Directivity, politeness and curse tablets: a comparative analysis of Greek and Latin magic texts[*]

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Abstract

The paper offers a pragmatic account of the Greek and Latin curse tablets containing verbs encoding the giving or entrusting of a person or a good to the deities. By logging all directive speech acts and strategies which encode deference or the asking for help, it aims at observing to what degree the curser keeps the control over the action and if and to what extent politeness strategies are activated in the interaction with the gods.

Key Words: politeness, directivity, ancient aggressive magic.

Directividad, cortesía y tablillas de maldición: un análisis comparativo entre textos mágicos griegos y latinos

Resumen

Ese artículo ofrece un estudio pragmalingüístico de las tablillas de maldición griegas y latinas que contienen verbos que codifican la entrega de alguien o algo a los dioses. Registrando todos los actos de habla directivos y todas las estrategias de cortesía que codifican deferencia o una petición de ayuda, el estudio se pone como objetivo observar hasta qué punto el defigens controla el acto y si y hasta qué punto se activan estrategias de cortesía en la interacción con los dioses.

Palabras Clave: cortesía, directividad, magia agresiva.

1. *Introduction*[1]

Defixiones are "inscribed pieces of lead […] intended to influence, by super-natural means, the actions or the welfare of persons or animals against their will".[2] Within (or apart from) *defixiones*, Versnel[3] isolated a specific type of curses, named 'prayers for justice' and defined as "pleas addressed to a god or gods to punish a (mostly unknown) person who has wronged the author (by theft, slander, fraud, crime, abuse, false accusations, magical action), often with the additional request to redress the harm suffered by the author (e.g. by forcing a thief to return a stolen object, or to publicly confess guilt)".[4] The request for justice in such texts is described as been made not by forcing the gods but by pleading them, since the *defigentes* are convinced of having been wronged and being in the right. The texts of ancient curse tablets can be considered to all intents and purposes speech acts, for which the saying constitutes the doing.[5] In a ritual context, consisting of both verbal and non-verbal components, words create a new reality, and things are no longer the way they used to be. For it can be an important tool in analysing the curses, a growing number of studies has been lately devoted to the pragmatic analysis of *defixiones* and prayers for justice. Some typical textual features, which should distinguish prayers for justice as opposed to standard *defixiones,*[6] can be also analysed under a pragmatic respect, since they could activate politeness strategies.

The paper focuses on Greek and Latin curses containing committal verbs,[7] which are generally linked to the prayers for justice.[8] Its aim is to contribute to the ongoing

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[1] I would like to thank Francesca Murano for sharing with me observations on earlier drafts of this paper. I am also grateful to two anonymous reviewers for their most useful comments. Needless to say, all remaining errors are my own.

[2] Jordan, 1985a, p. 151.

[3] See Versnel, 1991, 2010, 2012. The insertion of prayers for justice within the taxonomy of curse tablets has been largely accepted and employed, but strongly criticised by German scholars, above all Dreher, 2012. See on the issue also Versnel, 2012; Chiarini, 2021; Sánchez-Natalías, 2022.

[4] Versnel, 2010, pp. 278-279.

[5] See Austin, 1962; Searle, 1989.

[6] See Versnel, 1991, p. 68.

[7] I borrow the label from Kropp, 2010, who uses the adjective 'committal' for naming the 'committal formula' by which the giving of someone or someone to supernatural powers is elicited.

[8] See Versnel, 2010, p. 330 and Stroud, 2013, p. 108 for further references.

debate on curse tablets by proposing a pragmatic account of Latin and Greek aggressive magic through the analysis of both directive speech acts and the strategies encoding deference or the asking for help. Since directives can vary according to the degree of mitigation of the act, in order not to threaten the negative face of the addressee,[9] and prayers for justice are expected to be uttered by pleading the god(s), it will be investigated if and to what extent politeness strategies are activated within the analysed texts. Moreover, the control of the *defigens* over the curse will be investigated by analysing both canonical performative utterances at the 1 per. sing. of the present indicative and the gradience of the force of directive speech acts, by which the addresser tries to induce the addressee to take a particular action. By focusing on directives, which constitute the core of the magic utterance and a fruitful instrument to explore the dynamics of identity expression and negotiation, it will be proposed that the curser keeps the control over the magic act independently from the type of curse texts and that the committing of the *defixus* or of a good to the god(s) does not necessarily entail the activation of politeness strategies.

2. *The language of magic. A state of the art*

Aggressive magic consisted of both *praxis* and *logos*, the manual rite being simultaneous or not to the graphic and acoustic uttering of the enchanting formula.[10] Curse tablets represent ritual speech events, which, in pragmatic terms, have two participants, namely the speaker, i.e., the *defigens*, and the god being addressed, who is identifiable as the addressee. The incantatory function is, in Jakobson's terms, "some kind of conversion of an absent or inanimate "third person" into an addressee of a conative message".[11] Within a magic act, words have the power to change reality.[12] That makes, under certain circumstances, a magic utterance a performative speech act.[13]

Magic formulas of ancient Greek and Latin curse tablets satisfy the features of performative speech acts,[14] namely:

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9   See Brown & Levinson, 1987.

10   For the most recent overview of the topic see Sánchez-Natalías, 2022, pp. 15-52 and cited bibliography.

11   Jakobson, 1960, p. 354.

12   See among others Tambiah, 1968; Todorov, 1973; Poccetti, 1991, 1995; Graf, 1997.

13   See Poccetti, 1991, 2005 [2008].

14   See Searle, 1989, p. 548.

1. *An extra-linguistic institution*. Magic is a field which specialises in time in Greek and Roman tradition.[15] Aggressive magic, in particular, is a private practice connected to the underworld: curse tablets are deposited in tombs, shrines, wells, fountains, and chthonic deities are usually invoked.

2. *A special position by the speaker, and sometimes by the hearer, within the institution*. The *defigens* curses one or more persons, in order to punish who has wronged him or her or to manage the social risk.[16] He or she can do that by himself or herself or with the help of professional figures such as magicians.

3. *A special convention that certain literal sentences of natural languages count as the performances of certain declarations within the institution*. The verbs employed in ritual utterances such as curses, which usually encode everyday actions like binding, depositing, writing, singing, acquire a performative meaning within the rite.[17]

4. *The intention by the speaker in the utterance of those sentences that his utterance has a declarational status, that it creates a fact corresponding to the propositional content*. The *defigens*, by uttering the curse, changes the reality, inasmuch as the cursed person is from that moment on bound or entrusted to the god(s).

Some attempts towards a pragmatic oriented description and classification of *defixiones* have been tried, both focusing on the illocutionary force of the speech act and on the verbs used. Faraone,[18] e.g., lists the cursing formulas according to the structure of the utterance and places them along a *continuum* going from a greater to a lesser control of the *defigens* over the action. Poccetti,[19] within a broader study on the magic hymn, describes the magic speech act of the *defixiones* by distinguishing between canonical performative speech acts, which constitute in themselves the act of what is uttered by creating the context of utterance, and jussive or desiderative speech acts, which do not provide any information about the magic utterer nor the context or the means.

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[15] See e.g. GRAF, 1997 and DICKIE, 2001 for magic in the ancient world.

[16] See FARAONE, 1991 and EIDINOW, 2007 respectively.

[17] See POCCETTI, 1991.

[18] FARAONE, 1991.

[19] POCCETTI, 1991.

It is overall hard to describe cursing formulas according to the *Speech Act Theory* taxonomy,[20] for it falls within the ordinary language and does not fit properly to magical language.[21] In this respect, Murano[22] has proposed for ancient aggressive magic to abandon the categories created for ordinary language and to adopt Benveniste's theory of enunciation,[23] which incorporates Austin's Speech Act Theory and Jakobson's theory on the polyfunctionality of language.[24] Moreover, direct and indirect speech acts should be considered as functionally equivalent in that they represent different syntactical and pragmatic strategies encoding conative utterances.

As for Latin curses, Kropp[25] reformulates Faraone's classification by focusing on the semantic of the verbs uttered during the spell and proposes the new category of *transformatives* to classify cursing formulas: such acts emphasize "the speaker's intention, which is to produce directly (or automatically, or without any intermediary) the transformation of the concrete extra-linguistic phenomena specified by the performative verb".[26] Urbanová and Cuzzolin[27] go back to Austin's categories and describe Latin magic curses as both *exercitive* in relation to the supernatural entity involved, compelled to act against somebody, and *behabitative* in relation to the addresses(s) of curses. Lately, Urbanová[28] has analysed a selection of the to-date known Latin curse tablets, which are listed as curses or prayers for justice according to some specific features. She has mapped the development of formal structures used to achieve the purpose of particular speech acts and combined the pragmatic-semantic perspectives by Faraone and Kropp with a syntactic one, making a distinction between simple nominal lists of cursed people, direct cursing formulas and invoking formulae of request and committal.

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[20]   Austin, 1962; Searle, 1969, 1975.

[21]   See Archer, 2010.

[22]   Murano, 2018.

[23]   Benveniste, 1966, 1974.

[24]   Jakobson, 1960, 1963.

[25]   Kropp, 2008, 2010.

[26]   Kropp, 2010, p. 378.

[27]   Urbanová & Cuzzolin, 2016.

[28]   Urbanová, 2018.

A pragmatic-oriented analysis of the cursing formulas seems in general to provide fruitful insights in the description of the *defixiones*. Ancient curse tablets convey an aggressive message, through which the magician violently binds the culprit to a punishment, also by obliging the god(s) to fulfil the malediction. Conversely, prayers for justice are expected to show a deferential tone in invoking the deity: under a pragmatic respect, one would therefore expect the formulas of the latter kind of curses to be morpho-syntactically and lexically marked by a higher degree of politeness than *defixiones*, and the *defigens*, or the magician, to have less control over the act. As most recently recalled by the collective work edited by Unceta Gómez and Berger,[29] research on (im)politeness in ancient languages has been in the last years and is nowadays a fruitful field of investigation.[30] My analysis draws on the theoretical framework proposed by Brown and Levinson.[31] Even though it has proven problematic under several respects — it does not provide as claimed, among other things, a universally valid model for the mechanism of politeness[32] — its insights are suitable to studying ancient languages and prove helpful for the analysis of politeness in aggressive magic utterances. According to Brown and Levinson, politeness can be defined as the effort to maintain face, i.e., the public self-image that one person wants to claim for himself. Orders and requests are acts which by their nature threaten the addressee's negative face, that is "the want of every 'competent adult member' [i.e. of a social context] that his actions be unimpeded by others".[33] By using negative politeness, which is oriented towards partially satisfying hearer's negative face, the speaker recognizes and respects it and "will not (or will only minimally) interfere with the addressee's freedom of action".[34] The texts of curse tablets have been therefore analysed in order to see if, when, and to what extent politeness strategies are activated and how they possibly interact with directive speech acts typical of *defixiones*.

3. *The selected corpus*

Committal verbs are exceptional within the spectrum of the verbs of Greek and Latin curse tablets, for they neither refer to an act of manipulation nor to an

29   Unceta Gómez & Berger, 2022.

30   See e.g. Culpeper & Kádár, 2010; Jucker & Kopaczyk, 2017; Redondo-Moyano, 2022.

31   Brown & Levinson, 1987.

32   See Culpeper, 2011 for further discussion and references on the issue.

33   Brown & Levinson, 1987, p. 62.

34   Brown & Levinson, 1987, p. 70.

illocutionary act: by using them the plaintiff hands over a good or a person to the god(s), who is or are now responsible for the punishment. Committal verbs are *mando* (and its compounds *demando*, *commando*, *commendo*), *dono*, παρα(κατα)τίθημι, παραδίδωμι, ἀνιερόω, ἀνιαρίζω, ἀνατίθημι. They have been tentatively described as legal or technical terms that shift responsibility for the binding to the divine sphere, although some of them, namely *dono*, ἀνιερόω, ἀνιαρίζω and ἀνατίθημι, are explicitly linked to the semantic field of religion, for they express the idea of 'dedicating' and 'consecrating' someone or something to a deity. Such verbs have been linked to the so-called prayers for justice[35] and they especially recur in one subset of the category, namely the curses against thieves. Prayers for justice can then be described as prayers sharing elements of (or allusions to) the legal or juridical language where the culprit has not fallen into a kind of holy slavery, but has rather been entrusted, committed to the god.

For the sake of the present analysis, a particular set of committal verbs has been selected, namely *mando* (and its compounds *demando*, *commando*, *commendo*), παρα(κατα)τίθημι and παραδίδωμι. The verbs have been chosen because they are not semantically linked to religion or magic. They have been selected when they occur at the 1 per. sing. of the present indicative, for the form is prototypical of performative speech acts and marks an event which is simultaneous with the utterance. Data have been extracted by searching the online database Thesaurus Defixionum (TheDefix)[36]: in total, the corpus consists of 94 curse tablets, 37 in Latin and 57 in Greek respectively.[37] The texts span from the 4th cent. BC to the 4th/5th cent. AD, the eldest being in Greek and coming from Macedonia (Pella), Attica and South Italy (Tiriolo) and the most recent in Latin, coming from Rome (Porta San Sebastiano). They have been found almost all over the Graeco-Roman ecumene. A large amount of curse tablets containing committal verbs have been found in the Athenian Agora, close to Porta San Sebastiano in Rome and in Hadrumetum; smaller groups come from Carthago, Rome (Porta Salaria?) and Mainz.

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[35]   See note 98.

[36]   https://www.thedefix.uni-hamburg.de, last consulted on 03/07/2024. The database was last updated on 29/08/2023 - I would like to thank Sara Chiarini for the information.

[37]   In our knowledge, 11 out of the 94 texts have been tentatively described as prayers for justice, namely DTM 1, DTM 2, DTM 6, DTM 11, *dfx*.2.1.3/3, *dfx*.2.2.1/1, *dfx*.2.2.4/1, *dfx*.3.22/34, *dfx*.5.1.3/1, Stroud 125, Stroud 126.

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4. *Analysis*

4.1. Directive speech acts

In prayers for justice the *defigens* commits the culprit or the suffered wrong to the deity, therefore, we expect him or her to have less control over the curse, and to use a deferent tone towards the god(s). Thus, the textual features listed by Versnel for prayers for justice such as the commitment to the god(s) and the supplicating behaviour of the curser (including the requests the act to be excused) are likely to be morphologically, syntactically and lexically encoded in order to activate polite-ness strategies "by non-imposing, non-intrusive negative or distancing behaviour".[38] If orders are expected to be uttered in curses, the addressee being obliged to fulfil them, requests and prayers should be preferred in prayers for justice, the fulfilling of the request depending upon the will of the addressee. In analysing Ṛg-vedic hymns, Ilieva[39] correctly pointed out that the main goal of the praying person is "to put the gods in a benevolent disposition during the ritual event and to relate certain wishes to them in the hope that they will be fulfilled, a goal which determines, first, the structural components of the hymn, and second, the rhetorical-linguistic features of the text".

The use of committal verbs in curse tablets indicates that the responsibility for the offence to be punished is shifted to the deities. Therefore, such texts are expected to contain performative utterances — the *defigens* committing the culprit to the deity or personally cursing the wronged person — and directives speech acts encoding the punishment the *defigens* wants the god(s) to fulfil. Directives are attempts by the speaker, in a very modest or a more compulsive way, to get the hearer to do some-thing. Accordingly, in analysing directives in ancient Greek, Denizot[40] distinguishes between orders, instructions or suggestions, and requests or prayers. Given that the requests are addressed to the god(s), their language is supposed to be marked by humility and deference. Since the force of directives and the strategies of mitigation are linked to the willing to mitigate or avoid face-threatening,[41] my analysis entailed logging all illocutionary acts at the 1 per. sing. of the present indicative which don't resort to committal verbs (§ 4.1.1), all directives (§ 4.1.2) and all the mitigation strat-

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38   ILIEVA, 2003, p. 173

39   ILIEVA, 2003, p. 172.

40   DENIZOT, 2011.

41   See BROWN & LEVINSON, 1987.

egies (flattering epithets, titles, requests that the act be excused, see § 4.2) in them, in order to underline their strategic use.

4.1.1. Illocutionary acts

In our corpus, verbs at the 1 per. sing. of the present indicative occur both in Greek and in Latin curse tablets. Their semantics is in most cases connected to the calling the deities for help (ὁρκίζω, ἐξορκίζω, ἀξιῶ), less to the binding (καταδῶ, ἐνδίδ[η]μι, καταδεσμεύω), the judicial registering (καταγράφω), the saying (κελεύω, λέγω), the pleading (δέομαι, ἐρωτῶ). Verbs connected to calling the deities for help often recur in Latin texts too (*adiuro*, *rogo*), but they are immediately followed verbs of giving or entrusting (*do*, *trado*, *depono*), while binding verbs such as *defigo* and *obligo* only occur in two tablets.

(1) Ὁρκίζο [ὑμᾶς ἅγι]ε Νυμφε εἴνα συνκατήσχητε (DT 156, Rome, 4th-5th cent. CE)

'I adjure you, sacred Nymphs, to help in holding down'

(2) καταδῶ αὐτοὺς [ἐγὼ] Ὀνησίμη· πάντας τούτους αὐτοὺ[ς] (DTA 100, Attica, 4th cent. BC)

'I Onesime bind all those'

(3) καταγράφω Θεόξενον [ἀ]πήγυτον [Πλούτω]νι (NGCT 23, Oropos, 2nd cent. BC) 'I bind Theoxenos the buttock-less to Pluto' (translation by Eidinow, 2007)

(4) *defigo illos quo pereant* (dfx.1.7.4/1, Cremona, 1st cent. AD)

'I accurse them so that they may die' (translation by Urbanová, 2018)

(5) *trado: Nicea, Cyrus, Nice, Porista, Demo, Asclepiades, Time, Ce, Philaia, Caletiche, Menotia* (*dfx*.1.4.4/15, Rome, 1st cent. AD)

'I deliver: Nicea, Cyrus, Nice, Porista, Demo, Asclepiades, Time, Ce, Phialaia, Caletiche, Menotia' (translation by Urbanová, 2018)

(6) *numen demando, devoveo, desacrifico, uti vos Aquae ferventes, sive vos Nymꝭphae, sive quo alio nomine vultis appellari, uti vos eum interimatis, interficiatis intra annum istum* (*dfx*.1.1.1/1, Arezzo, 2nd cent. AD)

'I commend, devote, and sacrifice to your power [Quintus Letinius Lupus], may you, boiling Waters, or you, the Nymphs, or whatever other name you want to be called, destroy him, and kill him in this year' (translation by Urbanová, 2018)

Clusters of two or three verbs at the 1 per. sing. of the present indicative some-times occur in both Greek and Latin curse tablets, word repetition being a strate-gy of illocutionary intensification in curse tablets.[42] The clusters are: *trado, man-do;*[43] *demando, devoveo, desacrifico;*[44] *adiuro [...] et demando;*[45] *mando (et) rogo;*[46] καταγράφω καὶ (παρα)(κατα)τίθεμαι.[47]

4.1.2 Directives

In the collected texts, directivity is encoded by means of verbs in the imperative, the subjunctive, and the optative. Imperative is the most common directive strategy, even if the relation between the addresser and the addressee is asymmetrical from low to high.[48] Imperatives occur at the 2 per. sing. or plur., the addressee being the deity:

(7) δῆσον, κατάστρεψον [— — c.7 — — τὴν] ἰσχύν, τὴν δύναμιν — c.3 - c.3 — [— — c.9 — — τὰ] ἄρθρα, ἀφάνισον (SGD 38, Athens, ca. 250 AD)

 'bind, ruin … the force, the strength … destroy the limbs'

(8 ἄξον, κατάδησον Ματρώναν (SEG 38, 1837, Oxyrhynchos, 3rd-4th cent. AD)

 'carry (as a captive), bind Matrona'

(9) *mi(hi) fac tuto numini ma(i)estati exsemplaria, ut tu evide(s) immedio qui fecit* (*dfx*.2.2.2/1, Bolonia,1st-2nd cent. AD)

 'Make me proofs of your divinity and majesty, so that you publicly take away the life of the man who did (this theft)'

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[42] See Urbanová, 2019.

[43] *dfx*.1.4.4/9, *dfx*.1.4.4/10, *dfx*.1.4.4/11, *dfx*.1.4.4/12, all *defixiones* from Rome, Porta Salaria.

[44] *dfx*.1.1.1/1 from Arezzo.

[45] *dfx*.11.2.1/22, *dfx*.11.2.1/27, *dfx*.11.2.1/28, *dfx*.11.2.1/29, *dfx*.11.2.1/30, *dfx*.11.2.1/40 from Hadrumetum.

[46] *dfx*.1.5.2/1from Capua, *DTM* 10 and *DTM* 11 from Mainz.

[47] *SEG* 47.510 from Oropos, *SEG* 30, 326 from Athens.

[48] The same has been observed in the opposite situation by Dickey for letters on papyrus: "re-gardless of the identity of the addressee or the magnitude of the request, speakers' normal ten-dency is to use the bare, unsoftened imperative" (Dickey, 2016, p. 239). For the widespread use of the imperative for encoding directives see also Aikhenvald, 2010; Risselada, 1993; Denizot, 2011; Bruno, 2020.

(10) *Per Matrem Deum intra dies C(?) cito, vindicate numen vestrum magnum* (*dfx*.5.1.3/1, Groß Gerau, 1st-2nd cent. AD)

'By means of the Mother of the Gods in a hundred days, quickly, avenge your great divinity'

All the occurrences encode an order whose urgency is underlined by clusters of imperatives (7, 8) or collocations (*cito*, 10).

By using imperatives at the 3 per. sing. the practitioner moves the focus on the victim. The forms only occur in Greek curse tablets found in Athenian Agora (3rd-cent. AD):

(11) [ψυ]γήτ[ω] Ε[ὐ]τυχιανὸς καὶ μὴ εὐτονείτ[ω] [ἐν] τῇ μελλούσῃ παρασκιυῇ, ἀλλὰ γενέ[σθω] ἔγλυτος (SGD 25, Athens, ca. 250 AD)

'Let Eutychianos be chilled and do not let him have power, but let him become weak'

In (11) repetition is used with 3 per. sing. imperative forms to increase the force of the curse. The 3 per. sing. imperatives all occur at the passive voice, the focus being on the *defixus*, not on the addressee. This serves politeness ends, since such way of uttering an order can be interpreted as a less coercive directive.[49]

Directives are also encoded at the 2 per. sing. or plur. of the subjunctive, the addressee being the deity:

(12) δῇς ις τὸν τῆς λήθης ἀφώτιστον αἰῶνα καὶ καταψύξῃς καὶ ἀπολέσῃς καὶ τὴν πάλην (SEG 35, 213, Athens, ca. 250 AD)[50]

'Plunge (him) into the dark destiny of forgetfulness and chill and destroy (him) also in the battle'

(13) *eripias salu[tem], corp[us], colorem, uires, uirtutes Au[on]ia[e]. T[r]adas Plutoni uiro tuo* (*dfx*.1.4.4/9, Rome, 1st cent. BC)

'Snatch away the health, the body, the complexion, the strength, the virtues of Avonia. Hand (her) over to Pluto, your husband'

(14) *premas depremas hocidas quinto depremas nervia illi concidas neque spiritum abeant* (*dfx*.11.2.1/40, Hadrumetum, 3rd cent. AD)

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[49] See Tronci, 2022, pp. 199-200.

[50] The formula is attested, in more or less complicated patterns, in many *defixiones* from Attica edited by Jordan 1985b.

'weigh (them) down, oppress (them), kill (them) in the fifth (round), oppress their nerves, destroy them so that they don't have the breath of life'

The second person subjunctive (the so-called 'jussive subjunctive') is generally described as equivalent to the imperative: it elicits a fully-fledged directive expression form, even though it is relatively more prevalent in prohibition[51] and generally not used in independent directives. Conversely, in curse tablets it can be used even if it does not encode a prohibition. Clusters of subjunctives (12, 14) again contribute to foster directivity.

Verbs at the 3 per. sing. are also employed in the subjunctive mood in independent clauses, though in Latin only:

(15) *[Ni possit cogitati]onibus s[ueis hoc] quicqui[d] uit[are [...] [Male perdat, male e]xs[eat], male disperd[at* (*dfx*.1.4.4/9, Rome, I cent. BC).

'May he not be able to escape this (curse) with his thoughts. May he perish badly, may he depart badly, may he die badly'

Such uses of the subjunctive, which do not directly oblige the god(s) to fulfil a command, instead shifting the focus on the culprit, seem to act as politeness strategies.

Committal verbs are in most cases immediately followed by the statement of the aim of the committal, expressed either as a simple infinitive or as a final utterance in the subjunctive at the 2 per. or 3 per.:

(16) παραδίδωμι τοῖς καταχθονίοις θεοῖς τοῦτο τὸ ἡρῷον φυλάσσειν (IG II² 13209, IG II2 13210, Attica, mid 2nd cent. AD; IC II xvi 28, Crete, mid 2nd cent. AD)

'I hand over to the underworld gods the shrine so that they guard it'

(17) παραδίδωμί σοι Φιλοστράταν ἣν ἔτε(κεν) Γοργιππία ἵνα αὐτῆς καταψύξῃς πᾶν αὐτῆς τὸ πνεῦμα τὴν ζωὴν τὴν δυνάμιν τῇ ἰσχὺν […] (SGD 22, Athens, ca. 250 AD)

'I hand over to you Filostrata born from Gorgippia so that you chill her whole breath and life and power and strength'

(18) παραθίτομα[ι] καὶ καταθί[το]μα[ι] Καρπίμην Βαβίαν στεφανηπλόκον Μοίραις Πραξιδίκαις ὅπως ἐγδεικ[ήσ]ωσι τὰς ὕβρ{ι}εις (Stroud 125-126, Acrocorinth, Roman period)

'I entrust and consign Karpime Babbia, weaver of garlands, to the Fates who exact justice, so that they may punish her acts of insolence' (translation by Stroud, 2013)

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51   Risselada, 1993; Denizot, 2011.

(19) *rogo, domina, per maiestate(m) tua(m), ut (h)oc fortu(m) reprindas* (*dfx*.2.2.1/1, Bolonia, 2nd cent. AD)

'I ask you, Lady, by your majesty, that you punish this theft'

(20) *Dite Pater Rhodine(m) tibi commendo uti semper odio sit M(arco) Licinio Fausto* (*dfx*.1.4.4/3, 1st cent. BC)

'Father Dis, I commend to you Rhodine so that she may be always hated by Marcus Licinius Faustus'

In (19) the subjunctive is governed by *rogo*, which is likely to convey a supplicating behaviour. The use of the 3 per. acts differently in (18) and (20), for only in the latter occurrence it refers to the *defixus*, this resulting in the activation of politeness strategies. Even though they are not encoded in a canonical form, the constructions with the dependent subjunctive or the infinitive seem to encode orders whose force is the same as that of directive speech acts at the 2 per. of the subjunctive in independent clauses.

Optatives are rarely used to encode directives, either at the 2 per. plur. or at the 3 per. sing.:

(21) κακοὺς καὶ μελέους δέξαισθε αὐτοὺς πάντας (NGCT 23, Oropos, 3rd-2nd cent. BC)

'May you accept all of them who are bad and miserable'

(22) καὶ τὸ σῶμα [κα]ὶ [αἱ σ]άρκες καὶ τὰ νεῦρα καὶ τὰ ὀστᾶ καὶ τὰ μέλη καταψύγοιτο (SGD 38, Athens, ca. 250 AD)

'May the body and flesh and nerves and bones and limbs be chilled'

By using the optative, the speaker expresses his wish, this making the injunction indirect and activating politeness strategies. Moreover, the use of the 3 per. sing. shifts once again the focus on the victim, this realizing politeness strategies since the gods are not overtly called to do something.

To sum up, as regards independent clauses, the resorting to imperatives and subjunctives at the 2 per. sing. makes explicit the *defigens*' intentions to the god(s). The optative at the 2 per. sing. is rarely used[52]: this shows that hearer-oriented

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[52] It only recurs in four texts, three of which belong to the group of course tablets found in the Athenian Agora and edited by Jordan, 2022. The scholar claims that such forms are subjunctives, as they are the "scribe's inconsistent efforts to improve on the model, which, as texts from wells IV, V, and VII show, had subjunctives of positive command" (Jordan, 2022, p. 142).

terms are overall chosen in order to make a command evident to the god(s) and that face-threatening acts are normally not avoided. Conversely, directives at the 3 per. sing., which work as a device to save the negative face of the hearer by encoding indirect orders, occur less frequently. Such strategies, known as hedged performatives, express the *defigens*' "awareness of the status difference between him and the god invoked, insofar as he gives his request a non-peremptory character and, at the same time, qualifies his own position as dependent and inferior"[53]. As regards dependent clauses, on the other hand, it has been shown that directivity in curse tablets can also be encoded by means of final utterances, in the infinitive (16) or the subjunctive (17, 18, 19, 20), governed by committal verbs. Even though these are indirect strategies to encode orders, their force doesn't seem less threatening than that of independent clauses in the subjunctive.

4.2. Syntagmatic strategies[54]

Politeness can be also encoded by means of syntagmatic strategies, i.e. by employing allocutives by which the *defigens* shows respect and deference towards the addressee or by resorting to acts such as requesting the aid of the god(s) or apologizing for doing a face-threatening act such as uttering orders. This is in line with some of the formal features listed by Versnel as typical of the prayer for justice, namely: the principal requests that the act be excused or that he be spared the possible adverse effects; the gods, either because of their superior character, or as an emollient gesture, may be awarded a flattering epithet or a superior title; words expressing supplication are employed as well as direct, personal invocations of the deity; terms and names referring to (in)justice and punishment.

If no requests that the act be excused or that the *defigens* be spared the possible adverse effects have been found scattered among the texts, the remaining strategies are employed. The resorting to verbs meaning 'I beg you', 'I ask you' works as a mechanism of alleviation of orders (see also 19):

(23) ἱκέτις ὑμῶ<ν> γίνο[μαι (SEG 43, 434, Pella, ca. 380-350 BC)
    'I beg you'

(24) ἱκετεύω ὑμᾶς τηρ(ε)ῖν ταῦτα (DTA 100, Athens, ca. 360-330 BC)
    'I beg you to take care of these things'

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53   Kropp, 2010, p. 366.

54   I borrow the label from Tronci, 2022.

(25) *Mando et rogo, liberta Cerialis ut ea ext[r]a IPIVTI (ipsam?) fac[i]atis, ut se plangat* (DTM 10, Mainz, 1st-2nd cent. AD)

'I commend [to you] and ask that you make the freedwoman of Cerialis out of her mind, may she hurt herself' (translation by Urbanová, 2018)

Even though supplication formulas can be described as alleviating devices, they are not peculiar of prayers for justice, since verbs like *rogo*, *adiuro* and δέομαι and lexemes expressing the supplication occur in *defixiones* whose aim is to win in an agonistic context, be it athletic, legal or erotic. See the following examples:

(26) *Rogo Mane(s et Di?) inferi, ut (Ma)rius Fronto, (adv)ersariu(s) Sex(ti), sit vanus neque loqui possit contra Sextum* (*dfx*.5.1.2/1, Germania superior, 2nd cent. AD)

'I ask [you], Manes and the infernal gods, may Marius Fronto, the enemy of Sextus, be unsuccessful, may he be unable to speak against Sextus' (translation by Urbanová, 2018)

(27) Adiuro... per magnum deum... ut, ex qua hora hoc composuero, non dormiat Sextilius (Dfx.11.2.1/8, Hadrumetum, 2nd cent. AD)

'I adjure... the great god... from the moment I put this tablet [into the grave], may Sextilius... not sleep' (translation by Urbanová, 2018)

(28) δέομαί σου, κάτω Ἑρμῆ κάτοχε, Ἑρμῆ, σοῦ καὶ οἱ πολλοὶ παραιτηταὶ δὲ ἀνεικόνοι Τελχῖνες. Δῶρον τὸ πέμπω παιδίσκην ἰκνουμένην Πρῖμαν. Ἐρωτῶ ·παιδίσκην καλὴν δωροῦμαί σοι καλὸν (SEG 34, 952, Lilybaion, 2nd-1st cent. BC)

'I beseech you, O Hermes Binder, Hermes, you and the many intercessors, and the Telchines who cannot be depicted. I send as a gift the maiden Prima who is fitting. I ask: I give you as a nice (gift) the beautiful maiden'

In our corpus, terms and names explicitly referring to (in)justice and punishment appear in some Greek tablets and in one Latin *defixio* from Groß Gerau, Mainz. They are used as mitigation strategies in order not to threaten the gods' negative face: if the *defigens* states the reason of his or her anger, he or she somehow softens the force of the directive speech act:

(29) κύριε Τυφὼς ἐκδίκησον >(?) ἣν ἔτεκεν (Hesperia 6 (1937) 383, Athens, 1st cent. AD)

'Lord Typhos, punish her who gave birth'

(30) ὑμῖν παραθί[θομ]ε τοῦτον τὸν δυσεβὴν καὶ ἄνομ[ον] καὶ ἐπικατάρατον Κάρδηλον (DT 155, Rome, 4th-5th cent. AD)

'I give to you this impious and lawless and accursed Cardelos'

(31) *commendo deabus iniurium fas ut me vindic(e)tis* (*dfx*.5.1.3/1, Germania superior, 1st-2nd cent. AD)

'I commit to the goddesses the injust fas (fate? destiny?), so that you take vengeance for me'

Under a lexical perspective, epithets and flattering adjectives in calling the deities occur either in Greek and in Latin tablets, see, e.g., κρατα[ιὲ] Τυφὼς (Hesperia 6 (1937) 383, Athens, 1st cent. AD) 'powerful Typhos'; ἄναξ Απομξ Φριουριγξ (SEG 35, 216, Athens, ca 250 AD) 'Lord Apomx Phriurinx'; δαίμονες φίλ[ο]ι (SEG 43, 434, Pella, 380-350 BC) 'dear demons'; *[B]ona pu[lchra P]roserpina* (*dfx*.1.4.4/9, Rome, 1st cent. BC) 'Good Proserpina'[55]; *sancta Mater Magn[a]* (DTM 5, Mainz, 1st-2nd cent. AD) 'sacred Mater Magna'.

Such strategies can be used as a positive politeness device in order to convey deference or as a persuasive strategy towards the god(s). Explicitly laudatory terms of address seem to act as alleviating devices more in Latin (29 tablets out of 37) than in Greek curse tablets (30 out of 57 *defixiones*)[56].

5. *Conclusion*

In curse tablets containing committal verbs the curser seems to keep control over the action. This seems to be well elicited by using verbs at the 1 per. sing., together with the resorting to directives at the imperative, subjunctive and optative, by which the speaker makes explicit his intentions to the addressee in either a direct or an indirect way. Under a semantic respect, the verb *mando* itself, together with its compounds, acquires in time a directive meaning, as Unceta Gómez[57] has shown. Such linguistic strategies have been analysed, together with the encoding of deference by means of epithets or mitigation formulae, in order to shed light on the possible politeness strategies used by the utterer towards the god(s). It has been shown that

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[55]   See on this EHMIG, 2015.

[56]   Twenty-eight Greek curse tablets are part of a group of *defixiones* found in two wells, namely IV and V, in the Athenian Agora, which seem to have been composed by following more or less the same general model (JORDAN, 1985b, 2022).

[57]   UNCETA GÓMEZ, 2012.

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directives are widely employed even though the *defigens*, a human, talks to a deity. All the strategies observed entail modulation of the illocutionary force of the utterance by morpho-syntactic strategies which involve, e.g., the modal inflection of the verb or the resorting to variations in the grammatical person, but the *defigens* keeps the control over the action. Mitigation formulae encoding respect, deference or supplication can cooperate in activating politeness strategies, but are rarely employed. The pragmatic evidence suggests that curse tablets containing committal verbs are overall as coercive as standard *defixiones*, the authority of the curse remaining on the *defigens*, who, in fact, curses an enemy or someone who wronged him or her, although previously entrusted to the god(s), in the same mandatory way as in regular *defixiones*. Even though different strategies of coercion are employed, the force of the magic utterance remains binding, i.e. it obliges the world to change into what's been uttered. The *defigens* is in a dominant position and by uttering directive speech acts obliges the deity to fulfil his or her desires. Even though politeness strategies can be activated, the force of the illocutionary act is not weakened. The co-text is in fact crucial in determining the degree of directiveness of the utterance, as proposed by Bruno[58] for documentary papyri of the Early Ptolemaic period. This means that aggressive magic is binding, independently from the linguistic strategies the curser resorts to, and that the illocutionary force of directive speech acts remains the same even though a deferent tone may be used by the curser.

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