

# Politeness and formality in Cicero's letter to Matius (Fam. 11.27)

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## Politeness and Formality in Cicero's Letter to Matius (*Fam.* 11.27)

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As Peter Brunt notes in his famous essay on Roman *amicitia*, the “polite civilities” exchanged by aristocrats such as Cicero and Caesar are highly significant: this courteous language played a crucial part in the cultivation and preservation of political friendships in the Late Roman Republic.<sup>1</sup> As yet, however, few Classical scholars have taken up Brunt’s suggestion that this formal politeness receive close study in its own right.<sup>2</sup> In the discipline of sociolinguistics, by contrast, research into polite language has become something of a boom industry over the past three decades or so. These studies have not only confirmed Brunt’s observation regarding the social importance of politeness; they have also developed useful theoretical frameworks that can be profitably applied to the subject.<sup>3</sup> In the following discussion, I would like to consider how some of these ideas can help us reach a better understanding of Cicero’s use of linguistic courtesy. My focus will necessarily be quite narrow; nevertheless, as I hope to show, even the few letters addressed here can provide us with important insights that can be applied to the correspondence as a whole. In particular, we shall see that Cicero’s use of polite routines reflects some of the fundamental tensions and social anxieties that prevailed among his aristocratic peers.

As my title suggests, I take as the starting point of my discussion Cicero’s well-known letter to C. Matius (*Fam.* 11.27), written in 44 BC, some six months or so after Caesar’s assassination. Matius was a man of equestrian rank who had

1 Brunt (1988) 356–59. Originally published as Brunt (1965).

2 Brunt (1988) 381: “the polite civilities which social conventions required ... merit attention for their own sake.” Of the studies written before Brunt’s essay, the thesis of Miller (1914) offers a useful survey of some of the principles of social etiquette evident in Cicero’s correspondence, but is primarily concerned with identifying the rules for proper behaviour, rather than investigating the social values that created them. Kroll (1963) 196–203 shows an astute perception of the importance of etiquette in aristocratic circles, but his discussion is relatively brief. Since Brunt’s essay, the most important work on the social context of the correspondence is that of Deniaux (1993), although this study confines itself mainly to Cicero’s letters of recommendation. Hutchinson (1998) 17–18 makes a number of insightful remarks regarding the conventions of polite manners employed by Cicero and his correspondents, but does not pursue them in detail. Considerable attention has been paid to the conventional formulas of greeting in the letters and their implications for the status relations between writer and addressee; see Babl (1893), esp. 14–19; Adams (1978); Shackleton Bailey (1995) 1–10; Dickey (2002) 41–76. The study of Narducci (1989) is an important one for our sociological understanding of Roman aristocratic manners, but does not investigate in detail the language of Cicero’s letters.

3 For details, see the discussion below and the references in n. 20.

gained considerable influence at the highest levels through his close association with Caesar.<sup>4</sup> Cicero's relations with him in general seem to have been amicable and respectful.<sup>5</sup> But when Matius supported Octavian's funeral games in honour of the dead dictator in May 44, Cicero expressed to his friend Atticus a measure of irritation and annoyance.<sup>6</sup> This dissatisfaction appears to have increased in the months that followed, with Cicero voicing his criticisms so indiscreetly that they eventually came to the attention of Matius himself.<sup>7</sup> Matius was naturally aggrieved at these reports and made his displeasure known to one of their mutual friends, Trebatius Testa, who in turn passed this news on to Cicero.<sup>8</sup> Cicero's aim in *Fam.* 11.27, then, is to address the tensions that have thus arisen between Matius and himself.

This letter – and Matius' reply (*Fam.* 11.28) – have long been viewed by scholars as valuable documents for our understanding of Roman friendship. Cicero for his part claims that loyalty to the state should take precedence over any sense of allegiance to a private individual such as the dead dictator (*Fam.* 11.27.8); Matius by contrast asserts the importance of personal loyalty, and so justifies his continued support for Caesar's cause even after the Ides of March (*Fam.* 11.28.2–8). The social and philosophical background to these contrasting views has been energetically pursued by modern commentators, often with varying conclusions;<sup>9</sup> and they have been quick to pass judgement upon the individual characters of the two correspondents. Cicero is usually cast as the cool, glib orator, to be condemned for his peevishness and hypocrisy; Matius is lauded as Caesar's impassioned and loyal companion.<sup>10</sup> These discussions,

4 For a detailed discussion of Matius' life and career, see Münzer (1930). On the date of the letter (probably mid-October), see Shackleton Bailey (1977) 486.

5 At *Fam.* 7.15.2 Cicero describes Matius as *suavissimi doctissimique*, and at *Att.* 9.11.2 as *temperatus et prudens*. Cf. also *Att.* 9.15A, a letter written by Matius and Trebatius to Cicero in April 49.

6 *Att.* 15.2.3: *de Octavi contione idem sentio quod tu, ludorumque eius apparatus et Matius ac Postumus mihi procuratores non placent*. ("About Octavian's speech I feel as you do, and I'm not happy about the preparations for his show or the choice of Matius and Postumus as his agents.") See too *Att.* 14.5.1 and 14.9.3 (April 44) where Matius is called Calvenna ("Baldy"), presumably with some degree of disparagement; also *Att.* 16.11.1 (Nov. 44): *Caleni interventum et Calvennae cavebis*. ("And see that Calenus and Baldy don't poke their noses in.")

7 Cicero was said to have criticised Matius for voting in favour of a recent law, as well as for assisting in the management of Octavian's games. For further discussion, see Shackleton Bailey (1977) 487–88.

8 See *Fam.* 11.27.1: [*Trebatius noster*] *detulit ad me querelam tuam*. ("[Our good Trebatius] laid before me your grievance.")

9 Sternkopf (1901) 20, for example, sees in Cicero's letter a pragmatic approach to friendship that is typically Roman. Further discussion, with often contrasting views, in Dahlmann (1938), Heuss (1956), Combès (1958), Kytzler (1960a) and Heuss again (1962); most recently, see Griffin (1997); Konstan (1997) 131–32.

10 See e.g. Kytzler (1960a) 96: "dem kalten, glattzüngigen Rhetor Cicero ... die warme Freundestreue des Matius." Syme (1939) 121, n. 1 describes Cicero's letter as "peevish", Shackleton Bailey (1977) 486 as "hypocritical." Rice Holmes (1923) 349 gushingly declares Matius' reply to be "perhaps the noblest thing that has come down to us from antiquity", while

however, have focused almost exclusively on the ideas presented in the final two sections of Cicero's letter (*Fam.* 11.27.7–8) and Matius' reply to them. The rest of *Fam.* 11.27 – some fifty or so out of a total of eighty lines in Shackleton Bailey's Loeb text – has been largely ignored. And yet for our present investigation these sections are in fact the most interesting. For it is here that we find a quite striking use of polite language.

These opening paragraphs present an elaborate and fulsome acknowledgement of the many services that Matius has done for Cicero in the past. This show of appreciation begins with an emphatic assertion of the ties of friendship that exist between them (*Fam.* 11.27.2):<sup>11</sup>

*quantum memoria repetere praeterita possum, nemo est mihi te amicus antiquior. sed vetustas habet aliquid commune cum multis, amor non habet. dilexi te quo die cognovi, meque a te diligere iudicavi.*

As far back in the past as my memory extends, no friend of mine is older than yourself. But length of acquaintance is something which many share in some degree, affection is not. I cared for you from the first day we met, and believed that you cared for me.

Cicero then goes on to recount a number of the services that Matius has performed for him over the years (*Fam.* 11.27.2–3):

*quod enim vehementer mihi utile esse putabas nec inutile ipsi Caesari perfecisti, ut ille me diligeret, coleret, haberet in suis ... (3) initio belli civilis cum Brundisium versus ires ad Caesarem, venisti ad me in Formianum. primum hoc ipsum quanti, praesertim temporibus illis!*

Through your efforts Caesar came to look upon me as one of his circle, the object of his regard and friendly attentions; a result which you considered highly advantageous to me and not disadvantageous to Caesar himself ... (3) At the outset of the Civil War, when you were on your way to join Caesar at Brundisium, you paid me a visit in my house at Formiae. That to begin with meant a good deal, especially at such a time.

This catalogue of favours receives further elaboration in section 4 (*Fam.* 11.27.4):

*quod officium tuum, quod studium vel in absentem me vel in praesentis meos defuit? quem porro omnes mei et mihi et sibi te amiciosem iudicaverunt? veni Brundisium. oblitumne me putas qua celeritate, ut primum audieris, ad me Tarento advolaris, quae tua fuerit adsessio, oratio, confirmatio animi mei fracti communium miseriarum metu?*

Poteat (1916) claims that the frankness and sincerity of Matius' letter "stand out in sharp contrast to the polished phrases and hollow platitudes of Cicero's letter." Heuss (1956) 72 has tried to redress the balance a little, although this response has been challenged in turn; see Combès (1958) 182.

11 In the following discussion, texts and translations are taken from Shackleton Bailey (1999), (2001) and (2002).



What service, what attention was ever wanting either to me in my absence or to my family on the spot. In the judgement of them all, neither they nor I had a better friend. I arrived in Brundisium. Do you think I have forgotten how swiftly the moment you heard the news, you rushed over to me from Tarentum, how you sat beside me, talking and encouraging me in the dejection to which fear of the common calamities had reduced me?

This explicit recognition of Matius' past assistance continues in section 5 as well for a further nine lines.

Both the length and the explicitness of this show of appreciation are striking. And yet it is not entirely clear what function this opening gambit is supposed to play in the letter as a whole. From a traditional rhetorical perspective, these remarks can be viewed perhaps as a kind of *captatio benevolentiae*; Cicero hopes to gain Matius' goodwill before broaching the rather more contentious issue of Caesar's assassination.<sup>12</sup> But while such an explanation seems reasonable enough at first glance, as we shall see in a moment, it does not tell the whole story. These sections function in a rather more complex way than the simple tag *captatio benevolentiae* implies. Before we examine this function in detail, however, it is worth noting that Cicero himself seems a little self-conscious about the fulsomeness of his remarks. Indeed he feels the need in section 6 to explain their relevance (*Fam.* 11.27.6):

*quorsum igitur haec oratio longior quam putaram? quia sum admiratus te, qui haec nosse deberes, quicquam a me commissum quod esset alienum nostra amicitia credidisse.*

You may wonder where all this discourse (longer than I had envisaged) is tending. I am astonished that you, who ought to know all this, should have believed me guilty of any action against the spirit of our friendship.

Cicero asserts here that these opening sections form part of a rational line of argument: the fact that he and Matius have worked closely together in the past proves that he would not do anything now to undermine their relationship. This is a rather curious argument, however. Matius after all has been receiving quite specific reports about Cicero's antagonistic attitude towards him. A lengthy enumeration here of the services that *Matius* has performed in the past for *Cicero* scarcely offers a logical or effective rebuttal of these reports. As we shall see, there is good reason to suppose that the orator's extensive courtesy in sections 2 to 5 is not in fact intended to contribute to a rational argument; it operates instead on a quite different level, one that taps into fundamental elements of the Roman aristocratic mentality.

12 Cf. Heuss (1956) 58: "Nach solchen Vorbereitungen glaubt sich Cicero genügend gegen Missverständnisse gewappnet." ("After such preparatory comments, Cicero believes himself sufficiently armed against misunderstanding.") Cf. Kytzler (1960b) 55, n. 2, who notes in passing that Cicero needs to induce in Matius a favourable disposition ("günstige Stimmung").

To understand these sections properly we need to consider a similar passage in a letter written by Cicero to Gaius Trebonius in 46 BC (*Fam.* 15.21). Trebonius, we learn, has just presented Cicero with a book that celebrates a number of the orator's witticisms. Cicero in his letter responds to this literary tribute by launching upon his own celebration of the many good deeds that Trebonius has done for him in earlier days (*Fam.* 15.21.2):

*nam ut illa omittam quae civitate teste fecisti, cum mecum inimicitias communicavisti, cum me contionibus tuis defendisti, cum quaestor in mea atque in publica causa consulum partis suscepisti, cum tribuno plebis quaestor non paruisti, cui tuus praesertim collega pareret; ut haec recentia, quae meminero semper, obliviscar, quae tua sollicitudo de me in armis, quae laetitia in reditu, quae cura, qui dolor cum ad te curae et dolores mei perferrentur, Brundisium denique te ad me venturum fuisse nisi subito in Hispaniam missus esses.*

Suppose I put out of account what you did in full public view, when you made my enemy [i.e. Clodius] yours, defended me in your speeches, as Quaestor took upon yourself the duty of the Consuls on my behalf and the public's, and as Quaestor refused to obey the orders of a Tribune, even though your colleague obeyed them. Suppose I forgot the matters of recent date, which I shall always remember – your concern for me at the war, your gladness at my return, your anxiety and distress when you were told of my anxieties and distress, your intention to visit me at Brundisium had you not suddenly been ordered to Spain.

At the end of this extended *praeteritio*, Cicero finally turns to express his appreciation of the book itself (*Fam.* 15.21.2):

*liber iste quam mihi misisti quantam habet declarationem amoris tui! primum quod tibi facetum videtur quicquid ego dixi, quod alii fortasse non item; deinde quod illa, sive faceta sunt sive sic, fiunt narrante te venustissime, quin etiam ante quam ad me veniatur risus omnis paene consumitur.*

This book you have sent me, what a declaration of your affection! To begin with, you find wit in every saying of mine – another perhaps would not; and then, these things, whether witty or only so-so, become irresistible when you are their *raconteur*. In fact the laugh is nearly all over before *I* come on the scene.

As Shackleton Bailey notes, this “recapitulation of benefits” is quite similar to the one that we have just identified in Cicero's letter to Matius.<sup>13</sup> The intriguing point – one that Shackleton Bailey does not pursue – is that these two letters were written in response to quite different circumstances. It is not so easy, for example, to explain the passage in Cicero's letter to Trebonius as a rhetorical strategy. Trebonius' presentation of his book suggests that the two men are already on good terms; to this extent Cicero has no need for a *captatio benevolentiae*. Nor does he seem here to be trying to construct a logically persuasive argument. Rather, his comments in this case appear to be prompted by

13 Shackleton Bailey (1977) 486.

the social dynamics of gift-giving. Trebonius' gift calls for some kind of favour in return, and so Cicero reciprocates with a series of complimentary remarks. To accomplish this task, he employs essentially the same strategies of politeness that he will use in his letter to Matius a couple of years later. What we have here is a kind of conventionalised linguistic routine, one that could be used by Roman aristocrats in various contexts. The recapitulation-of-benefits is evidently a distinctive element in Cicero's repertoire of polite manners.

This conclusion is confirmed by a third example of the routine, this time from Cicero's correspondence with Atticus. In general the letters to Atticus are characterised by an easy informality. Features such as grammatical ellipse, everyday vocabulary, energetic exclamation and the occasional Greek phrase work together to create an elegantly colloquial idiom.<sup>14</sup> This lively familiarity of tone differs quite markedly from the stiff politeness that Cicero uses with many of his other high-ranking correspondents and seems to reflect the real intimacy that he enjoyed with Atticus.<sup>15</sup> In one particular letter, however, we find him adopting an unusually formal tone with his friend (*Att.* 1.17 written in 61 BC). This change in linguistic register seems to have been prompted by a disagreement that had arisen between Atticus and Cicero's brother, Quintus. As governor of Asia, Quintus had evidently invited Atticus to serve on his staff; when Atticus declined, Quintus responded rather rudely, apparently making some disparaging comments about Atticus' social position and career in commerce. Cicero attempts in this letter to make amends by insisting that he regards Atticus as a social equal, and by assuring him that his chosen career as an equestrian businessman is a perfectly respectable one (*Att.* 1.17.5). He then proceeds to embark upon an appreciative recapitulation of Atticus' past services to him (*Att.* 1.17.5–6):<sup>16</sup>

*vera quidem laude probitatis, integritatis, diligentiae, religionis neque me tibi neque quemquam antepono, amoris vero erga me, cum a fraterno (a)more domesticoque discessi, tibi primas defero. (6) vidi enim, vidi penitusque perspexi in meis variis temporibus et sollicitudines et laetitias tuas. fuit mihi saepe et laudis nostrae gratulatio tua iucunda et timoris consolatio grata. quin mihi nunc te absente non solum consilium, quo tu excellis, sed etiam sermonis communicatio, quae mihi suavissima tecum solet esse, maxime deest – quid dicam? ... postremo non labor meus non requies, non negotium non otium, non forenses res non domesticae, (non publicae), non privatae carere diutius tuo suavissimo atque amantissimo consilio ac sermone possunt.*

14 On colloquial usages and lively, inventive vocabulary, see most conveniently Tyrrell (1885) 56–73, and von Albrecht (1973) cols. 1271–1286, usefully summarised in von Albrecht (2003) 52–71. On the use of Greek, Steele (1900) and Baldwin (1992).

15 As Boissier (1897) 156–58 notes, we may have doubts about Atticus' degree of commitment to their friendship when political push came to shove; cf. most recently, Marchetti (2000) 195–212. But the often indiscreet content of Cicero's letters to Atticus points to a measure of trust and candidness that finds few parallels in the rest of his correspondence.

16 For a recent brief discussion of this letter see Konstan (1997) 124–25.

In the things that really matter – uprightness, integrity, conscientiousness, fidelity to obligation – I put you second neither to myself nor to any other man, while as to affection towards me, leaving aside my brother and my home circle, I give you first prize. (6) I have seen with my own eyes and very thoroughly noted your anxieties and your joys in the ups and downs of my career. Your congratulation has often given me pleasure in success and your comfort consoled my apprehensions. Indeed at the present time I badly miss in your absence not only your excellent advice but also our habitual exchange of talk, which is such a delight to me. In short ... whether working or resting, in business or in leisure, in professional or domestic affairs, in public life or private, I cannot for any length of time do without your affectionate advice and the delight of your conversation.

The intriguing point here is that Cicero addresses this recapitulation-of-benefits to a close friend and confidant; in the previous two examples, it is used in letters to rather more distant acquaintances (Matius and Trebonius). Several factors need to be considered if we wish to understand the principles that govern Cicero's use of this polite routine.

#### *The form and function of linguistic routines*

According to modern sociolinguistic studies, conventionalised linguistic routines usually develop in order to help participants deal effectively with social situations that recur frequently.<sup>17</sup> The language of epistolary recommendations, for example, presumably became conventionalised to such a high degree because these letters played an important and extensive part in Roman aristocratic life.<sup>18</sup> Having at one's disposal a familiar vocabulary and framework for such occasions makes the process of composition much easier; the writer does not need to spend a great deal of time searching for apposite phrases. The process of conventionalisation also makes such exchanges socially less threatening. The often awkward intrusions involved in requests for favours can be accomplished efficiently and appropriately simply by following the established conventions.<sup>19</sup>

Another feature that shapes formal language is the concern with "face" that most social transactions involve. As recent studies of politeness have stressed, most of us have a persona (or "face") that we present to others in our daily business. We expect this face to be acknowledged and respected; if it is

17 See Coulmas (1979) 251: "the chief function of [routine formulas] is to reduce the complexity of social interaction."

18 See the useful studies of Plantera (1977–78); Cotton (1981), esp. 3–7 and 44–7; Cotton (1984); Cugusi (1983) 99–101; Trisoglio (1984); Deniaux (1993) 44–53.

19 Cugusi (1983) 73–104 and (1989) 400–19 has compiled a useful list of themes that tend to occur in Roman letter-writing and are, to this extent, conventional. (See also Thraede (1970) 27–47.) But these are not quite the same as the routines that we are considering here, whose prime purpose is to help negotiate relations between correspondents. See also Marouzeau (1933) who identifies a number of linguistic clichés that were in common use in Cicero's correspondence and elsewhere.

not, we are said to “lose face”, something that often provokes in us feelings of anger and embarrassment.<sup>20</sup> We also speak of “saving” face – that is, trying to maintain our desired image of poise and competence whenever social encounters expose it to some threat. It is important to note, however, that, while we naturally have a strong interest in saving our own face, we also often take considerable pains to save the face of those with whom we come into contact. Social interaction usually runs much more smoothly if we do so. Since it is usually not in our interest to go around embarrassing or insulting other people, most social encounters to some degree involve mutual efforts to protect each other’s face.<sup>21</sup> According to modern politeness theory, these delicate negotiations of face are very powerful and ever-present parts of daily interaction and play a major part in the kind of language that we employ. Polite civilities can to this extent be regarded as linguistic “facework.” This sociolinguistic neologism is admittedly not an especially elegant one, but it does serve the useful purpose of reminding us that politeness is not just a matter of saying “please” and “thank you” at the right time; it is crucial in helping us to negotiate social encounters.<sup>22</sup>

This concern with face in social interaction is especially relevant when we turn to consider Roman aristocratic society. The Roman senator’s preoccupation with his own *dignitas* and social rank (sometimes referred to as aristocratic “status-anxiety”) has been amply demonstrated in the scholarly literature.<sup>23</sup> It mattered intensely to the Roman grandee where he sat at the games, how many people came to visit him in the morning, what statues or inscriptions were awarded in his honour. This concern with *dignitas* corresponds closely with the sociolinguistic conception of face. Both involve the individual’s desire to project an image of social competence and importance to those around them. Modern linguistic studies of facework, then, can help us to explore how Cicero and his contemporaries used language to display deference and respect within aristocratic circles. It alerts us to the fact that polite

20 The seminal work is Brown and Levinson (1978; revised with a new introduction in 1987), which builds upon concepts first explored by Goffman (1955). The subsequent bibliography is huge; a convenient starting place is DuFon et al. (1994). The main concepts of “politeness theory” have slowly found their way into Classical scholarship; see e.g. Schrijvers (1993), esp. 75–90; Oliensis (1998); Lloyd (1999); Dickey (2002). It should be noted, however, that not all sociolinguists have accepted the validity of the conceptual model, especially as regards its application across different cultures; see e.g. Matsumoto (1988). In my view, at the very least it provides a useful framework for analysing the social functions of polite language. Holmes (2001) 258–83 offers a summary of the prevailing state of scholarship.

21 Brown and Levinson (1987) 61–83.

22 For a useful summary of these issues, see Tracy (1990). Again, the basic concepts were first formulated by Goffman (1955) and (1963).

23 See most conveniently the excellent discussion of Lendon (1997) 30–73, with its extensive references to both ancient and modern sources. Hellegouarc’h (1972) 362–424 and Wiseman (1985) also provide useful introductions.



language could function as one element in the finely calibrated and on-going daily calculus of their social prestige.<sup>24</sup>

If we look again at Cicero's letter to Matius and reconsider its recapitulation-of-benefits in these terms, the linguistic routine can be seen to function as a form of honorific facework.<sup>25</sup> By acknowledging Matius' social and political influence, Cicero is able to enhance his friend's social standing. The routine is in essence a ritual display of respect. Cicero is not attempting to construct a rational, cogent defence of his recent behaviour; rather he is drawing upon the recapitulation-of-benefits routine to try to restore the face that Matius has lost as a result of Cicero's sniping criticisms of him. For the disagreement between Cicero and Matius was almost certainly by this stage a semi-public one. The highly effective rumour-mill at Rome would have been spreading the news of their quarrel around the dinner parties and morning receptions of the elite as quickly as Trebatius had hurried to tell Cicero of Matius' displeasure.<sup>26</sup> Moreover, Roman aristocrats regularly circulated letters among friends, and on occasions had them read out at dinner parties.<sup>27</sup> Cicero's highly formal and explicit recognition of Matius' position thus constitutes a valuable social capital; this honorific facework plays a crucial part in restoring both Matius' self-image and his image within the wider community.<sup>28</sup>

This interpretation of polite language as a kind of social currency also explains its extensive use in Cicero's letter to Trebonius. First and foremost, Trebonius' book places Cicero in some debt to him; at the same time, however, Trebonius also exposes *himself* to potential rejection – Cicero after all could

- 24 This function of language has been discussed to some extent by scholars of ancient Greek society. See e.g. Kurke (1991) 86–7.
- 25 Or in the terms of Brown and Levinson (1987) 70, “positive politeness”: “Positive politeness is approach-based; it ‘anoints’ the face of the addressee by indicating that in some respects, S[peaker] wants H[earer]’s wants (e.g. by treating him as a member of an in-group, a friend, a person whose wants and personality traits are known and liked).” In general, however, Brown and Levinson focus only on the use of positive politeness in informal conversational contexts; they do not explore in detail its honorific use in formal settings. On this ceremonial function, see Coulmas (1992).
- 26 On rumour and gossip in Roman society see Kroll (1963) 80–87; Laurence (1994); Achard (1991) 233–8.
- 27 Some of Cicero's letters were evidently written with an eye for circulation beyond the named addressee, especially those with wider political significance (e.g. *Fam.* 1.9; see also *Att.* 8.9.1–2). But other letters also seem to have been circulated among interested friends, sometimes with and sometimes without his knowledge; see e.g. *Fam.* 15.21.4; *Att.* 4.6.4. Cicero himself of course regularly passed on to Atticus letters received from other correspondents (e.g. *Att.* 9.7A, 9.7B, 9.7C, 10.8A, 10.8B, 10.9A). For letters read out at dinner parties, see *Att.* 15.17.2; 8.9.1. Further discussion in Cugusi (1983) 168–70 and Nicholson (1994) 58–60.
- 28 The deferential element of this show of respect also ensures that their spat does not degenerate into a more destructive struggle of egos. See the ingenious and illuminating experiment of Brown (1968), who succeeded in demonstrating under controlled conditions the extent to which an individual's desire to save face can lead them to decisions that are counter-productive in other respects.



respond quite negatively to his literary efforts.<sup>29</sup> The face of both men is thus at stake. Cicero's use of the recapitulation-of-benefits routine neatly addresses these tensions: it assures Trebonius that the book is much admired and appreciated; and it goes some way to repaying the debt that the gift has established. In the long run, no doubt the usual mechanism of favour-exchange between Roman aristocrats could be counted upon to balance the account. But for the moment Cicero can offer some kind of immediate repayment through this formal honorific facework. Thus, while the use of this routine in his letters to Matius and Trebonius seems to be prompted by very different circumstances, we can see that its function in both is in fact essentially the same: to address the Roman grandee's concern with face. Within the aristocratic economy of *dignitas* this polite language has an important role to play.<sup>30</sup>

The same applies to our third example too. Quintus' ill-tempered comments have clearly dented Atticus' *dignitas* and require from Cicero some kind of recompense. His solution to the problem is to employ the same routine that he uses elsewhere when the serious matter of an aristocrat's prestige is involved. This approach, however, obliges him to put aside for a moment their customary intimacy and adopt a more formal manner. Indeed, the letter in this respect provides an interesting example of "code-switching." Cicero changes from one linguistic register to another in the space of just a few paragraphs.<sup>31</sup> Having performed the honorific routine of the recapitulation-of-benefits in sections 5 to 7, Cicero returns to the style of lively informality that we associate more regularly with his correspondence with Atticus. His use in section 9, for example, of the exuberant exclamation *ecce aliae deliciae equitum vix ferendae!* ("Now along come the knights with another fancy, really almost insupportable!") contrasts sharply with the formal tone of his earlier remarks; so too does the conversational rapidity at *Att.* 1.17.11: *rides? non sunt haec ridicula, mihi crede. quid aliud scribam ad te? quid? multa sunt, sed in aliud tempus.* ("That makes you laugh? These are no laughing matters, believe me. What else can I tell you, I wonder? There are lots of things, but another time.") The highly formal register of the recapitulation-of-benefits thus performs the required show of respect to Atticus, while the switch to a more conversational tenor in the final sections signifies that Cicero considers the tensions in their relationship to be resolved; he can therefore resume his more familiar epistolary style.

29 Cf. Cicero's own anxiety at how Varro will react to being depicted in the *Academica Posteriora* (*Att.* 13.14–15.1; 13.22.3; 13.24.1; 13.25.3).

30 See Brown and Levinson (1987) 46 for a summary of the social complexities involved in gift-giving, and 129 on polite language as a metaphorical gift.

31 On this phenomenon see Dunkel (2000) who examines when and why Cicero switches between the use of Latin and Greek in his letters. Note, however, that the term "code-switching" can refer also to switching between different stylistic registers within a single language; see e.g. Holmes (2001) 36.

The concept of facework, then, helps us to make sense of Cicero's use of the same linguistic routine in three rather different contexts. In each case, his explicit acknowledgement of the correspondent's importance helps to restore the equilibrium of their relationship. The routine thus functions as much on a social level (that is, as an indicator of respect), as on an informational level (as an accurate inventory of past services). As Brunt perceived, and as recent sociolinguistic studies have articulated in detail, this negotiation of personal relationships is one of the main functions of polite language.

The formal dimension of this routine is also a direct consequence of the status-conscious circles in which Cicero moved. One of the main functions of stylistic register is to convey the degree of social distance expected in a communicative exchange: to insist on a high level of formality implies a high concern with the rank and status.<sup>32</sup> From the three letters that we have examined, it is clear that Roman aristocratic interaction could be circumscribed by a high degree of stiff formality. Face and *dignitas* were not constant, stable entities; they were matters of on-going negotiation. Even years into his relationship with Atticus, Cicero has to resort to a highly stylised routine at a moment of tension in order to pay proper respect to his friend's *dignitas*. Such formality was to this extent essentially the default-mode among members of the elite. This point is worth stressing because of the tendency in modern scholarship to focus on the more colloquial and informal linguistic features in the letters; in fact Cicero's epistolary relationship with Atticus is unusual in this regard.<sup>33</sup>

### *Examples of Other Polite Routines*

Unfortunately we have no conclusive proof that other Roman aristocrats used the recapitulation-of-benefits routine in their dealings with each other – although this lack of evidence is hardly surprising given the relatively small number of non-Ciceronian letters preserved in the extant correspondence. Nevertheless it is difficult to attribute Cicero's use of the same routine in contexts some seventeen years apart to idiosyncratic whim. The routine was more likely a familiar and widespread one within aristocratic correspondence. Indeed, it is perhaps best viewed as a particularly elaborate example of the highly conventionalised and formal language that we know to have been regularly employed by Cicero's peers. His correspondence with the grand patrician Appius Claudius Pulcher illustrates this point well.

32 Holmes (2001) 375: "Different communities put different degrees of weight on solidarity vs status, and formality vs casualness. In conservative, status-based communities, where differences are emphasised, interactions with acquaintances may be relatively formal." Conversely a more casual tone usually aims at generating a sense of social solidarity, often through the use of in-group markers which reduce the social distance between participants.

33 For the focus on colloquial usage, see Tyrrell (1885), 56–73; Dammann (1910); Bignone (1946); Monsuez (1952), (1953) and (1954).

In 51 BC Cicero succeeded Appius as governor of Cilicia. Not surprisingly relations between the two men were rather strained. Appius of course was the brother of Cicero's great enemy Publius Clodius (who had been killed in early 52 BC); he was also notorious for his difficult, not to say arrogant temperament.<sup>34</sup> In recent months, however, Pompey had managed to effect a public reconciliation between the two men, and, as their correspondence shows, they had managed to construct a fragile working relationship with each other.<sup>35</sup> The way in which they were able to do so is illustrated in part by the following passage from a letter to Appius in June 51 (*Fam.* 3.4.1–2):

*meum studium erga te et officium, tametsi multis iam rebus spero tibi esse cognitum, tamen in iis maxime declarabo quibus plurimum significare potuero tuam mihi existimationem et dignitatem carissimam esse. mihi et Q. Fabius Vergilianus et C. Flaccus L. f. et diligentissime M. Octavius Cn. f. demonstravit me a te plurimi fieri. quod egomet multis argumentis iam antea iudicaram maximeque illo libro augurali, quem ad me amantissime scriptum suavissimum misisti. (2) mea in te omnia summae necessitudinis officia constabunt. nam cum te ipsum, ex quo tempore tu me diligere coepisti, cottidie pluris feci.*

You have, I hope, already had evidence in plenty of my goodwill and desire to serve you, but I shall demonstrate it most conspicuously where I can most clearly show how precious to me are your good name and dignity. Your warm regard for myself had been made plain to me by Q. Fabius Vergilianus, by C. Flaccus, son of Lucius, and especially by M. Octavius, son of Gnaeus. I had previously deduced it from many indications, above all the charming gift of your volume on Augury with its affectionate dedication to me. All that I can do for you to the uttermost limits of friendly service shall be done. My esteem for you has increased from day to day ever since you began to have a regard for me.

Cicero's aim here is to forge a sense of mutual respect between Appius and himself, presumably in the hope that this will convert into goodwill and cooperation in their future dealings. In doing so, he employs language similar in its formality to that used in the recapitulation-of-benefits routine, although his general approach here differs in several respects. First, Cicero evidently wants to depict their relationship as one of reciprocal esteem and cooperation; he therefore mentions not just the *beneficia* that Appius has bestowed upon him in the past, but also the *officia* that he himself will perform in return.<sup>36</sup> Second, his expression of appreciation for Appius is considerably shorter than the elaborate acknowledgement that he undertakes in his letters to Matius and Trebonius, and in *Att.* 1.17. This brevity may in part be the inevitable result of their earlier conflicts: the many tensions between them over the years must have

34 For a summary, see Constans (1921) 115–16; also *Fam.* 5.10a.2 (Vatinius to Cicero).

35 For this reconciliation, see *Scaur.* 31; *Fam.* 1.9.4; 1.9.19; 3.10.8–9; Quint. *Inst.* 9.3.41; also Constans (1921) 34–51.

36 Cicero's reference to his *future* services to Appius constitutes a kind of pledge or promise; he carefully avoids the potential insult of cataloguing past services.

made long lists of mutual *beneficia* quite a challenge. (In this respect Appius' dedication to Cicero of a volume on augury no doubt provided a welcome bond between them that could be readily invoked on such occasions.) But perhaps the most important factor is that Cicero here does not actually need to embark upon an especially extended piece of honorific facework. The relationship between them at present is relatively stable; there is no sense of grievance to be soothed, no threat to prestige that needs to be eased. Nevertheless, Cicero must still show a measure of solicitous respect, and he achieves this through the use of several semi-formulaic phrases.

For example, his assertion that he cares deeply for Appius' *dignitas* and *existimatio* is a thoroughly conventional one. As we see in a letter from Munatius Plancus to Cicero in 43 BC, it was a polite custom in Roman correspondence for one aristocrat to entrust the protection of his *dignitas* to another (*Fam.* 10.21a): *meam dignitatem commendatam habeas rogo*. ("Let me ask you to regard my public standing as entrusted to your care.") The conventionalised nature of this remark is also illustrated by a comment that Cicero makes to Q. Cornificius (*Fam.* 12.17.3): *quod mihi existimationem tuam dignitatemque commendas, facis tu quidem omnium more...* ("In commending your reputation and consequence to my care you follow the general form of courtesy. ...") Various examples from other correspondents point to the widespread use of this convention.<sup>37</sup>

Moreover, Cicero's remark to Appius at the start of the letter's second section seems to be a studied variation on a phrase that he uses in his letter to Matius. With Matius, he can evidently assert with some plausibility that he has cared for him from the first day that they met (see *Fam.* 11.27.2 quoted above). With Appius, however, he modifies the sentiment, presumably to make it more appropriate to their own particular relationship and its previous strains (*Fam.* 3.4.2): *nam cum te ipsum, ex quo tempore tu me diligere coepisti, cottidie pluris feci*. ("My esteem for you has increased from day to day ever since you began to have a regard for me.")<sup>38</sup>

A remark in Cicero's next extant letter to Appius confirms that these opening sections of *Fam.* 3.4 form part of a recognisable epistolary routine (*Fam.* 3.5.1):

*nunc, quoniam et tu ita sentis (scribis enim quae <de> nostris officiis ego ad te scripseram, etsi tibi iucunda fuerint, tamen, quoniam ex alto repetita sint, non necessaria a te putasse) et re vera confirmata amicitia et perspecta fide commemoratio officiorum supervacanea est, eam partem orationis praetermittam, tibi tamen agam, ut debeo, gratias.*

37 *Fam.* 12.14.4 (Lentulus Spinther the younger to Cicero); *Fam.* 12.12.2 (C. Cassius to Cicero); *Fam.* 10.17.3 (Plancus to Cicero); *Fam.* 11.6 (Cicero to D. Brutus).

38 On the conventionalised use of *diligo* in such letters, cf. *Fam.* 2.9.3; *Fam.* 12.16.1 (Trebonius to Cicero); *Att.* 8.15A.2 (Balbus to Cicero). See also Hellegouarc'h (1972) 143–46.



Well, since you feel as you do (you write that, while the remarks in my letter about our services to one another gave you pleasure, you saw no need to go back so far into the past), and since reminders of services rendered are in truth superfluous between firm and tried friends, I shall leave that topic on one side. Nevertheless, I shall thank you as I ought.

Cicero here refers to the opening sections of *Fam.* 3.4 as a *commemoratio officiorum* – a phrase that comes close in meaning to “recapitulation of benefits.”<sup>39</sup> Indeed, Cicero uses the verb *commemoravi* at *Fam.* 11.27.6 and the noun *commemoratio* at *Att.* 1.17.7 to refer to the polite routines in his letters to Matus and Atticus respectively. He also describes the opening sections of *Fam.* 3.4 collectively as a *pars orationis*, a term that encourages us to regard them as a distinct element within the letter – that is, as a conventionalised routine.<sup>40</sup> Moreover, it is clear that this convention was regularly employed in quite formal contexts where writer and addressee were not on especially intimate terms. For Appius has evidently responded to the respectful tone of *Fam.* 3.4 by urbanely assuring Cicero that such stiff punctiliousness is really quite unnecessary (*supervacanea est*). Appius thus takes a step towards placing their relationship on a closer and more intimate footing. Significantly, however, Cicero chooses not to adopt a noticeably more casual tone. He maintains the tenor of formal courtesy by insisting on an explicit offering of thanks – another highly conventionalised routine of polite etiquette in Roman correspondence.<sup>41</sup> Again the aristocrat’s concern with personal status finds expression in a formal linguistic style that conveys respect, appreciation and esteem.<sup>42</sup>

The content and linguistic register of these routines also neatly illustrate perhaps the most notable paradox of aristocratic correspondence. Although formal in tone, such letters regularly include emphatic assertions of admiration

39 See Saller (1982) 8–39 for a discussion of the Roman terminology of friendship, especially 15–21 on the overlap in meaning between *officium* and *beneficium*.

40 The use of *pars* here suggests a readily identifiable section or sub-division. For *oratio* as simply “what one says, one’s words” see OLD, s.v. 5a, which quotes this example.

41 The formality of such thanks-offerings is evident from Cicero’s remarks to Q. Cornificius at *Fam.* 12.28.2: *gratum etiam illud, quod mihi tuo nomine gratias agendas non putas; nec enim id inter nos facere debemus*. (“I am also glad you feel that expressions of thanks to me on your account are out of place – you and I do not have to do that between ourselves.”) In this case Cornificius seems to have ostentatiously rejected the convention in order to highlight the special nature of his relationship with Cicero: their friendship is so close that they do not need careful acknowledgements of the favours they do for each other. See also *Fam.* 10.19.1 (Cicero to Plancus).

42 It is worth comparing too the fragment preserved by Servius and attributed to Cicero’s first book of letters to M. Brutus, in which Cicero states (Shackleton Bailey (2002) frag. VII.1): *si Pompeius non ex alto peteret et multis verbis me iam hortaretur ...* (“If Pompey were not asking, going a long way back and urging me with plenty of words ...”) Since Cicero uses the phrase *ex alto* to refer to his *commemoratio officiorum* addressed to Appius Claudius, it is just possible that Pompey had composed his own recapitulation-of-benefits, which gave an elaborate and detailed account of his relationship with Cicero up to this point. Cicero’s phrasing suggests that this routine had had a certain persuasive effect.

and affection for their addressee; as we have seen, Cicero claims (for example) to have had great regard for Matius from the first day that they met. This tension between tone and content is best viewed perhaps as the reflection of a fundamental tension in Roman political life overall: on the one hand, the highly competitive, status-conscious mentality of the aristocrat – embodied in the very concept of *dignitas* – urged him towards an emphasis on formality and social distance; on the other, his pragmatic need to form temporary alliances with colleagues (and with rivals too on occasions) obliged him to engage in active political courtship, a process that required him to try to close the social distance between himself and others. The conventionalised routines that we have identified helped Roman grandees to negotiate these tensions.

This formal epistolary style probably also reflects the formality that prevailed in face-to-face encounters between Roman aristocrats. At *Pro Sulla* 18, for example, Cicero depicts a meeting with P. Autronius (pr. 68; cos. desig. 65) in the following way:

*veniebat enim ad me et saepe veniebat Autronius multis cum lacrimis supplex ut se defenderem, et se meum condiscipulum in pueritia, familiarem in adulescentia, conlegam in quaestura commemorabat fuisse; multa me in se, non nulla etiam sua in me proferebat officia. quibus ego rebus, iudices, ita flectebar animo atque frangebar ut iam ex memoria quas mihi ipsi fecerat insidias deponerem.*

Autronius came to me and came repeatedly in tears begging me to defend him and recounting how we had been school-fellows in boyhood, friends in our youth and colleagues in the quaestorship; he cited the many services that I had done for him and some too that he had done for me. These pleas, gentlemen, so weakened and shook my resolve that I was ready to shut out from my memory the plot which he had recently undertaken against me.

Autronius here is making an earnest, tearful request to Cicero, and so his situation is clearly rather different from the epistolary contexts that we have been considering so far. But several of his linguistic strategies are notably similar. He lists the long-standing ties between them (note Cicero's use of the verb *commemorabat* to describe this routine); and he does so apparently in the careful and methodical way that Cicero himself uses in his letters. Autronius also mentions the many good deeds that Cicero has done for him in the past, presumably in a kind of recapitulation-of-benefits. In short, he seems to be acting out a well-defined role, using a highly conventionalised script. As a whole, our information about how such conversations were conducted is disappointingly meagre; but given that the morning *salutatio* (for example) was, like the letter of recommendation, a regular and established feature of aristocratic life, it is not unreasonable to suppose that certain conventions of etiquette and language arose to help structure such encounters and ensure that they ran smoothly.



*Matius' Reply (Fam. 11.28)*

If these considerations help us to understand more fully the form and purpose of Cicero's letter to Matius, they also throw light on the manner that Matius adopts in his reply. Shackleton Bailey is quite right to doubt whether Matius really believed the claims that Cicero makes in his letter.<sup>43</sup> But to analyse their exchange solely from the binary perspective of sincerity and hypocrisy risks overlooking the social complexities of the situation. From Matius' perspective, Cicero's sincerity may be of less concern than the fact that the orator has gone to considerable lengths to perform this explicit show of respect and appreciation. As we have seen, such public approbation was not to be dismissed lightly. Matius therefore has to make a pragmatic decision. He can refuse to go along with the polite fiction that Cicero has initiated and directly challenge his assertions. Or he can diplomatically reciprocate the polite civilities that Cicero has undertaken and so ensure that face – on both sides – is saved. The fact that he replies in a gracious and courteous manner tells us much about the priorities of Roman grandees (*Fam.* 11.28.1):

*magnam voluptatem ex tuis litteris cepi, quod quam speraram atque optaram habere te de me opinionem cognovi. de qua etsi non dubitabam, tamen, quia maximi aestimabam ut incorrupta maneret, laborabam.*

Your letter gave me great pleasure, because it told me that you think of me as I had expected and desired. Although I was not in any doubt on this score, the high importance I attach to your good opinion made me anxious that it should remain unimpaired.

At the same time, Matius is sly enough to exploit this polite facework for his own ends. His ostensible acceptance of Cicero's claims allows him to assert with some plausibility that the vigorous remarks that follow are in no way a criticism of the orator himself (*Fam.* 11.28.1): *respondebo criminibus quibus tu pro me, ut par erat pro tua singulari bonitate et amicitia nostra, saepe restitisti.* ("I will make some reply to the charges which you, as befitted the singular kindness of your heart and the friendly relations between us, have often rebutted on my behalf.") The passionate indignation of his rebuttal, however, suggests that there is a degree of archness in this courtesy; he is deftly reciprocating here the insincerity of Cicero's own assertions.<sup>44</sup> But Matius can indulge in this delicate irony, provided that the outward form of the routine with its polite fiction is maintained. Indeed, in matters concerning face and *dignitas*, the public dimension of what is said and done is the prime consideration. What matters is that Cicero

43 Shackleton Bailey (1977) 488; he concludes that it is "improbable" that Matius did believe Cicero.

44 Cf. the scepticism of Shackleton Bailey (1977) 491: "What was in Matius' mind as he wrote these words and in Cicero's as he read them?"

has performed properly his ritual of deference and respect, and that Matius has in turn put on an appropriate show of courteous politeness.<sup>45</sup>

This is not to say that sincerity was never an issue for Cicero and his contemporaries. They were in fact well aware of the problems created by the frequent use of these social and linguistic routines. In a well-known passage from a letter to Papirius Paetus written in 46 BC, Cicero draws the distinction between *amor verus* and *amor fictus* and comments on the difficulty of distinguishing the two (*Fam.* 9.16.2):

*sic enim color, sic observor ab omnibus iis qui a Caesare diliguntur ut ab iis me amari putem. tametsi non facile diiudicatur amor verus et fictus, nisi aliquod incidit eius modi tempus ut quasi aurum igni sic benevolentia fidelis periculo aliquo perspici possit.*

The courtesies and attentions I receive from all who stand high with Caesar are such that I believe they have an affection for me. Admittedly it is no easy matter to distinguish the genuine article from the sham, unless a situation happens to arise in which the gold of loyal attachment is discerned in the fire of danger.

Clearly at times Cicero could scrutinise the aristocratic world and its conventions coolly and cynically from the outside, especially when it was crucial for him to know whose word he could trust and whose he could not. But much of the time he was busy playing the game as hard as he could according to its established rules, and was happy to exploit its conventions whenever necessary. One of our challenges is to identify and appreciate these conventions as best we can.

### Conclusions

Further analysis of Cicero's formal language and polite routines will add more detail to this sketch of aristocratic interaction and its underlying principles. As I have tried to show, sociolinguistic studies of politeness, with their emphasis on the significance of face in social encounters, may provide a useful guide in this regard. But many of the issues that we have been discussing are also neatly encapsulated in an anecdote about the great general Scipio the Younger and his close friend Laelius that Cicero in *De Oratore* puts into the mouth of Licinius Crassus (*De Oratore* 2.22):

*saepe ex socero meo audivi, cum is diceret socerum suum Laelium semper fere cum Scipione solitum rusticari eosque incredibiliter repuerascere esse solitos, cum rus ex urbe, tamquam e vinculis evolavissent. non audeo dicere de talibus viris, sed tamen ita solet narrare Scaevola, conchas eos et umbilicos ad Caietam et ad Laurentum legere consuasse, et ad omnem animi remissionem ludumque descendere.*

45 On the value of the correct performance of social rituals, even though they may be perceived as empty, see Chen (1990/91).

I have often heard from my father-in-law [sc. Scaevola] the story of how his own father-in-law Laelius would go into the country, usually in the company of Scipio, and how they would, more than you'd ever believe, become boys again, as soon as they had escaped, so to speak, from the chains of city life to the countryside. I hardly dare say this about such great men, but still, Scaevola likes to tell how they were in the habit of collecting snails and seashells at Caieta and Lavernium, and of indulging in all kinds of distractions and play.

It is not often in serious Roman literature that we come across depictions of prestigious senators behaving with the casual intimacy of carefree little boys (note the vivid and explicit verb *repuerascere*).<sup>46</sup> As we have seen, the Roman aristocrat caught up in the *vincula* of political life was usually too busy trying to project an image of power and *auctoritas*. Indeed, the reticence of Licinius Crassus to expose the less formal side of such great men (*non audeo dicere de talibus viris*) is in itself revealing: only a select few were granted the privilege of peeking behind the image. Certainly we catch glimpses of Cicero's own playfulness in his letters to Atticus, Papirius Paetus, Tiro and a few others. But the more formal language of his letters to men such as Matius and Appius reveals the austere and restrained manner that would have prevailed in his daily encounters with influential associates. Constructing an image of power and *dignitas* necessarily involved maintaining a sharply defined social distance from others, something that in turn generated a high degree of formality in manners and language. The linguistic conventions of Cicero's letters – their polite civilities – show us at first hand how grand aristocrats constructed, projected and negotiated this image of power. And only by carefully considering how such strategies of politeness operated can we hope to understand fully both the nuances of individual letters and the social context that makes the correspondence of the Late Republic so complex and fascinating.

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46 The *senex* in Roman comedy, of course, often falls in love and indulges in the infatuations of a young man; see e.g. Duckworth (1952) 242–49; Pl. *Mer.* 296 (*repuerascere*). But to depict actual Roman senators behaving in this way is a very different matter.

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