopf-Ziehner (1983) remains the most extensive study of the formulae of Coptic letters. The term 'salutation', indicating an expression for the health of the addressee, is taken from Halla-aho (2009).

uniform and employ polite forms (initial and final greetings), even when the content of the letter is polemical. Breaches of these rules would have been considered rude or impolite but appear very rarely in private correspondence.⁴ The issue is different in official letters, which follow different codes: a superior may dispense with introductory formulas when writing to a subordinate, without this being impolite.⁵ Frange's corpus, in particular because of his strong personality and lively temperament, contains several letters that can be described as impolite.⁶

1.3. Approaching im/politeness in Frange's corpus

While Frange's corpus provides opportunities to study im/politeness in Coptic letters, there are several methodological issues that need to be considered. As demonstrated by Terkourafi (2002), to understand the politeness strategies that a speaker uses, it is necessary not only to examine the formulaic expressions themselves but also the extra-linguistic factors involved, namely the sex, age, social class of the individuals involved, the relationship between them, and the setting of their exchange. Such an approach moves away from the micro-level relationship between speaker and addressee as advanced by Brown and Levinson (1987) in which politeness is determined by three variables (pp. 68–83): perceived power dynamic, social distance, and the cultural ranking of the topic being discussed (i.e., how sensitive it is perceived to be within a particular culture). Instead, Terkourafi's approach considers politeness within its macro-level, taking into account the relationship of the interlocutors not only with each other but with the whole culture with which they seek to identify themselves (*ibid.*, 194–5).

Applying this approach to an ancient archive such as Frange's is not unproblematic. On one hand, a certain level of extra-linguistic information is known, in particular sex and the setting of the exchanges. However, even when multiple exchanges with the same individuals survive, it is not possible to determine other factors, including age, as well as social class and the nature of their relationship. The honorific use of titles such as 'Lord', as well as kinship terms, obscures social ties and positionality. Nevertheless, sufficient data exists within Frange's texts to identify different strategies. What follows presents two case studies. The first case focusses on letters written by Frange to a village official, Mahenknut, which reveal Frange's uses of impoliteness. The second case turns to letters written to Frange by two women, Tsie and Susanna, which provide a rare opportunity to examine letters between men and women. The final section provides a discussion of these case studies using frameworks adapted from Terkourafi's macro-level approach to politeness.

2. Impoliteness in Frange's letters: one of a variety of strategies

⁴ An example is P.Pisentius 75, which is a letter of reproach, and does not contain any initial greeting.

⁵ See, e.g., P.Mich.Copt. 15 (cf. Delattre, 2007; Cromwell, 2022: 235–6).

⁶ Note that the study of politeness in Coptic letters is still in its infancy; see recently Cromwell (2022: 237–9) and Müller (2023).

Most of Frange's letters respect the codes and rules of epistolography as well as the manners and politeness expected in his time. But when the monk is annoyed, upset, or angry, he does not hesitate to show it in his letters. In order to get what he wants, Frange uses a wide variety of rhetorical and argumentative strategies, including reproaches, blackmail, threats, the use of authority, and impoliteness. Often, these strategies reinforce and complement each other within the same text. In concrete terms, three violations of the epistolary code can be highlighted and considered as marks of impoliteness: the reduction or omission of the polite formulas expected in letters; the anonymous nature of certain messages, in which Frange does not even name the addressee, but provides his own name in the final salutation; and the material deviations from the form and layout of the letter.

2.1. Playing with the codes of letter writing (1): Impolite ways of addressing

Polite introductory phrases are practically obligatory in private letters of the time. They can be given more or less importance, depending on the wishes of the sender and the quality of the recipient. Frange did not hesitate to reduce them to the bare minimum, or even to omit them, if it served his purpose. Three letters in the corpus provide a good illustration of this (exx. 1–3).⁷ The three documents are addressed to Mahenknut, a *lashane* (village chief) in the Theban area, and adopt very different tones.

Ex. 1. O.Frangé 175: “Jesus Christ + Before my humble words, I write and greet (ϣΙΝΕ) my lord and loving-god brother Mahenknut. Be so good as to take the trouble (αΡΙ ΤΑΓΑΠΗ ΝΤΉΖΙΣΕ ΝΑΚ) to go out and meet me. For truly, I have entered (and) I have not found a means to go to the place where you live to meet your brotherhood. To be given to Mahenknut from Frange.”⁸

In this letter, the tone is polite and friendly. An invocation to Christ is noted in the upper margin and the text humbly begins by greeting (ϣΙΝΕ) Mahenknut, defined as a lord and brother. The request is then introduced in a particularly polite manner (“Be so good as to take the trouble to”): the formula “be so good” (αΡΙ ΤΑΓΑΠΗ) is banal, but it usually introduces the request itself. Here, for the sake of politeness and to show the recipient that he understands the effort required, Frange adds “to take the trouble to go out and meet me”; this pattern also occurs in Tsie's letters to Frange in §3.1. The text ends without the ordinary final salutation, with the address.

Ex.2. O.Frangé 176: “+ It is Frange who writes and greets (ϣΙΝΕ) his dear brother (ΠΕΦΜΕΡΙΤ ΝCON) Mahenknut. Since you came to me, I acted towards you as a brother. The great men gave you the tools in my name. Now my heart has suffered (ΠΑΞΗΤ ΑΦΖΙΣΕ), (and) the great men even more. Be so good (αΡΙ ΤΑΓΑΠΗ), my brother, as to give the things to that great man whom I

⁷ On these letters, see also Boud'hors (2018: 78-79).

⁸ Coptic text: ΤΕ ΠΕΧΕ | ϣ ΖΑΘΗ ΜΕΝ Μ|ΠΑΨΑΞΕ ΝΕΛΑΧ(ΙΣΤΟΣ) | ΕΙΣΖΑΙ ΕΙΨΙΝΕ ΕΠΑΧΟΕΙΣ ⁵ ΝCON ΜΜΑΙΝΟΥΤΕ | ΜΑΞΝΚΝΟΥΤ ΑΡΙ ΤΑ|ΓΑΠΗ ΝΤΉ ΖΙΣΕ ΝΑΚ ΝΤΕΙ | ΕΒΟΛ ΝΤΑΒΝΤΚ ΜΜΟΝ | ΑΝΟΚ ΡΩ ΔΙΕΙ ΕΖΟΥΝ ¹⁰ ΜΠΙΒΝ ΘΕ ΝΕΙ ΕΠΜΑ | ΕΤΕΚΟΥΗΖ ΝΖΗΤΩ | ΝΤΑΑΠΑΝΤΑ | ΕΤΕΚΜΗΝΤCON | ΤΑΔΣ ΜΜΑΖΝ¹⁵ΚΝΟΥΤ | ΖΙΤΝ | ΨΡΑΝΓΕ.

have charged (with this) when I send him to thee. For my heart has suffered much. I am surprised that (ⲧⲣⲱⲡⲏⲣⲉ ⲙⲓⲙⲟⲕ ϣⲉ) you have gone to Petemout without bringing them to me. Be so good as not to oblige me to send you a message another time. Hail in the Lord! +”⁹

The letter here is still polite: it begins with the greeting (ϣⲓⲛⲉ) and Mahenknut is described as “his dear brother”. The usual final polite formula concludes the text. The content, however, is more trenchant. Frange reminds us that he treated Mahenknut well (as a brother), but that he did not act well towards him. The reprobation is marked, as is often the case in Coptic, by the phrase “I am surprised of you because”. He ends by urging Mahenknut to action, asking that he not force him to write another message about the matter.

Ex. 3. O.Frangé 177: “In the foreword, I greet (ϣⲓⲛⲉ) you. Then I give you this statement: you have acted neither with regard to God, nor with regard to me, your brother, but you have taken the tools of the brothers and gone to Petemout. You have acted without discernment (ⲉⲛ [ⲟϥ]ⲙⲛ<ⲧ>ⲁⲧⲥⲱⲱ). Now be so good (ⲁⲣⲓ ⲧⲁⲃⲁⲡⲏ) as to send their tools back to the brothers in haste. For God knows that if you do not send them quickly and the hearts of the brothers suffer, yours will suffer even more and you will feel the pain (ⲡⲱⲕ ⲛⲁⲃⲓⲥⲉ ⲉⲡⲉⲥⲟϥⲟ ⲁϥⲱ ⲛⲧⲓ ⲟⲥⲉ). To be given to Mahenknut from Frange.”¹⁰

The last letter of the exchange shows Frange’s anger. Clearly Mahenknut has not brought back the tools and the monk has to write to him once again. The initial formula is present, but it is bare and perfunctory, with Mahenknut no longer being named and without any words of praise or friendship for him. The reproaches are now explicit: Mahenknut has acted without discernment, and by behaving badly towards Frange, he has behaved badly towards God. Moreover, if he does not return the tools quickly, he will suffer.

A comparison of the three letters clearly shows a deterioration in the relationship between the two characters, which is expressed explicitly in the letter by the reproaches and threats, and implicitly by the reduction of formulaic polite expressions. Several other letters in the corpus also illustrate this epistolary process, which Frange sometimes develops even more clearly, notably in O.Frangé 159 (ex. 4). This letter, addressed to Pahatre, begins abruptly with an interpellation (“As for you, Pahatre”) and concludes with very harsh words: Frange no longer wants to see Pahatre at all (“Stay at home, do not come back to me”).

⁹ Coptic text: ⲡⲓ ⲁⲛⲟⲕ ϣⲣⲁⲃⲃⲉ ⲉϥⲥⲁⲓ | ⲉϥϣⲓⲛⲉ ⲉⲡⲉϥⲙⲉⲣⲓⲧ ⲛⲥⲟⲛ | ⲙⲁⲁⲛⲃⲛⲟϥⲧ ⲉⲡⲉⲓⲁⲛ ⲁⲕⲉⲓ ⲁⲁⲉ | ⲧⲏⲓ ⲁⲓⲉⲓⲥ ⲛⲧⲙⲁⲕ ⲁⲱⲥ ⲥⲟⲛ ⲁⲛ⁵ⲛⲟⲃ ⲛⲣⲱⲙⲉ ⲧⲛⲉⲧⲃⲃⲁⲉⲓⲁⲓⲥ | ⲛⲁⲕ ⲉⲧⲃⲏⲏⲧ ⲧⲛⲟϥ ⲉⲓⲥ ⲡⲁⲁⲏⲧ \ⲁϥ/ⲉⲓⲥ | ⲛⲛⲟⲃ ⲛⲣⲱⲙⲉ ⲡⲉⲥⲟϥⲟ ⲁⲣⲓ ⲧⲁⲃⲁⲡⲏ ⲡⲁ | ⲥⲟⲛ ⲛⲧⲟϥⲱϣⲱ ⲛⲧⲓ ⲛⲉⲥⲕⲉϥⲉ ⲙⲡⲉⲓ | ⲛⲟⲃ ⲛⲣⲱⲙⲉ ⲛⲧⲁⲓⲉⲓⲉⲁⲓⲥ ⲉⲣⲟϥ ⲉⲓ¹⁰ⲁⲱⲟϥ ⲛⲁⲕ ⲙⲙⲟⲛ ⲁⲡⲁⲁⲏⲧ ⲉⲓⲥ ⲉⲙⲁ | ⲧⲉ ⲧⲣⲱⲡⲏⲣⲉ ⲙⲓⲙⲟⲕ ϣⲉ ⲁⲕⲃⲱⲕ | ⲉⲡⲉⲧⲉⲙⲟϥⲧ ⲙⲡⲉⲛⲧⲟϥ | ⲛⲁⲓ ⲁⲣⲓ ⲧⲁⲃⲁⲡⲏ ⲙⲡⲉⲕⲁⲉⲓ | ⲉⲁⲱⲟϥ ⲛⲁⲕ ⲛⲕⲉⲥⲟⲡ : ¹⁵ ⲟϥⲁⲓ ⲉⲙⲡⲱⲥⲓⲥ : ⲡⲓⲡ

¹⁰ Coptic text : ⲡⲓ ϣⲟⲣⲡ ⲙⲉⲛ ⲙⲡⲱⲁⲁⲉ | ⲧⲱⲛⲉ ⲉⲣⲟⲕ ⲙⲛⲛⲥⲱⲥ | ⲧⲁⲙⲟ ⲙⲙⲟⲕ ⲉⲡⲉⲓⲱⲁⲁⲉ | ϣⲉ ⲟϥⲁⲉ ⲙⲡⲉⲕⲁⲁⲥ ⲉⲧⲃⲉ ⁵ ⲡⲛⲟϥⲧⲉ ⲟϥⲁⲉ ⲙⲡⲉⲕⲁⲁⲥ | ⲉⲧⲃⲏⲏⲧ ϣⲉ ⲁⲛⲟⲕ ⲡⲉⲕⲥⲟ(ⲛ) | ⲁⲗⲗⲁ ⲁⲕϥⲓ ⲛⲥⲧⲱⲟⲉⲧⲉ ⲛⲧⲓⲛⲏⲩ ⲁⲕⲃⲱⲕ ⲉⲡⲉⲧⲉ | ⲙⲟϥⲧ ⲉⲛ [ⲟϥ]ⲙⲛ(ⲧ)ⲁⲧⲥⲱⲱ ¹⁰ ⲁⲕⲁⲁⲥⲉ ⲧⲉⲛⲟϥ ⲁⲣⲓ ⲧⲁⲃⲁⲡⲏ | ⲛⲧⲁⲱⲟϥ ⲛⲥⲧⲱⲟⲉⲧⲉ ⲛⲛⲥⲛⲏ | ⲟϥ ⲛⲁϥ ⲉⲛ ⲟϥⲥⲡⲟϥⲁⲛ ⲙⲙ(ⲟ)(ⲛ) | ⲡⲛⲟϥⲧⲉ ⲥⲟⲟϥⲛ ϣⲉ ⲉⲕⲧⲙⲓⲁⲱⲟϥⲟ ⲉⲛ ⲟϥⲃⲉⲡⲏ ⲛⲧⲉ¹⁵ⲡⲉⲏⲧ ⲛⲛⲥⲛⲏⲩ ⲉⲓⲥ ⲡⲱⲕ | ⲛⲁⲃⲓⲥⲉ ⲉⲡⲉⲥⲟϥⲟ ⲁϥ | ⲱ ⲛⲧⲓ ⲟⲥⲉ ⲧⲁⲁⲥ ⲙⲧⲓⲁⲁⲥ ⲙⲧⲓⲁⲁⲥ ⲛⲁⲁⲁⲥ ⲉⲓⲥ ⲧⲉⲛ ⲣⲁⲃⲁⲃⲉ.

Ex. 4. O.Frangé 159: “(written above the main text) + We are astonished (ⲛⲧⲁⲛⲣ̅ ⲙⲁⲓⲥⲉ), we Frange and Moses, we are amazed (ⲉⲛⲣⲱⲡⲏⲣⲉ): we wrote, on oath to Phoibamon the impudent (ⲁⲧⲱⲡⲏⲣⲉ) that we would send him the blanket before opening the Easter fast, (and) he rejected us. (*main text*) + As for you, Pahatrè, you know that the impudent man has fallen out with his wife because of you. I did all I could and reconciled you. Now God knows that I will not interfere in my life to make peace between you for the sake of his wife. And if you take me (into account), if you believe me, Pahatre, many people are scandalised (ⲥⲕⲁⲛⲧⲁⲗⲓⲥⲉ) that you go to Phoibamon, the impudent. So, I wrote to you and told you to go away [...] from this impudent man, lest you get into trouble. And I have taken you as a witness, if you do not send me the cover, never come back to me at all (ⲙⲡⲣⲉⲓ ⲛⲁⲓ ⲛⲕⲉⲥⲟⲛ ⲉⲛⲉⲥ ⲁⲣⲟⲓ). Stay at home, don’t come back to me.”¹¹

These examples reveal a ranking of letter openings, which can be deployed in order to best convey Frange’s intentions towards who he is addressing: 1) a greeting + identification (exx. 1 and 2); 2) a bare greeting (ex. 3); 3) an identification that serves to gain the attention of the addressee, without fulfilling any additional social role (ex. 4).

2.2. Playing with the codes of letter writing (2): ‘anonymous’ letters

Frange can go even further by deliberately choosing not to name his addressee, or even not to name himself. The idea is probably that the correspondent is not even worthy of being addressed by Frange or of pronouncing (or writing) his name. Functionally, it is true that the address can be omitted: messages were transmitted by messengers, who were told to whom the message was to be sent and who themselves could tell the recipient from whom the message came. Nevertheless, Frange frequently uses this procedure when he is irritated, as witnessed in ex. 5.

Ex. 5. O.Frangé 45: “The humble Frange! I am surprised (ⲓⲣ̅ ⲙⲁⲓⲥⲉ) that you should have disdained (ⲕⲁⲧⲁⲫⲣⲟⲛⲓ) something you could have done, for it is written in Scripture: “He who disdains a matter shall be disdained”. You have treated me like a dog (ⲙⲡⲉⲧⲛⲣ̅ ⲡⲁⲱⲡⲏⲣⲉ ⲛⲉⲉ ⲛⲟⲩⲟⲩⲟⲣ) by not making me this little metal needle when I need it for the finishing of the books, and I would have thanked you (ⲛⲧⲁⲉⲩⲭⲁⲣⲓⲧⲓ ⲛⲧⲟⲧⲧⲏⲧⲏⲧ̅)! Now I pray to the only Son of God who sits on his holy throne, and I beg you (ⲓⲥⲟⲛⲉ̅), in consideration of the forty days for which the whole world is waiting, make the needle quickly and send it to me, for I need it very much for the books (ⲧⲉⲩⲉⲱ ⲙ̅ⲙⲟⲥ ⲉⲛⲭⲱⲱⲙⲉ ⲉⲙⲁⲧⲉ ⲉⲙⲁⲧⲉ). Hail.”¹²

¹¹ Coptic text: ⲛⲧⲁⲛⲣ̅ ⲙⲁⲓⲥⲉ ⲁⲛⲟⲛ | ⲕⲣⲁⲛⲉ ⲙ̅ⲛ ⲙⲱⲥⲏⲥ ⲉⲛⲣ̅ | ⲱⲡⲏⲣⲉ ⲭⲉ ⲁⲛⲥⲁⲓ ⲉⲛⲱⲣ̅ ⲙ̅ⲑⲟⲓ | ⲱⲙⲁⲱⲛ ⲁⲧⲱⲡⲏⲣⲉ ⲭⲉⲛⲁⲭⲟⲟⲩ ⲛⲧⲉⲩⲱⲧⲉⲥ ⲛⲁⲕ ⲙⲙⲁⲛⲙⲟⲩⲣ̅ | ⲉⲟⲩⲛ ⲉⲧⲡⲁⲥⲃⲉ ⲁⲕⲧⲟⲛ ⲉⲃⲟⲗ | ⲛⲕⲟⲟⲩⲛ ⲉⲱⲕ ⲡⲁⲁⲧⲣⲏ | ⲁⲡⲓⲁⲧⲱⲡⲏⲣⲉ ⲧⲱⲥ ⲙ̅ⲛ | ⲧⲉⲩⲥⲓⲙⲉ̅ ⲉⲧⲱⲛⲧ̅ ⲁⲓⲣ̅ ⲧⲏⲡⲟⲥ ¹⁰ ⲛⲓⲙ ⲁⲓⲣ̅ ⲧⲏⲧ̅ ⲛⲉⲓⲣⲏⲛⲏ ⲧⲉⲛⲟⲩ ⲁⲉ | ⲡⲛⲟⲩⲧⲉ ⲥⲟⲟⲩⲛ ⲭⲉ ⲙⲁⲓⲧⲱⲥ̅ ⲉⲧⲉⲩⲉⲓⲣⲏⲛⲏ | ⲛⲙⲁⲕ ⲛⲙ̅ⲓⲁⲕ ⲉⲓⲟⲛⲥ̅ ⲉⲁ ⲡⲉⲱⲱ ⲛⲧⲉⲩⲱⲧⲉⲥ̅ ⲁⲩⲱ ⲉⲱⲱⲡⲏⲣⲉ ⲕⲭⲓ ⲙ̅ⲙⲟⲓ ⲁⲩⲱ ⲕⲡⲓⲥ̅ ⲧⲉⲩⲉ ⲛⲁⲓ ⲡⲁⲁⲧⲣⲏ ⲟⲩⲛ̅ ⲉⲁⲥ̅ ⲡⲣⲱⲙⲉ̅ ¹⁵ ⲥⲕⲁⲛⲧⲁⲗⲓⲥⲉ ⲉⲣⲟⲕ ⲭⲉ ⲕⲙⲟⲟⲱⲉ̅ | ⲉⲟⲩⲛ ⲉⲑⲟⲓⲱⲙⲁⲱⲛ ⲡⲓⲁⲧⲱⲡⲏⲣⲉ | ⲉⲓⲥ̅ ⲉⲛⲏⲧⲉ ⲁⲓⲥⲁⲓ ⲁⲓⲣ̅ ⲙ̅ⲛⲧⲣⲉ̅ | ⲛⲁⲕ ⲭⲉ ⲙⲟⲟⲱⲉ̅ ⲛⲁⲕ ⲉ̅. ⲁⲉ̅ ⲙ̅ⲓⲡⲓⲁⲧⲱⲡⲏⲣⲉ ⲙ̅ⲛⲧⲉⲟⲩⲩⲉ̅ ²⁰ ⲧⲁⲁⲕ ⲁⲓⲣ̅ ⲙ̅ⲛⲧⲣⲉ̅ ⲛⲁⲕ | ⲙ̅ⲛⲧⲉⲕⲭⲟⲟⲩ ⲧⲱⲧⲩ̅ | ⲛⲁⲓ ⲙ̅ⲡⲣⲉⲓ ⲛⲁⲓ ⲛⲕⲉ̅ⲥⲟⲛ ⲉⲛⲉⲥ ⲁⲣⲟⲓ | ⲣⲱ ⲉⲙⲟⲥ ⲛⲁⲕ ⲙ̅ⲡⲣ̅ⲉⲓ ⲛⲁⲓ ⲛⲕⲉⲥⲟⲛ.

¹² Coptic text: ⲕⲣⲁⲛⲉ ⲡⲓⲉⲗⲁⲧⲱⲧⲟⲥ̅ | ⲛⲧ̅ ⲛⲧ̅ ⲱⲡⲏⲣⲉ ⲙ̅ⲙⲱⲧ̅ | ⲛⲧ̅ ⲙⲁⲓⲥⲉ ⲭⲉ ⲟⲩⲩⲱⲱ ⲉⲟⲩⲩⲱⲱ ⲉⲟⲩⲛ̅ ⲃⲟⲙ̅ⲓ ⲙ̅ⲙⲱⲧ̅ ⲉⲁⲁⲕ ⲁⲧⲉⲧ̅ⲕⲁⲧⲁⲫⲣⲟⲛⲓ ⲙ̅ⲙⲟⲩ̅ ⁵ ⲛⲉⲉ̅ ⲉⲧⲏⲥ̅ ⲉⲧ̅ ⲧⲉⲩⲣⲁⲑⲏ ⲭⲉ ⲡⲉⲧⲕⲁⲧⲁⲫⲣⲟⲛⲓ ⲛⲟⲩⲩⲱⲱ ⲥⲉⲛⲁⲕⲁⲧⲁⲫⲣⲟⲛⲓ ⲙ̅ⲙⲟⲩ̅ ⲙ̅ⲡⲉⲧⲛⲣ̅ ⲡⲁⲱⲡⲏⲣⲉ ⲛⲉⲉ̅ ⲛⲟⲩⲟⲩⲟⲣ̅ ⲛⲧⲉⲧ̅ⲛⲥⲉⲛⲁⲩ̅ ⲉⲗⲉⲗⲁⲕⲓⲥ̅ⲧⲟⲛ̅ ⲛⲥⲣ̅ⲧⲟⲕ ⲛⲁⲓ ⲉⲓⲩⲉⲱ ⲙ̅ⲙⲟⲥ̅ ¹⁰ ⲉⲛⲭⲱⲱⲙⲉ̅

This letter begins without any greeting: only Frange's name is noted, almost as a title. The monk does not name his interlocutors, who have omitted to make him a small needle.¹³ In order to convince them, he quotes the Bible, in this case the book of Proverbs, to show his correspondents that their mistake is serious and constitutes an offence (see also the analysis by Piwowarczyk, 2022: 254). He continues with a reproach ("you have treated me like a dog") and seeks to make them feel guilty ("I would have thanked you"). He concludes with an appeal to religious feelings and repeats that he needs it very much ("for I need it very much").

Other shorter and more threatening messages are also entirely anonymous, as the three following examples (6–8) demonstrate.

Ex. 6. O.Frangé 178: "+ Go away (ΒΩΚ ΝΑΚ) for today, I won't meet you (†ΝΑΒΝΤΚ ΑΝ). If you want me to meet you, you will go to Petemout and you will come again to my house in a hurry [...] believe [...] delay again [...] quickly, I [...] you don't look for people; strangers (ϣϣΜΔΙ) enquire about me a hundred times more than for you!"¹⁴

In ex. 6, which is unfortunately incomplete, no one is named: Frange does not want to see the correspondent at that time (i.e., 'for today') and reproaches him for not taking care of him, unlike others (specifically, socially more distant individuals – "strangers" – who demonstrate greater concern for him). There is still the possibility of reconciliation, if the correspondent goes to Petemout (on which location, see §3.1) and returns quickly. While the opening, 'go away', indicates a communicative immediacy, with the recipient being in close proximity, the fact that this message is written and not addressed orally indicates Frange's offence, and written communication allows him to create greater social distance during this moment of tension in their relationship. In other letters, Frange can be even more radical, as seen in exx. 7 and 8.

Ex. 7. O.Frangé 172: "+ I sent to you to tell you while you were in church: you discredit me (ΕΚΕΙΡΕ ΜΜΟΙ Ν]ΑΖΑΒΕ) during Easter [...] it does not make my [...] God knows I am angry (†Ω Ν[ΧΟ]ΛΗ): I sent to warn you once and for all; God will answer for you if you ever come back to me."¹⁵

Ex. 8. O.Frangé 173: Side A. "+ If God receives my prayers, be sure that you will die quickly (†ΠΙΣΤΕΥΕ ΧΕΡΑΜΟΥ ΖΝ ΟΥΒΕΠΗ). How [...] made my heart suffer [...] may it make [...] suffer in Hell (ΔΜΝΤΕ) [...] brother(s) in Scripture killed a city of men, a sister ... was humiliated [...]

ΕΚΟСМΙ ΜΜΟΟΥ | ΝΤΑΕΥΧΑΡΙCΤΙ ΝΤΟΤΗΥΤΝ | ΤΕΝΟΥ †CΟΠC ΜΠΜΟΝΟΓΕΝΗC | ΠΩΗΡΕ ΜΠΠΟΥΤΕ ΠΕΤΖΜΟΟC Ε|ΖΡΔΙ·
ΕΧΜ ΠΕΦΘΕΡΟΝΟC ΕΤΟΥ¹⁵ΔΑΒ †CΟΠC ΜΜΩΤΝ ΕΤΒΕ | ΠΕΖΜΕ ΝΖΟΟΥ ΕΤΕΡΕΠΚΟC|ΜΟC ΤΗΡC ΔΕΡΑΤC Ε|ΤΒΗΤΟΥ
CΕΝΑΥ | ΤCΟΥΡΕ ΤΑΧΥ²⁰ ΧΟΟΥC ΝΔΙ ΧΕ ΤΕ|ΖΕΥ ΜΜΟC ΕΝ|ΧΩΩΜΕ· Ε|ΜΑΤΕ ΕΜΔ|ΤΕ ΟΥ²⁵ΧΔΙ.

¹³ See also O.Frangé 42 about this needle.

¹⁴ Coptic text: ⲡ ⲃⲱⲕ ⲛⲁⲕ ⲡⲟⲟϥ ⲣⲱ ⲡⲛⲁ|ⲃⲛⲧⲕ ⲁⲛ· ⲉϣⲱⲡⲉ | ⲕⲟϥⲱϣ ⲛⲧ[ⲁ]ⲃⲛⲧⲕ | ⲉⲕⲃⲱⲕ ⲉⲡⲉⲧⲉⲙⲟϥⲧ ⲉⲕ⁵ⲉⲓ ⲛⲁⲓ
[. . .]ⲟⲡ ⲧⲁϣϥ | [...]ⲡⲓⲥⲧⲉϥ | [...]ⲱⲥⲕ ⲟⲛ | [...] ⲧⲁϣϥ ⲙⲁⲓ| [...]ⲕ ⲟⲛ ⲛⲧⲁⲕ¹⁰[...]ⲱ ⲕⲱⲓⲛⲉ ⲛⲥⲁ | [?]ⲣⲱⲙⲉ ⲁⲛ ⲛϣⲡⲙⲁⲓ
| ϣⲓⲛⲉ ⲛⲥⲱⲓ ⲡⲁ|ⲣⲁⲣⲁⲕ ⲛϣⲉ | ⲛⲥⲟⲡ.

¹⁵ Coptic text: [ⲡ ⲁⲓⲭⲟ]ϣ ⲛⲥⲱⲕ ⲉⲕ| [ⲉⲛ ⲧⲉ]ⲕⲕⲗⲏⲥⲓⲁ· ⲉⲕⲉⲓⲣⲉ [ⲙⲙⲟⲓ ⲛ]ⲁⲗⲁⲃⲉ ⲉⲛ ⲧⲡⲁⲥⲃⲉ | [?]ⲉ ⲉⲧⲉⲙⲉϥⲣ ⲡⲱⲱ⁵ [?
ⲡⲛⲟ]ϥⲧⲉ [ⲥ]ⲟⲟϥⲛ ⲡⲱ ⲛ[ⲧⲁ]ⲕⲁⲓⲁⲓⲁⲃⲉ ⲉⲛ ⲧⲡⲁⲥⲃⲉ | ⲉⲟⲗⲱⲥ ⲡⲛⲟϥⲧⲉ ⲣⲱ|ϣⲉ ⲉⲣⲟⲕ ⲉϣⲱⲡⲉ | ⲕⲛⲏϥ ⲛⲁⲓ ⲛⲕⲉ¹⁰ⲥⲟⲡ
ⲉⲛⲉⲗ

Side B. + If you come [...] the son of Daniel [...] evil man/men [...]. He is in death altogether, he comes to you, her stench is stinking. If you think that [...] deliver [...] know [...] I will [...] woman [...] village.”¹⁶

In the first of these two anonymous letters, Frange indicates to his correspondent his deep dissatisfaction: he reproaches him for discrediting him, especially during Easter, and the last phase is to be understood as a threat (“God will answer for you if you ever come back to me”). Frange’s reference to the addressee as being in church indicates that the individual is well-known to Frange, and so the use of written rather than oral communication, as with ex. 6, serves to further distance Frange from his transgressor. In the second letter, the threat is explicit: it is a death wish (‘If God receives my prayers, be sure that you will die quickly’). Frange then seems to wish the addressee to suffer as he has suffered and he continues with an allusion to Genesis 34:1-31 (cf. Piwowarczyk, 2022: 256), intended to impress the woman to whom he is writing. The rest of the text is too incomplete to make sense of.

This letter is not the only one to contain a death wish. Another letter in the corpus not only makes such a threat but demonstrates that such polemics were not the reserve of anonymous letters. In O.Frangé 51 (ex. 9), Frange writes to David, asking for a pair of blades that he needs; however, while the letter’s recipient is named, this is another example of a bare identification (as seen in §2.2), which provides no relational content and is therefore appropriate for a letter such as this. He proceeds to threaten him with suffering and to testify to God. Here again, the phraseology could be inspired by the biblical text (cf. Piwowarczyk, 2022: 270, n. 29).

Ex. 9. O.Frangé 51: “It is Frange who writes to David. Do all you can to send me the pair of blades for shaving the cloths and the ... of wood that belongs to me from/in Jerusalem (?). God knows that if you do not send them to me quickly, your heart will suffer (ΠΕΚΖΗΤ ΝΑΖΙΣΕ) and I believe that God will erase you in the year (ΓΠΙΣΤΕΥΕ ΧΕ ΠΝΟΥΤΕ ΝΑΧΑΡΕΚ ΕΒΟΛ ΖΠ ΤΕΡΟΜΠΕ).”¹⁷

2.3. Playing with the codes of letter writing (3): the form of the letter

Late Antique epistolary practice is attentive to the form of the letter, which must be neat, well written, and correctly formatted (Fournet, 2009). This particular attention to the form is especially evident in Frange’s corpus (Delattre & Vanthieghem, 2020). The monk felt that the whole surface should be covered with writing. As ostraca are irregular

¹⁶ Coptic text: Side A. ⲡ ⲉϣⲱⲡⲉ ⲡⲛⲟϥⲧⲉ | ⲛⲁⲭⲓ ⲛⲁϣⲗⲛⲗ ⲡ|ⲧⲟⲟⲧ ⲓⲡⲓⲧⲉϥⲉ ⲭⲉⲣⲁ|ⲙⲟϥ ⲁⲡ ⲟϥⲃⲉⲡⲛ ⲡⲉⲉ⁵ [.?] . ⲓ ⲁⲓⲥⲉ ⲙⲡⲁⲑⲛⲧ | [...] ⲉϥⲉⲓ ⲁⲓⲥⲉ | [...] . ⲁⲡ ⲁⲙⲡⲧⲉ | ⲁϥ[ⲛ]ⲁϥ ⲡⲥⲟⲛ ⲁⲡ ⲧⲉ|ⲓⲣⲁⲫⲛ ⲙⲟϥⲟϥⲧⲉ ⲟϥ¹⁰ⲡⲟⲗⲓⲥ ⲡⲣⲱⲙⲉ ⲉⲁ ⲟϥ|ⲥⲱⲛⲉ ⲡⲧⲁϥ ⲭⲉ | ⲁϥⲉⲃⲓⲁⲥ ⲡⲧⲟⲧⲧ | . ⲙⲟ

Side B. ⲡ ⲉⲣⲛⲛϥ . . . ⲛⲙⲁⲛ¹⁵ ⲡⲱⲛⲣⲉ ⲛⲁⲁⲛⲓⲛⲗ . ⲣⲁⲙ[?] | ⲙⲙ ⲣⲱⲙⲉⲧⲉ ⲉⲧⲁⲟⲟϥ | ⲡⲁⲓ ⲭ ⲉϥⲉⲑⲛⲟϥ | ⲙⲟϥ . ⲧⲛⲣⲥ ⲡⲛⲛϥ ⲛⲛⲉ ⲉⲣ[ⲉ]|ⲡⲉⲥⲥⲟⲧⲉⲓ ⲗⲁⲙⲥ ⲉⲣⲙⲉⲉϥⲉ²⁰ ⲭⲉ ⲁ ⲃⲱⲗ ⲉⲃⲟⲗ ⲡⲡ|ⲙ ⲥⲟⲟϥⲛ | . ⲡⲧ . . ⲗⲉⲧⲉⲣ . ⲓⲛⲁⲡⲓ| [...] . ⲙ ⲥⲁⲓⲙⲉ | [...] . ⲛⲉ . ⲛⲓⲙⲉ .

¹⁷ Coptic text: ⲡ ⲁⲛⲟⲕ ϥⲣⲁⲛⲓⲉ ⲉϥⲥⲁⲓ | ⲛⲁⲁϥⲉⲓⲁⲥ ⲭⲉ ⲣⲥⲟϥⲁⲛ | ⲛⲓⲙ ⲛⲓⲭⲁⲟⲟϥ ⲙⲡⲉⲥⲛⲁϥ | ⲛⲓⲭⲱⲣⲉⲑ ⲡⲱⲙⲱⲃ ⲧⲁⲗ⁵ⲗⲓⲥ ⲛⲁⲓ ⲙⲡ ⲡⲉⲣⲓⲥ ⲡⲱⲭⲉ | ⲡⲧⲁⲓⲡⲧⲥ ⲡⲉⲓⲉⲣⲟϥⲥⲁ|ⲗⲛⲙⲉ ⲡⲛⲟϥⲧⲉ ⲥⲟⲟϥⲛ ⲙⲡ|ⲧⲉⲕⲭⲁⲟⲟϥⲥⲟϥ ⲛⲁⲓ ⲁⲡ | ⲟϥⲃⲉⲡⲛ ⲡⲉⲕⲑⲛⲧ¹⁰ ⲛⲁⲁⲓⲥⲉ ⲁϥⲱ ⲓⲡⲓⲥ|ⲧⲉϥⲉ ⲭⲉ ⲡⲛⲟϥⲧⲉ | ⲛⲁⲭⲁⲣⲉⲕ | ⲉⲃⲟⲗ ⲁⲡ | ⲧⲉⲣⲟⲙ¹⁵ⲡⲉ .

in shape, he fills in the blank spaces above ('pre-text') or below the text ('post-text') of the letter with religious formulas (e.g., 'Jesus Christ' or 'pray for me'). He also sometimes frames the text, adding single or double lines, wavy or straight, to fill in the space. Additionally, he constantly uses punctuation marks, which denote a carefully written text.

In O.Frangé 162 (ex. 10), Frange addresses Azarias, with whom he is particularly irritated. In keeping with his habit of covering the surface of the shard, he has added a 'pre-text' in the upper margin. In this instance, this text is not a religious formula, as is typical, but a reproachful interpellation: "Disobedient Azarias".

Ex. 10. O.Frangé 162: "Disobedient (ⲁⲧⲥⲱⲧⲙ) Azarias. + The Lord said to his disciples, 'He who listens to you, listens to me'. Now if I send for you repeatedly, and you do not obey me once nor come to me to meet me for my business, WHAT IS THE USE (ⲟⲩ ⲧⲉ ⲧⲉϣⲣⲓⲁ) of your coming to me at all? If it is not enough for me to ask you once for you to obey me and come to me for my business, you need not come to me at all. You have succeeded in coming this time: go to Moses. You do not obey: neither will you find peace with (us?) two".¹⁸

The entire letter is designed to impress Azarias. Apart from the "pre-text", added in the margin, which seeks to make Azarias feel guilty, there are several devices intended to punish him. The letter does not contain any form of politeness and Frange does not name himself. The text begins abruptly with a biblical quotation (Lk 10:16), in which Frange compares his authority over Azarias to that of Jesus over his disciples (Piwowarczyk, 2022: 254-255). He then threatens to cut off Azarias if he does not obey him immediately: he will not find peace with Frange and his disciple Moses and there is no need to come to him anymore. The language at the end of the letter, as the editors note, is particularly incisive thanks to the use of parataxis. A final formal device is used in the letter: Frange has written in a larger module the words ⲟⲩ ⲧⲉ ⲧⲉϣⲣⲓⲁ, "what is the use". This usage probably corresponds to the modern practice of writing in capital letters the words one would shout if faced with one's interlocutor. In contrast to Leech (2014: 231), who notes that such features of spoken language are "not available in the *normal* written form of a text" (emphasis ours), Frange's use of large letters demonstrates how such prosodic features can be integrated into written language.¹⁹

The same use of writing a passage in large letters is also found in a letter to his 'sister' Tsie (ex. 11), who is discussed further in §3.

¹⁸ Coptic text: [ⲁ]ⲫⲁⲣ[ⲓ]ⲁⲥ ⲁⲧⲥⲱⲧⲙ | ⲫ ⲛⲧⲁⲡⲭⲟⲓⲥ ⲭⲟⲟⲥ | ⲛⲛⲉϣⲙⲁⲑⲏⲧⲏⲥ ⲭⲉ | ⲛⲉⲧⲥⲱⲧⲙ ⲉⲣⲱⲧⲛ ⲉϣⲥⲱⲧⲙ ⲉⲣⲟⲓ
ⲧⲉⲛⲟⲩ ⲉϣⲱⲛⲉ | ⲉⲓⲭⲟⲟⲩ ⲛⲥⲱⲕ ⲛⲉⲁⲉ ⲛ | ⲥⲟⲡ ⲙⲛⲧⲉⲕⲥⲱⲧⲙ ⲛⲥⲱⲓ | ⲛⲟⲩⲁ ⲛⲥⲟⲡ ⲛⲧⲉⲓ ⲛⲁⲓ | ⲛⲧⲁⲃⲛⲧⲕ ⲙⲡⲁⲁⲱⲃ ¹⁰ ⲟⲩ
ⲧⲉ ⲧⲉϣⲣⲓⲁ ⲛⲧⲉⲓ | ⲛⲁⲓ ⲁⲱⲗⲱⲥ ⲉϣⲱⲛⲉ | ⲙⲛⲧⲁⲭⲟⲩ ⲛⲥⲱⲕ ⲛⲟⲩⲁ | ⲛⲥⲟⲡ ⲛⲧⲥⲱⲧⲙ ⲛⲥⲱⲓ | ⲛⲧⲉⲓ ⲛⲁⲓ ⲙⲡⲁⲁⲱⲃ ¹⁵ ⲙⲁⲕⲣ
ϣⲁⲩ ⲛⲉⲓ ⲛⲁⲓ | ⲁⲱⲗⲱⲥ ⲁⲕⲡⲱⲥ ⲛⲉⲓ | ⲙⲡⲓⲥⲟⲡ ⲙⲟⲟⲩⲉ ⲃⲛ | ⲙⲱϣⲏⲥ ⲛⲁⲕ | ⲙⲁⲕⲥⲱⲧⲙ ⲙⲁⲕ ²⁰ ⲃⲛ ⲙⲧⲟⲛ | ⲟⲛ ⲉⲁ |
ⲥⲛⲁⲩ.

¹⁹ Indeed, as discussed by Darics (2010), the use of capital letters can be used to convey prosodic features in computer-mediated discourse: "Capitalization of words or complete messages is used as a strategy to clarify the message or the relational intention. ... although writing in capital letters is stigmatized ... because it is considered to represent shouting, capitalization is in fact a creative linguistic strategy that is used to emphasize or evoke prosody, intonation or stress" (p.138). This example from Frange presents a clear example of expressing impoliteness through paralinguistic features in a historic text.

Ex. 11. O.Frangé 331: “Man is not ... + It is Frange who writes to Tsie. Is this your way of being a sister (ⲧⲙⲛⲧϥⲱⲛⲉ ⲧⲏⲣⲥ ⲧⲉ ⲧⲓ), to send me kaké by Karakos without accompanying him to the ferry, and to let him take the bread? DO I REALLY DESERVE (ⲡⲁⲛⲧⲱϥ ⲡⲁⲙⲱⲁ ⲡⲉ) that you treat me like this because I am a bitter man?”²⁰

The letter is very violent towards Tsie. There is no politeness at the beginning or at the end. A rhetorical question (“Is this your way of being a sister”) is intended to hurt Tsie and make her feel guilty (for a rather light reason, it seems: it is about the loss of some bread she had sent him). The text continues with another rhetorical question, beginning in large letters (“DO I REALLY DESERVE that you treat me like this”) and ending with the words “because I am a bitter man”. This could be an allusion to Shenoute, a great monastic leader of the fifth century who designates himself as bitter and from whom Frange draws much inspiration (Boud'hors, 2011b). Finally, due to lack of space at the bottom of the sherd, he has added in the margin an aphorism or a quotation (“Man is not ...”²¹) which is again a way of resorting to an external authority, as he does with the Bible.

As these examples demonstrate, the absence of polite formulas, the anonymity of certain letters, or graphic and layout procedures are often used by Frange in addition to the contents and strategies of guilt, threats, or recourse to scriptural authority. These strategies are discussed further in §4.

3. Women's politeness in Frange's correspondence

Frange's corpus provides the opportunity not only to examine his im/politeness strategies when corresponding with a range of people about various topics, it also allows an examination of the strategies that other individuals used in correspondence with him. The corpus is of particular importance concerning the number of letters from women, which significantly expands the number of women's letters that were previously known in Coptic.²² Not only were letters written from women, many were also written by them, in their own hands. In this respect, one woman in particular dominates the corpus: Frange's 'sister' Tsie, who wrote to Frange herself and also penned letters on behalf of other women. A smaller group of letters was written by another woman, Susanna. The fact that these women wrote in their own hands presents the chance to examine women's politeness, as opposed to male politeness, and determine whether it conforms with or diverges from expected practice.²³

3.1. Tsie's letters to Frange

²⁰ Coptic text: ⲕⲟⲩⲁⲓⲛ ⲁⲛ ⲡⲉ ⲡⲣⲱⲙⲉ/ | ⲡⲉ ⲁⲛⲟⲕ ϣⲣⲁⲛⲉⲃⲉ ⲉϣⲥⲁⲓ | ⲛⲧⲥⲓⲉ : ϣⲉ ⲧⲙⲛⲧϥⲱⲛⲉ | ⲧⲏⲣⲥ ⲧⲉ ⲧⲓⲉⲣϣⲟⲟⲩ | ⲛⲕⲁⲕⲉ ⲛⲁⲓ ⲛⲧⲛ ⲕⲁⲣⲁⲕⲟⲥ ⁵ ⲙⲡⲉⲧⲛⲙⲟⲟⲩⲉ ⲛⲙⲁⲩ | ϣⲁ ⲡⲭⲛⲉⲓⲱⲣⲉ ⲉⲧⲉⲧⲛⲕⲁⲁⲩⲉⲃⲉ ⲉϥϥⲓ ⲛⲟⲉⲓⲕ | ⲛⲧⲟⲟⲧⲥⲱⲛ ⲡⲁⲛⲧⲱϥ ⲡⲁⲙⲱⲁ ¹⁰ ⲡⲉ ⲡⲓ ⲛⲟⲉⲓⲕ ⲉⲧⲉⲧⲛⲉⲓⲣⲉ ⲙⲙⲟⲥ ⲛⲙⲁⲓ ϣⲉ ⲁⲛⲟⲕ ⲟⲩⲣⲱⲙⲉ ⲉϣⲥⲁⲩⲉⲃⲉ.

²¹ The Coptic literally states “Man is not a day”, but the meaning of this phrase is not clear.

²² A number of Coptic letters are collected in Bagnall & Cribiore (2006).

²³ The nature of these women's writing – including palaeography, orthography, and syntax – is beyond the scope of the current discussion, although it should be noted that the non-standard writing exhibited often renders the text difficult to understand. On Tsie's handwriting, see Boud'hors & Heurtel (2010: 15).

Almost seventy letters in Frange's corpus are written by Tsie to Frange: O.Frangé 247–264 and 267–318.²⁴ Of these, over half are too fragmentary to provide meaningful data concerning her communication strategies (276–318, plus a few other texts). Additionally, Tsie wrote O.Frangé 265, 266, and 340 on behalf of other women. Tsie played an important role in Frange's daily life, being responsible in part for the provisioning of his food supply, including cheese, fish, and cake (Boud'hors & Heurtel, 2010, vol. 1: 19). Much of their correspondence concerns such matters. Whether the designation of Tsie as a sister in Frange's letters refers to a spiritual or biological relationship, she represents a connection to his hometown, Petemout (see Boud'hors & Heurtel 2010, vol. 1: 10–11); given the uncertainty about the nature of their relationship, 'sister' in inverted commas is used throughout. Petemout, modern al-Madāmūd, was a small village on the east bank of the Nile, approximately 10km from TT29 (Ait-Kaci et al., 2010:3–6; Timm, 1984–2007:1503–1505). Despite Petemout's distance from the Theban west bank, these connections represented a more practical and sustainable source of support than more local networks (on which, see Heurtel, 2008a).

As discussed above in §1, Coptic letters conform to a standard pattern, framed by salutations and politeness markers, which can be adapted to suit the letter-sender's needs. Tsie's letters adhere to this pattern, albeit with consistent additions. Ex. 12 is illustrative of these features:

Ex. 12. O.Frangé 247: "I, this worthless (ⲁⲩⲩⲁⲩ) sinner (ⲛⲣⲉϣⲣⲛⲟⲩⲉ) Tsie, writes and greets my beloved (ⲙⲉⲣⲓⲧ) brother Frange in the Lord. Be so good (ⲁⲣⲓ ⲧⲁⲃⲁⲛⲛ) and pray for me through raising your holy hands (ⲉⲛ ⲓⲥⲣⲁⲓ ⲛⲉⲕⲃⲓⲭ ⲉⲩⲟⲩⲃⲁⲃ). Hail in the Lord!"²⁵

The letter is brief, comprising only formulaic expressions, but it is complete. The key features, which appear in the majority of Tsie's letters, are all present: the self-deprecation of the sender, greetings and reference to Frange as 'beloved' (ⲙⲉⲣⲓⲧ), and the request for prayers through the raising of the arms (on which, see Heurtel, 2008b: 93). The use of ⲁⲩⲩⲁⲩ, "worthless", is particularly of note. Tsie refers to herself as such in over twenty of her letters (the attestations are collected in Boud'hors & Heurtel, 2010, vol. 2: 67). In contrast, the designation occurs elsewhere only a handful of times, by Frange three times (O.Frangé 4, 21, 134) and by one Peter once (O.Frangé 650). In addition to the opening salutation, Tsie uses the term in the expression "I am unworthy / a worthless one" (ⲁⲓⲛ ⲟⲩⲁⲩⲩⲁⲩ) on five occasions in the body of the letter (O.Frangé 254, 256, 259, 261, 268). The frequency of its use indicates that it is a standard element of Tsie's epistolary practice.

²⁴ O.Frangé 319 and 320 are also written by women called Tsie, but in both instances they refer to a different woman (or women). Also note that O.Frangé 263 and 264 are written from but seemingly not by Tsie; however, their writer is unknown.

²⁵ Coptic text: ⲫ | ⲁⲛⲟⲕ ⲧⲉⲁⲩⲩⲁⲩ | ⲛⲣⲉϣⲣⲛⲟⲩⲉ | ⲧⲥⲓⲉ ⲉⲓⲥⲣⲁⲓ ⲉⲓⲩⲩⲓⲛⲉ ⲉⲡⲁⲙⲉⲣⲓⲧ/ | ⲛⲥⲟⲛ ϣⲣⲁⲃⲉ | ⲉⲛ ⲡⲭⲟⲉⲓⲥ ⲁⲣⲓ | ⲧⲁⲃⲁⲛⲛ ⲩⲗⲛⲗ | ⲉⲭⲱⲓ ⲉⲛ ⲓⲥⲣⲁⲓ ¹⁰ ⲛⲉⲕⲃⲓⲭ ⲧⲟⲩⲃⲁⲃ ⲟⲩⲭⲁⲓ ⲉⲛ | ⲡⲭⲟⲉⲓⲥ

As a result of its brevity, the editors suggested that O.Frangé 247 (ex. 12) may have accompanied a more important letter. While this suggestion cannot be discounted, it is also possible that the letter was sent by itself. A letter comprising only phatic expressions, without further content, serves the socio-pragmatic function of maintaining social relationships.²⁶ Furthermore, this letter is not alone in this respect. O.Frangé 249, written to “my beloved brother” (almost certainly Frange), similarly contains just phatic expressions (other examples from TT29 are discussed in §3.2). Even letters that do contain more specific content are dominated by such formulas; e.g., O.Frangé 248 is written on quite a large sherd (15.1 by 12.6 cm) and of the 13 lines of text, non-formulaic content fills less than two full lines of writing and simply records “Here are ten cakes(?) and two cheeses”. Tsie’s epistolary practice is therefore built on formulaic phrases. However, this is not to say that she was incapable of producing more complex letters that moved beyond these frames.

When moving beyond indicative content, i.e., noting the delivery of certain commodities, to instead make requests, Tsie’s politeness strategy is marked by its periphrasis. Rather than simply use ἀρι ταγαπη, “Be so good” (in essence, the equivalent of “please”), Tsie either adapts this phrase or employs alternatives to make a range of requests:²⁷

- “Be so good to trouble yourself to come and collect the garment” (ἀρι ταγαπη [N]Γ(ΟΥ)ΕΖΖΙΣΕ ΝΓΕΙ [ΖΟ]ΥΝ ΝΓϸΙ (Τ)ΖΟΕΙΤΕ), O.Frangé 252.11–13; such use of ΖΙΣΕ to intensify the standard politeness phrase also occurs in Frange’s letters, as discussed in §2.1.
- “... be so good to act according to God and come” (ἀρι ταγαπη ΓΝΕΙΣ ΖΑΠΝΟΥΤΕ ΓΝΕΙ), O.Frangé 259.31–33.
- “Be so good – if you can – to come and console our hearts” (ἀρι τακαπη ΕΨΩΠΕ ΠΒΟΜ ΓΝΕΙ ΕΖΟΥΝ ΓΝΣΑΛΣΛ ΠΕΝΖΗΤ), O.Frangé 269.9–12; cf. similarly O.Frangé 272.6–8 and possibly 278.6–7.
- “If you want, send some strips to (meet) the need” (ΕΨΩΠΕ ΕΚΟΥΩΨ ΧΑΥΖΕΝΚΕΡΕ ΝΑΙ ΕΤΕΧ(Ρ)ΙΑ), O.Frangé 251.3–5.

It is perhaps of note that the periphrastic expressions with “be so good” all involve requests for Frange to visit Tsie in Petemout. The request requires greater effort by Frange and the additional phrases reflect this situation; in Brown and Levinson’s framework, the request has a higher rank of imposition. As “please” and its equivalents are not necessarily markers of actual politeness (Müller, 2023, with further references), these longer expressions indicate how generic phrases can be made more polite. Frange uses the same language in O.Frangé 175, discussed in §2.1, when asking Mahenknut to

²⁶ Letters comprising only greetings are known from other sites, e.g., O.Brit.Mus.Copt. II 20, from another Theban site, the monastery of Apa Phoibammon at Deir el-Bahri. On phatic communication, see Coupland et al. (1992); in relationship with these Coptic letters, the relational nature of such communication (see pp. 215–7) is especially of note.

²⁷ Requests with ἀρι ταγαπη are discussed in Müller (2023, §4) as pattern a.

travel. Such periphrastic politeness expressions are not, therefore, unusual, but the frequency with which Tsie employs them in her correspondence with Frange is of note.

Tsie also employed other strategies in her requests to Frange. In one letter (ex. 13), Tsie incorporates an explicit gendered dimension, positioning herself as incapable of undertaking certain activities as a result of being a woman.

Ex. 13. O.Frangé 258: “I, the worthless [Tsie], write and greet my beloved brother Frange in the Lord. God knows that it’s been three days since the basket was filled, (yet) I still cannot find a boat or the person. Besides, [you] know that I’m a woman and have no power (ΓΝΟΥΣ(Ε)ΙΜΕ <Μ>ΝΒΟΜ ΝΜΟΙ). Be so good and pray for me in the raising of your holy hands. Hail in the Lord!”²⁸

The content of this letter recalls O.Frangé 331 (ex. 11) in which the monk admonishes her – in the harshest of ways – for not accompanying to the ferry the man entrusted with delivering goods, goods that never reached Frange. The situation here is not the same, as goods have not yet been sent, but it is not difficult to imagine that Tsie’s apologetic tone is in direct response to a rebuke. In order to allay his annoyance, Tsie invokes her broader social context. As a woman, she simply lacks the authority and connections needed to complete the delivery. On a couple of other occasions, Tsie also alludes to her inability to travel to Frange herself (O.Frangé 255, 260), but does not state the reasons why, i.e., whether due to particular or more general circumstances.

In sum, Tsie’s letters to Frange are highly formulaic in nature, but this does not mean that her own voice – including her politeness strategies – is silent. The overall combination of her use of formulae, periphrasis, and self-deprecation renders her visible in her missives. Her communication is built upon core expressions that serve the phatic purpose of reaffirming her relationship with Frange. How these features of her formal writing reflect Tsie’s relationship with Frange and produce a framework of politeness strategies is discussed further in §4.

3.2. Letters written by Tsie for other women

The letters that Tsie wrote on behalf of other women from Petemout provide the opportunity to check whether she employed different strategies when writing for others, i.e., recording the specific words and idioms of those she wrote for, and thus also whether her own letters represent her as an individual.²⁹ Three letters in the TT29 corpus fall into this category: O.Frangé 265 (ex. 14) is from Taham to Frange; 266 is from Tareke to Frange; 340 is from Tanaste and David to Frange. The second and third letters are entirely

²⁸ Coptic text: ⲡ ⲁⲛⲟⲕ ⲧⲉⲓⲁ(ⲧ)ⲱⲁϥ [ⲧⲥⲓⲉ] | [ⲉⲓⲥⲉ]ⲁⲓ ⲉⲓⲱⲩⲛⲉ ⲉⲡⲁⲙⲉⲣⲓⲧ [ⲛ] | ⲥⲟⲛ ϣⲣⲁⲓⲣⲉ ⲉⲛ ⲡⲭⲟⲉⲓⲥ | [ⲛ]ⲛⲟϥⲧⲉ ⲥⲟⲟϥⲛ ϣⲉ ⲉⲥ ⲱⲟ⁵ⲙⲧ ⲛⲉⲟⲟϥ ⲡⲉⲃⲓⲣ ⲙⲉⲣ | ⲱⲁ ⲧⲉⲛⲟϥ ⲉⲓⲃⲓⲛ ⲉⲁ(ⲗ)ⲙⲉ | ⲉⲥ ⲡⲣⲱⲙⲉ ⲁⲛ ⲡⲗⲏ[ⲛ] | [ⲕ]ⲥⲟⲟϥⲛ ϣⲉ ⲓⲛ ⲟϥⲥ(ⲉ)ⲓⲙⲉ | <ⲙ>ⲛⲃⲟⲙ ⲛⲙⲟⲓ ⲁⲣⲓ ⲧⲁ¹⁰ⲓⲁⲡⲏ ⲱⲗⲏⲗ <ⲉⲭⲱⲓ> ⲉⲛ ϣⲓ ⲉ | ⲉⲣⲁⲓ <ⲛⲉⲕⲃⲓⲭ> ⲉⲧⲟϥⲁⲁⲃ ⲟϥ | ⲱⲁⲓ ⲉⲛ ⲡⲭⲟⲉⲓⲥ.

²⁹ Four further letters to Frange were written by women (O.Frangé 319–322). However, as the writer of each is either not known or probably a man (O.Frangé 320 was almost certainly written by one Ezekiel), they are not included in this discussion.

phatic in nature, in the same way as O.Frangé 247 (ex. 12) discussed in §3.1. The first letter provides more content.

Ex. 14. O.Frangé 265: “I, Taham (daughter of?) Kirakin, write and greet my beloved brother Frange. I beseech (ΕΙΣΟΠΕ), bow before you (ΕΙΠΩΣΤ) ΜΜΟΙ ΝΑΚ), and prostrate myself at your feet (ΕΙ(ΟΥ)ΩΨΤ ΖΑΝΕΚ[ΟΥ]ΡΗΤΕ). Be so good (ΑΡΙ ΤΑΚΑΠΗ) and pray to the Lord for me, that he may be merciful to me, for a great suffering is in my body. Perhaps God will listen to your plea and have mercy on me, for I am a sinner. Perhaps [he] listens to you [...].”³⁰

The appeals to Frange in this letter are not replicated in Tsie’s own letters, who never prostrates herself before the monk. The request itself employs the simple politeness marker, ΑΡΙ ΤΑΚΑΠΗ, without additions, but a different strategy is used to convince Frange to act: Frange is invoked as an interlocutor with the Lord, in contrast to Taham herself, to whose prayers God may instead listen. The appeal is to his positive face, in respect of his status as a holy man. Furthermore, none of the female senders of these letters refer to themselves as “worthless” (ΑΤΥΨΑΥ); that designation is the reserve of Tsie alone.

Even though the comparable dataset is very limited, and two of the three letters lack specific content, sufficient material is present to indicate that Tsie did not impose her own writing style upon the letters that she wrote for others. Rather, O.Frangé 265 reveals a different voice, presumably that of Taham herself, who dictated the letter – and so her own politeness style – to Tsie.

3.3. Letters from Susanna

A smaller group of letters, O.Frangé 353–8, are written by one Susanna, sometimes accompanied by a man called Psate (355 and 256). Most of the letters are addressed to Frange and Moses together, in contrast to Tsie’s letters, which are written to Frange alone.³¹ The last letter in the group (358) is written to Moses alone. The nature of the relationship between Susanna and Psate is unknown, as is also the case with her relationship with the two monks. Unfortunately, nothing is known about Susanna’s background, including her location, occupation, and social status. It is therefore not possible to treat her letters and those of Tsie as representative of women’s writing in general – if it is even possible to refer to such a thing. Rather, at present, they are treated as examples of individual women’s epistolary practices.

³⁰ Coptic text: ⲡⲁⲛⲟⲕ ⲧⲁ|ⲛⲁⲙ ⲃⲓⲣⲁⲕⲓⲛ|ⲉ/|ⲧ ⲉⲓⲥⲁⲓ ⲉⲓⲱⲛⲉ | ⲉⲡⲁⲙⲉⲣⲓⲧ ⲛ|ⲛⲟⲛ⁵ ϣⲣⲁⲛⲉ ⲉⲓⲟⲡⲉ | ⲉⲓⲡⲱⲥ(ⲧ) ⲙⲙⲟⲓ ⲛⲁⲕ | ⲉⲓ(ⲟϥ)ⲱⲱⲧ ⲛⲁⲛⲉⲕ[ⲟϥ]|ⲣⲏⲧⲉ ⲁⲣⲓ ⲧⲁⲕ[ⲁ]|ⲡⲏ ⲁⲛⲥⲡⲉⲥ¹⁰ ⲡⲭⲟⲉⲓⲥ ⲛⲁⲣⲟⲓ | ϣⲏⲣⲟϥⲛⲁ ⲛⲙ|ⲙⲁⲓ ⲛⲙⲟⲛ ⲟϥⲛⲟⲃ | ⲁⲓⲧⲕⲉⲥ ⲛⲁ|ⲥⲱⲙⲁ ⲁⲣⲉϥ¹⁵ ⲡⲛⲟϥⲧⲉ ⲛ[ⲁ]|ⲥⲱⲧⲙ ⲉⲡⲉⲕ|ⲥⲟⲡⲥ ⲉⲓⲣⲉ ⲟϥ|ⲛⲁ ⲛⲙⲙⲁⲓ ⲭⲉ | ⲛⲁⲛ ⲟϥⲣⲉϥⲣⲏⲟ²⁰[ⲃ]ⲉ ⲙⲉϣⲏⲕ | [ϣⲥⲱ]ⲧⲙ ⲉⲣⲟⲕ | [. . .] ⲟⲕ ⲟϥ[. . .] | [. . .]ⲧⲛ[. . .].

³¹ This does not include letters that Tsie wrote on behalf of other individuals, some of which are also addressed to Moses, e.g., O.Frangé 321, from the woman Tianthamena to Frange and Moses.

Four of the six letters (353–6) seem to be written in the same hand, which may well be that of Susanna herself.³² If this is indeed the case, then we once again are granted the opportunity to observe a woman’s own textual production and expression of politeness. As well as the different hand in O.Frangé 357 and 358, standard phrases and spelling also differ between these two letters and the other four ostraca (e.g., a longer address and greeting; ἀκαπη rather than ἀραπη for Greek ἀγάπη). For these reasons, the following discussion rests on the reduced dataset provided by O.Frangé 353–6:

- O.Frangé 353: request for prayers and a note that it has been a difficult year.
- O.Frangé 354: another request for prayers to help protect them through a difficult year, plus reference to a cover (λωτῆ) that Susanna is sending with the letter.
- O.Frangé 355: the first part refers to the recipient’s illness, while the second part is obscure.
- O.Frangé 356: Susanna protests her love for Frange, which he seemingly doubts. What follows refers to a child and mother, the meaning of which is somewhat obscure.

In her address, Susanna refers to Frange primarily as Father (εἰωτ), but also as Brother (CON) in O.Frangé 353, which she qualifies by “beloved” (μεριτ) and “good” (εἰτᾶνογγ). Moses is either Brother or Son (ψηρε), which is also qualified by “good” and once by “pious” (μαῖνογγε). In contrast to Tsie’s letters, which typically have a separate greeting following the initial address, Susanna eschews a separate greeting in three of the four letters, with εἰτᾶι εἰψῖνε / εἰτᾶι εἰψῖνε, “who writes and greets”, sufficing. The exception occurs in O.Frangé 354.5–6, where she adds ψῖνε ερωτῆν ὅτῃ παῖντ τηρῶ, “I greet you with all my heart”, a standard formula that also occurs in Tsie’s letters (cf. O.Frangé 248, 262, 266, 272, 294, as well as 340). There are no apparent reasons why the longer formula is used. In terms of its content, the letter includes a request for prayers as a result of unnamed hardships that Susanna has suffered, but so does O.Frangé 353, which lacks the additional greeting. In terms of the letter’s length and size of the ostrakon itself, O.Frangé 354 does contain additional content to 353, but the two sherds – even with the damage suffered by each – are roughly the same size and, furthermore, Susanna had to drastically reduce the size of her writing to fit her text into the second half of the sherd that bears 354. Hence, it is not extra writing space that facilitated the additional greeting. This instance may therefore be an example of the free-variation that occurs in texts produced by a single writer.³³ However, there are other, hidden factors that may also be at play, such as the amount of time that has lapsed since the previous exchange, a response to a previous communication, or a subjective evaluation of the rank of imposition of the request. With such a limited example of the correspondence between Susanna and Frange, much of the social context of the exchanges is lost.

O.Frangé 355 and 356 do not contain any requests. In the former, Susanna reveals her distress upon hearing about Frange’s illness: ἀπαῖντ ὅτῃ ἐματε ἐματε, “my heart felt a

³² The editors describe Susanna’s hand in the introduction of O.Frangé 353–355. The other two texts, O.Frangé 357 and 358, instead are written in a hand that may belong to the writer of O.Frangé 349, a letter written to Frange by one Isaac.

³³ On free-variation, see Grossman & Cromwell (2018: 1–3).

very great pain". The latter also concerns Susanna's feelings for Frange. Despite allegations to the contrary, Susanna declares $\text{ⲓⲟⲩⲁⲩⲩⲉⲛ ⲡⲁⲣ[ⲁ] ⲡⲁⲉⲓⲱⲧ ⲧⲁⲁⲭⲡⲟⲓ}$, "I love you more than my father who bore me". These emotional statements stand in contrast to the otherwise plain, indicative language of these letters, which, despite their obscure content, convey information without phatic framing. These letters are illustrative of the social role of politeness, which is not always intended to convince the recipient to act but to maintain or strengthen existing relationships.

Even though there are only a few letters from Susanna to Frange, they offer at least a comparative group to the correspondence with Tsie. The style of the two women is quite different. Susanna's letters lack the self-deprecating designations of Tsie's; she refers to herself neither as worthless nor as a sinner. Her language is generally indicative, being to-the-point, and her requests are similarly direct, lacking the circumlocution of Tsie. Therefore, these letters enable us to see the individual voices of the women who wrote them and their own epistolary styles, as well as gain an insight into the nature of the relationship of each with Frange.

4. Discussion

The two case studies presented above demonstrate the different ways in which im/politeness is formed in letters written by Frange and to him. Even though these letters represent only a sample of those contained in his broader archive, they are sufficient to identify key strategies employed by their respective writers. The following discussion draws upon Terkourafi's (2002; 2005) frame-based approach to politeness, which seeks to "establish regularities of co-occurrence between linguistic expressions and their extra-linguistic contexts of use" (Terkourafi 2005, 247). That is, in order to understand how politeness occurs between the writer and addressee of these letters, it is necessary to examine the formulas employed alongside the context of the identity of both parties and the relationships between them.

As noted in §1.2, the epistolography of Coptic letters during this period seems to follow fairly strict conventions, which are formed around a limited number of expressions. In addition to the greeting and salutations noted above, phrases such as ⲁⲣⲓ ⲧⲁⲣⲁⲡⲉ (see §3.1) are also regularly encountered. These formulaic sequences are not merely the result of scribal training. Rather, they convey "familiarity with the norms of the community within which one is operating" (Terkourafi 2001, 196) and "carry a great deal of social meaning" (Coulmas 1979, 264); their use increases the likelihood of the addressee achieving what they want, as the addressee is more likely to understand a message if it matches their expectations.³⁴ Frange's modification of these formulaic sequences expresses a range of discontent with the addressee, with three identifiable levels, from least to greatest discontent:

³⁴ The term "formulaic sequence" is taken from Wray (2002, 9), as "a sequence, continuous or discontinuous, of words or other elements, which is, or appears to be, prefabricated: that is, stored and retrieved whole from memory at the time of use, rather than being subject to generation or analysis by the language grammar".

- 1) A greeting + identification, “I write and greet *NN*” (ἐἰςχαῖ ἐἰψῶινε *NN*), in which the addressee’s name may be accompanied by honorifics. Such letters are typically lacking further phatic communion.
- 2) A bare greeting, “I greet you” (ψῶινε εἶπον), without the use of the addressee’s name.
- 3) A bare identification, “As for you, *NN*” (καὶ σοὶ γὰρ *NN*), which only serves to gain the attention of the addressee.

Such modification of epistolary formulas reflects the content of the respective letter and, in this particular case study, emphasises Frange’s growing displeasure towards Mahenknut.

The letters written by Tsie to Frange demonstrate another use of formulaic sequences. Her letters are highly formulaic, but this does not mean that they are devoid of content. The phatic nature of Tsie’s communication reveals her relational goals and her aim for closeness with Frange. Additionally, her requests are notable for their periphrastic phrasing, in which epistolary sequences are expanded (e.g., “Be so good to trouble yourself to come ...” rather than simply “Be so good and come”, as discussed in §3.1). Such periphrasis is indicative of the Tsie’s subjective evaluation of the high rank of imposition of her requests upon Frange. Similarly, Susanna’s phatic communions, O.Frangé 355 and 356, demonstrate her relationship building objectives in her correspondence with the monk, which is an aspect of her communication strategies that are not readily apparent in her more indicative letters.

The use of “sister” and “brother” as forms of address, together with the number of letters between Tsie and Frange, suggests that they are socially close. However, Tsie’s perception of the severity of her impositions upon Frange is indicative of her positionality, both as a woman and as somebody unworthy of a holy man such as the monk. Tsie’s frequent reference to herself as “worthless” or as a “sinner” affirms her status in regard to him. Even without further paralinguistic information (e.g., Tsie’s age, occupation, further social networks), she can confidently be identified as having a lower social standing than Frange. The combination of her use of formulaic expressions, deference to Frange, and self-deprecation are illustrative of her use of negative politeness (Brown and Levinson 1987, 70), that is, communication strategies aimed at avoiding offense and reducing the level of imposition upon the addressee. Application of a frame-based approach to her letters therefore helps to identify how Tsie selects from the epistolary conventions and formulaic expressions available to her in order to navigate the power difference between herself and Frange, regardless of their familiarity with each other.

Concerning power and social distance, it is more difficult to determine these factors in the letters between Frange and male addressees, which constitute the majority of his dossier. Mahenknut, the object of Frange’s ire in exx. 1–3, is a village official (*lashane*),

and therefore an individual of some social standing.³⁵ Yet, this status does not prevent Frange's adoption of impolite language towards him. From the Theban region in the seventh and eighth centuries, there are considerable numbers of letters by villagers to monastic elders, beseeching them for aid in a range of circumstances.³⁶ As such, Frange, as a monk, may be perceived locally as holding more power than a village chief; the cultural framing of their social status is therefore central in understanding the nature of their communication. The social distance between the two men is harder to determine, based on the limited – and one-sided – correspondence. As all three letters concern the same matter (provision and return of tools), the two men may not have had a previous relationship, and therefore the risk involved in impolite behaviour may not be a consideration for Frange.

In a recent study of Frange's communication with one Apa Theodore in the village Djeme, Manley (2024) suggests he uses sarcasm as a strategy when writing to a "social superior". While Manley's discussion is not framed as one of im/politeness, it raises several points pertinent to the current study. This letter is the longest of three that Frange wrote to Theodore (O.Medin.HabuCopt. 139;³⁷ 138 and 140 is additionally addressed to one Pher) and, unlike the other letters discussed above, was found in the village Djeme rather than Frange's cell. It is replete with polite language, including formulaic expressions, phatic communion, and self-deprecation, which is not dissimilar from Tsie's letters to him. By comparison, therefore, the formal features of this letter suggest that Theodore is indeed Frange's "social superior". It is therefore within this frame that Frange has to navigate how best to reprimand Theodore concerning his prior "errant conduct" (Manley 2024, 187). In contrast to the explicit reproaches towards Mahenknot contained in ex. 3, Frange employs sarcasm in this instance to achieve his objectives, which is identified as being influenced by the Pauline letters.³⁸ An additional paralinguistic frame is thus added to Manley's treatment of this letter: Biblical, specifically New Testament, models. Paul's influence (Manley 2024, 186-187), therefore, provides both a Christian and an educational frame within which Frange's strategies also need to be examined.

5. Summary

The letters from TT29, both those written by and to Frange, provide the opportunity to examine the politeness strategies employed by several people. In contrast to other dossiers, the large number of texts preserved in this re-used tomb means that typical behaviour can be identified, as well as how this behaviour could be transgressed. While Coptic letters adhere to set formulae, and the small size of most ostraca limits the amount

³⁵ A Mahenknot is attested in O.Gurna Górecki 71 with the title *lashane* ; see Boud'hors (2018, 67–69) for a discussion of the evidence for this individual (even without the writing of a patronymic, the name is so unusual that it is highly likely that all occurrences of the name at Thebes refer to the same individual).

³⁶ For example, as evident in the correspondence concerning the seventh century monastic elders Epiphanius and Pisentius, for whom see the discussion in Winlock and Crum (1926, 209–231).

³⁷ Note that Manley incorrectly refers to this letter throughout as O.Medin.HabuCopt. 2482 (mixing papyrological siglum with inventory number).

³⁸ That is, if Manley's identification of the use of ⲙⲙⲟⲛ ⲃⲛⲧⲥ as such is correct. There have been no other studies on sarcasm in Coptic texts with which to compare Frange's language.

of text that can be written, Frange's correspondence reveals how individual writers diverted from standard practice. The first case study examined how Frange adapted his language, form of address, as well as his actual handwriting in certain circumstances that necessitated an impolite approach. The second case study turned to women who wrote to Frange, Tsie and Susanna, as this corpus provides a rare opportunity to study women's language. These letters, especially those of Tsie, present distinct features that demonstrate individual writing behaviour and polite language, including terms of address and self-humbling designations, periphrasis, and phatic expressions. In each case, the strategies employed provide a politeness framework in which writers select from a range of epistolary conventions to navigate what Brown and Levinson identify as Distance, Power, and Rank. While data is limited, sufficient paralinguistic information is available to determine how identity (gender, age, sex, social position) contributes to these strategies (following Terkourafi).

This study highlights the potential of the Frange material to study the language of Coptic private communication in the early eighth century. The secure context of the ostraca, in conjunction with the sheer size of the corpus, provides the opportunity to explore the sociolinguistics of letter writing, for both men and women, through an examination of grammar and lexical choices, as well as the supralinguistic features of texts (including handwriting and formatting). The case studies discussed here focus on the im/polite language of several individuals, but they present the beginning of investigations in this area. Within Frange's broader corpus, there is considerable scope for future work within this topic, which could include the language of other people who wrote to Frange, the question of whether monks communicated differently to lay people than other monastic figures, and a comparison of the letters in this corpus with other texts from western Thebes. Furthermore, beyond contributing to our knowledge of Coptic epistolary practice, examining this material through a politeness framework will have impact beyond the field of linguistics, improving our understanding of social networks and group dynamics across the region in early Islamic Egypt.

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