

Politeness Stylistation in Neo-Victorian Play-by-Post Forum Games

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Abstract. This study examines politeness as a means of character speech stylistation in Neo-Victorian play-by-post role-playing games, which serve as a fusion of creative writing and social simulation. Players adopt Victorian-era discourse strategies, integrating their perceptions of historical politeness with their contemporary linguistic behaviour. Using a corpus of over 36,000 words of character lines from Victorian-themed role-playing forums compared against 19th-century plays, this study focuses on the recurring politeness markers such as hedges, deference and endearment address forms, positive vocabulary, and modal verbs in both samples. While authentic Victorian discourse often features concise or ironic politeness moves, Neo-Victorian players tend to use politeness markers more densely. By applying a cognitive-pragmatic approach, the study reveals that these politeness moves function as construal-enriching operations, serving as a conversation engine in both the authentic Victorian plays and the Neo-Victorian play-by-post creative writing games. The findings highlight the dynamic interplay between historical stylistation and politeness as a conversation-building discourse practice.

Keywords: politeness; Neo-Victorian; play-by-post role-playing games; cognitive pragmatics; speech stylistation.

Introduction

Play-by-post role-playing games (RPGs) are online, text-based RPGs in which players collaboratively build a narrative through forum posts, inventing or impersonating characters and interacting with one another. This genre is a fusion of game and creative writing, as

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players can shape their characters' paths and influence other characters' choices. Such web-based collaborative composing results in the emergence of online communities, which share an interest in creative writing and a certain thematic subject, often being fandoms (Alley, King, 2018). One such community is the Neo-Victorian RPGs, in which players develop characters that replicate the society of Victorian England. Neo-Victorianism as an aesthetic movement is marked by the reinterpretation of the Victorian Era (Hadley, 2010), including gender roles and stereotypes (Palmer, Poore, 2016; Barros, 2023; Smith, 2013). Online collaborative spaces offer opportunities to practice postmodern ludic meaning-making (Schallegger, 2018). The players use this environment to act as if they are members of Victorian society and employ stylisation means to make their speech authentic.

Politeness was a hallmark of Victorian discourse, with the ideology of gentrification reigning over the society and regulating the upper class's linguistic behaviour (Watts, 2011, pp. 117–118). The concepts of grace and decorum were also reflected in literary works that either propagated or parodied these values (Watts, 2011, p. 121), thereby reinforcing the upper-class members' discourse as highly stereotypical (Morozova, 2016). In turn, the role-playing game participants' knowledge of the Victorian communication style is most likely nurtured by works of fiction. Their stylisation will therefore include the politeness strategies they view as typical of Victorian society.

The study aims to explore the stylisation of politeness that modern English speakers use in Victorian-themed online play-by-post role-playing games. The objectives are to establish the politeness inventory that players use in neo-Victorian roleplays compared to original Victorian plays, and to explore modern perceptions of Victorian discourse and speech norms, as well as the evolution of politeness.

1. Material and corpus design

For this study, we extracted direct speech (character lines without scene descriptions) from RPG forums set in Victorian London, namely *Absinthe* and *Beyond the Thames*, using continuous sampling. The resulting RPG corpus contains over 1277-character lines (36439 words), with 709 lines from the *Absinthe* forum community¹ and 568 lines from *Beyond the Thames*². We collected information on users' gender, the gender of the character played, age, and class from the character cards; the corpus was created in January–February 2024. No other potentially de-anonymising information on the users was either available or collected. The native or non-native speaker of English status of the players was not considered a factor in this study, with the language competencies of all users playing the play-by-post RPGs being at least native-like.

In turn, our reference corpus is compiled from eight authentic Victorian plays, totalling 2021-character lines (36818 words). It is comprised of 205 lines from *The Gay Lord Quex* by Arthur Wing Pinero (1899, comedy), 226 lines from *Mrs Warren's Profession*

¹ <https://absinthe.jcink.net>

² <https://beyondthethames.jcink.net>

by George Bernard Shaw (1894, problem play), 301 lines from *The Importance of Being Earnest* by Oscar Wilde (1895, comedy), 364 lines from *Caste* by Thomas William Robertson (1867, comedy), 99 lines from *Two Roses* by James Albery (1870, comedy), 166 lines from *Money* by Edward Bulwer-Lytton (1840, comedy), 315 lines *London Assurance* by Dion Boucicault and John Brougham (1841, comedy), and 345 lines from *Lady Audley's Secret* by Colin Henry Hazlewood (1863, comedy). In selecting the plays for the reference corpus, we focused on well-known “classical” authors working in that period and depicting everyday life scenes and common interactions of Victorian people to better match the contents of the RPG corpus. The character lines were counted based on turns in a conversation, both in RPG and plays.

The aesthetic of Victorian-themed play-by-post forum games draws on the nostalgic environments of the Victorian period, mapped as forum threads (e.g., Piccadilly, the New Royalty Theatre, West India Docks, the Royal Exchange, Victoria Park, the London Zoo, etc.). Beyond the Thames is set in 1872, and Absinthe is set in 1881. In both forum games, each location offers some interaction patterns logically available to the players, facilitating the plot and scaffolding characters' interactions. These spaces also represent Victorian urban London and the height of the Empire's splendour, for which the Neo-Victorian aesthetic nurtures nostalgic feelings. Characters can navigate this Victorian London and immerse themselves in the atmosphere they create collaboratively, feeling as if they are interacting with actual Victorians.

The Absinthe website provides the following description of the game environment,

It's 1881 and the class divide has never been clearer. The working poor live in squalor. Crime is rampant, and social reform for the masses is on the rise. Meanwhile, the gilded lives of the upper echelons has become an idealistic fairytale. Join us as we step back in time to when the British Empire built the foundation for the modern world. Through urbanization, industrialization, and social reform, we explore the relationships of the people of the era, and how their daily lives mirror our own.

One distinct game-building principle is the simulation of social hierarchy and the resulting socioscape, which blends Victorian social rules with modern approaches to character interaction. The players build relationships through which they explore their fictional characters, adding depth as long as other players' choices influence theirs.

The primary focus of Neo-Victorian play-by-post games is creative writing in a ludic collaborative set-up. The forum rules usually require players to produce their best writing and to research the epoch and the characters to create a believable environment. Such encouragement of research into the simulated epoch prompts players to stylise their speech to reflect their perceived Victorian discourse norms.

2. Approach to historical politeness

Following in the Gricean theory of communication maxims, politeness is traditionally regarded as a way of minimising the tension of social interactions (Watts, 2011, p. 106). Brown and Levinson (1987, p. 65) note that some acts are, by default, face-threatening because they oppose the universal wants of the communicants. In social interactions, discursive agents aim to maintain their own as well as each other's social faces to make communication effective in satisfying their respective needs (Brown, Levinson, 1987, p. 60). The negative face requires being unimpeded, and the positive face dictates seeking social approval (Brown, Levinson, 1987, p. 58). Acts that threaten negative face include all interferences with the addressee's actions and future: requests, instructions, and suggestions; offers and promises; and expressions of strong emotions towards the addressee or their possessions. In turn, positive face is threatened by the lack of care for the addressee's wants and needs, such as criticism, irrelevance, boasting, and non-cooperation (Brown, Levinson, 1987, p. 65).

This view of politeness as a strategy aimed at mitigating tension has been pervasive in pragmatic theories of politeness, with Lakoff (1977, p. 103) stating that "the rules of politeness are designed to get people through cooperative transactions with a minimal amount of wasted effort, or friction". Viewing politeness as a frame of interaction that eases communication, as an automatically taken, conventionally accepted stance, prompts us to approach it from a cognitive perspective.

In addition to mitigating face-threatening acts, politeness in both Victorian and Neo-Victorian discourse often operates through indirect speech acts. Requests, refusals, criticisms, or compliments are often expressed indirectly, through hedged statements or generalised observations rather than bald imperatives. In the present analysis, we therefore consider not only the formal inventory of politeness markers, but also how these markers participate in the realisation of indirect speech acts in the two corpora.

Cognitively-gearred approaches to pragmatic aspects of discourse emphasise the cognitive aspects of pragmatic choices, i.e., the relevance of cognitive linguistics' tools and concepts in understanding the pragmatics of discourse (Wilson, Carston, 2019; Shevchenko, Gutorov, 2019). The cognitive pragmatics approach focuses the analysis on cognitive-intentional and social-cultural aspects of discourse (Shevchenko et al., 2021) and envisages a cognitive model of the concepts of politeness and impoliteness (Shevchenko et al., 2021; Watts, 2011).

Watts (2011, p. 105) regards politeness as "an extraordinarily complex, constantly fluctuating and ultimately unstable cognitive concept that we make use of and frequently adapt and transform when involved in emergent social practice". If interaction contexts can be regarded as frames and long-term schematic knowledge packages, then politeness fits into this scheme as a characteristic of the stance the speaker believes is prescribed by the conventional context.

Politeness is a social construct, shaped by the interaction's social context, its hierarchy and power dynamics, social and cultural norms, and intersubjective dynamics. It is hence reasonable to approach politeness from the cognitive-pragmatic perspective and analyse

the use of politeness markers as a consequence of the speakers' knowledge and perceptions of the Victorian discourse, as well as their general linguistic competencies. In this study, the aim is to define the markers of politeness that players use to replicate the discourse of this period.

In order to compare the means of construing the polite stance in the two samples, we analyse five groups of politeness resources:

- (i) forms of address (e.g. *Sir*; *dear*);
- (ii) apology and gratitude markers (e.g. *thank you*, *excuse me*);
- (iii) hedges (including verbs (e.g. *think*, *guess*), adverbs (e.g. *maybe*, *perhaps*), and tag questions);
- (iv) modal verbs (including their hedging and deontic functions);
- (v) positive lexis and intensifiers (e.g. *great*, *lovely*).

The two samples, the RPGs' direct speech lines and authentic Victorian plays, were lemmatised and loaded into the AntConc corpus analysis software (Anthony, 2024). The markers of politeness (see the full lists of markers we controlled for in this study in the corresponding discussion sections) in these two samples were then calculated and compared to identify statistically significant verbalised markers from both periods.

3. Polite forms as a means of Neo-Victorian stylisation in forum games

3.1 Forms of address: deference vs endearment

The first marker of politeness that shows a drastic statistical difference is the address forms used in the Victorian plays compared to those in the Neo-Victorian game players' lines.

Table 1. Address forms frequencies in the RPGs sample vs the authentic Victorian plays

Item	Occurrences in the RPGs sample	Occurrences in the reference sample	Confidence interval
<i>dear</i> ; <i>dearest</i> ; <i>fellow</i> ; <i>friend</i> ; <i>love</i> ; <i>mom</i> ; <i>dad</i> ; <i>mother</i> ; <i>father</i> ; <i>aunt</i> ; <i>uncle</i> ; <i>girls</i> ; <i>boys</i>	34	73	[-0.001602, -0.0004976]
<i>madam</i> ; <i>ma'am</i> ; <i>miss</i> ; <i>missy</i> ; <i>lady</i> ; <i>sir</i> ; <i>Dr</i> ; <i>Professor</i> ; <i>your honour</i> ; <i>officer</i> ; <i>Mr</i> ; <i>Mrs</i> ; <i>Reverend</i> ; <i>Colonel</i> ; <i>Father</i>	147	564	[-0.01270, -0.009871]

Both the forms of address that highlight that the speaker and the hearer are close, such as relative names (e.g. *mother*; *father*) and nouns denoting endearment or friendship (e.g. *dear*; *friend*; *love*), and deference terms (e.g. *madam*; *sir*; *miss*; *Reverend*) are more frequent in the reference corpus of Victorian plays rather than in the forum RPG interactions.

Only *dear* occurs as frequently as 133 times in the plays sample, while we see it only 26 times in the RPGs posts sample, which reflects the inclination of the contemporary players to use it, but not as eagerly as the Victorian playwrights expected their characters to.

- (1) *My dear fellow, the truth isn't quite the sort of thing one tells to a nice, sweet, refined girl. What extraordinary ideas you have about the way to behave to a woman!* (Wilde, 1895)

This strategy is considered to be “positive politeness” according to Brown and Levinson’s theory, and another tendency revealed is for the contemporary players to associate this positive politeness with the working-class discourse rather than the upper-class style:

- (2) *Hmm, well do not stress too much, love. We must have you at your best, always.* (*Beyond the Thames*)
- (3) *You and I share a streak there, my friend. My Ma's parents disowned her when they found she'd married my Da.* (*Absinthe*)

Endearment terms such as “*dear*” or “*love*” may co-occur with advice or even criticism, so that a potentially face-threatening act is framed as a solidarity-inspired move. From the point of view of speech act theory, these address forms contribute to the indirect realisation of warnings and reprimands by foregrounding care, a hallmark of positive politeness. For example, in (2), the endearment address form “*love*” softens the command or even criticism (*do not stress too much*), reframing it as warm advice.

Equally, *sir* is used 138 times in the plays sample and 17 times in the RPGs corpus. Interestingly, the deference terms are mostly used by players as a pure marker of politeness after an utterance, usually set off with a comma:

- (4) *I'm sorry to disturb you, sir, but I was looking for Mr. Langlois. Is he here?* (*Absinthe*)

In the original Victorian plays, however, these deference terms are also used with names (e.g., Sir Harcourt, Sir Michael), which contemporary players do not use as often in their stylisation efforts.

As Watts (2011, p. 108) points out, language use is grounded in other, more fundamental cognitive mechanisms. In particular, cognitive scientists use the term “construal” to refer to different ways of conceptualising a situation using linguistic prompts (Langacker, 2015). Construal operations allow for the instrumentalisation of knowledge of cognitive processes and their application to linguistic data with socially relevant implications, thereby revealing the ideology emerging in discourse (Hart, 2014). According to Langacker (2008; 2015), the aspects of construal are selection, prominence, perspective, dynamicity, and imagination.

From the cognitive point of view, the use of in-group markers (e.g. *friend, fellow, love, mother, father*) may be considered a construal operation of zooming in on the immediate scope (terms suggested by Langacker (2015) for construal operations), taking a position closer to the addressee, within their circle or family. In turn, the use of deference terms that are universal and non-selective (e.g. *sir, madame*) would broaden the immediate scope, not stepping into the addressee’s boundaries.

3.2 Apology and gratitude markers

An adjacent group of distancing/approaching means are apology and gratitude markers, which constitute expressive speech acts that repair or pre-empt offence (Brown, Levinson, 1987). Their distribution is generally equal in both samples. However, the specific means chosen are different: “*excuse, pardon, and obliged*” are more typical of the original Victorian plays, while the Neo-Victorian players overlook these lexical choices in their stylisation of Victorian speech and use more modern means (*sorry, please, thank*):

- (5) *I'm so sorry... that does sound difficult. ... I suppose it is impossible to give up, huh?*
(*Beyond the Thames*)

Table 2. Apology and gratitude markers in the RPGs sample vs the authentic Victorian plays

Item	Occurrences in RPGs sample	Occurrences in the reference sample
<i>excuse</i>	3	10
<i>sorry</i>	13	3
<i>pardon</i>	5	19
<i>please</i>	19	6
<i>thank</i>	42	25
<i>obliged</i>	1	8
Total	83	71

Overall, RPG players demonstrate the influence of modern politeness norms, which they map onto their perceptions of Victorian values.

3.3 Hedges

Hedges (markers of subjectivity such as “*I think*”, adverbs of probability, and tag questions) are considered politeness markers in that they weaken and soften the speaker’s claim. Hedges are classified as negative politeness by Brown and Levinson (1987, p. 145). Hedges such as “*I think*” or “*maybe*” frequently convert what could be a direct assertion or disagreement into an indirect suggestion, allowing speakers to perform potentially face-threatening acts under the guise of a subjective opinion.

Table 3. Hedges in the RPGs sample vs the authentic Victorian plays

Item	Occurrences in the RPGs sample	Occurrences in the reference sample
<i>maybe, perhaps, probably, possibly</i>	94	25
<i>guess, think, suppose, believe, reckon</i>	128	63
tag questions	21	11
Total	243	99

There are significantly more hedges in the RPGs sample than in the original Victorian plays. This finding illustrates that the general contemporary understanding of politeness is geared towards negative politeness (Shevchenko, Matiukhina, Drazdauskienė, 2021).

For example, RPG players resort to softening the claim and making it sound more subjective and less committed, making the speaker's stance less assertive:

(6) ... *he wished for this to be sort of a surprise, **I believe**. The painting itself. (Absinthe)*

Similarly, hedges serve the characters in the plays for minimising the self-assurance of their claims, especially the risky ones or the ones that give opinions directly concerning the interlocutor:

(7) *Now you're clever, Bark, a little too clever, **I think**. You're paying your devoirs – that's the correct word, **I think** (Robertson, 1867)*

This softening strategy demonstrates social tact, reducing potential interpersonal friction. In addition, repeating “*I think*” adds rhetorical tentativeness, distancing the speaker from strong criticism.

A strategy opposite to subjectification would be to make the claim impersonal (e.g., *one should; it is recommended*). The frequency of this strategy is slightly higher for our sample of plays (20 occurrences against 14 in RPGs). For instance, in the RPGs sample, players use this strategy to relieve imposition and avoid directly saying “you should”:

(8) *Ah of course, **one's gotta be careful don't they**. (Absinthe)*

(9) *Would it be **terribly inappropriate** of me to ask why? After all, **one might wish** to drink something refreshing... (Absinthe)*

It is also often combined with subjectifying means/hedges, which is quite remarkable from the point of view of the construal, since the latter serves to highlight the subjective perspective of the speaker, while the generalisation with “*one*” corresponds to the increased schematicity of the construal, zooming out on the situation and including a broader scene in the scope of attention:

(10) *But yes, Typhoid took me in Sierra Leone. I **do believe** I saw the light at the end of the world, **as one might say**. (Absinthe)*

In the Victorian plays, the function of “*one*” or general nouns is similar and serves to avoid a personal recommendation by replacing it with a less intrusive generalisation:

(11) ***A man should always** have an occupation of some kind. (Wilde, 1895)*

This soft recommendation can be more overt, like in (12), where the speaker starts with a general “an heiress” and then refers directly to the speaker by “such as you”:

- (12) *He was so, my dear; before we knew your poor uncle was dead; but **an heiress, such as you will be**, should look out for a duke.* (Bulwer-Lytton, 1840)

From a cognitive perspective, such language choice would reflect the construal operation of increasing schematicity, or zooming out and including a more general picture within the immediately activated scope.

Generalisation serves to say not necessarily risky things but also to redress a compliment to be less intrusive, which requires additional cognitive effort to understand:

- (13) *Ladies like yourself, of course, must be a bit more creative and find **their** own ways to such knowledge, **if they desire it**.* (Absinthe)

Cognitive narratologists consider the complexity of the emerging construal to be an important factor in readers’ enjoyment. When they actively construct meaning through mental simulations, frame shifts, and perspective-taking operations, they engage more cognitive processes and are more immersed in the fiction world (Herman, 2009). The joy of solving the riddles gives satisfaction and fulfilment. This dynamic interaction taps into readers’ theory of mind (Zunshine, 2006), prompting them to take the characters’ perspectives and reconstruct them from fragmented clues.

Other constructions that make the claims sound more objective or distanced are nominalisation phrasing:

- (14) *I will **give you my acceptance if it will be of any use** to you; it is of none to me.* (Boucicault, Brougham, 1841)

In (14), nominalisation serves to both make the utterance sound more objective and less personal (*I will give you my acceptance instead of I will accept/agree*) and to make the construal more elaborate, conceptualising an action as a noun. Indirectness that results from these linguistic choices makes the utterance more polite and requires a cognitive effort to understand it.

3.4 Modal verbs as hedging expressions

Modal verbs may serve as hedges in English (Adolphs, 2007; Carretero, 1992), prompting our analysis of modal verb frequencies in both corpora. We run searches for all modal verbs, regardless of their potential to serve as a hedging move or to express strong deontic modality, to investigate how RPG players and Victorian speakers perceive modality and what relation it bears to politeness.

Table 4. Modal verbs in the RPGs sample vs the authentic Victorian plays

Item	Occurrences in the RPGs sample	Occurrences in the reference sample
<i>may</i>	41	67
<i>might</i>	84	25
<i>can</i>	209	110
<i>could</i>	103	48
<i>will</i>	134	191
<i>would</i>	176	127
<i>shall</i>	28	86
<i>should</i>	79	84
<i>dare</i>	5	11
<i>ought</i>	9	18
<i>must</i>	49	90
Total	917	857

Our analysis of modal verb frequencies shows distinctly higher frequencies of the classic hedging expressions *might*, *could*, and *would* in the RPG corpus. This means that players are constantly softening their assertions, downgrading commitments, and turning what could be direct requests or opinions into “*polite*” or “*distanced*” ones:

(15) *And – well frankly, I wouldn't have use for 'em either; but **I thought you might be able to work your magic on 'em Nicks, maybe get a pair of gloves each for you and Grahame, or make some book covers out of 'em?'** (Absinthe)*

This face-management falls under negative politeness, reaffirming the finding that modern perceptions of politeness gravitate towards negative politeness (Shevchenko, Matiukhina, Drazdauskienė, 2021).

Generally, the past forms of the modal verbs evolved into politeness means because of the conceptual distance they create between the current speaker and the construal of the situation that they evoke. This way, the claims become less intrusive if there is a risk of being interpreted as an infringement on the interlocutor's face:

(16) *Oh, the twig needn't be prominent. Small will be fine. **I was thinking I might hold it in my hand, or it could be on a desk or table? Do you mind terribly if I keep it? It's... Symbolic.** (Absinthe)*

In (16), the distancing modal verbs *might* and *could* are intended to suggest less direct and more tentative, as well as to shift the focus to the interlocutor and their opinions and interests in *do you mind*, combined with a conditional “*if I keep it*”. In addition, there is tentative reasoning expressed by *I was thinking*, which in cognitive terms is a clue for a certain trajectory, a justification of a request with a dynamic description. This succession

of politeness results in a more enriched construal than if the same meaning were expressed by “*Can I please keep it and hold it, or put it in my desk?*”.

Meanwhile, the authentic plays show higher frequencies of deontic modal verbs such as “*must*”, “*shall*”, and “*ought*”, which code the social hierarchies that the period relied on. In turn, RPG players tend to avoid deontic modality, possibly because they perceive it as too face-threatening. Instead, they rely on less direct expression, using more “*could*”, “*would*”, and “*might*” to disguise requests or refusals.

The use of deontic modal verbs can yet serve the speakers to express regrets in a situation where they want to take the blame for the potential infringement on the interlocutor’s face:

(17) *No, it’s alright, Miss, ... I should be the one apologizing – I probably should’ve announced myself better. (Absinthe)*

Yet, regardless of the possible indirect functions deontic modal verbs perform outside of hedging mechanisms, the fact that Victorian speakers use deontic modals liberally while RPG players turn to them significantly less often demonstrates that contemporary speakers instinctively default to epistemic softening as politeness.

3.5 Positive vocabulary

Positive vocabulary is considered a marker of politeness, especially in computational models (Danescu-Niculescu-Mizil et al., 2013). In the samples, the number of positively charged adjectives and adverbs (e.g. *great*, *wonderful(-ly)*, *lovely*, *charming*, *nice(-ly)*, *beautiful(-ly)*, *kind(-ly)*) is not drastically different in general, with a slightly elevated frequency for the Neo-Victorian role-playing sample.

Table 5. Positive vocabulary in the RPGs sample vs the authentic Victorian plays

	Occurrences in the RPGs sample	Occurrences in the reference sample
<i>great</i> , <i>wonderful(-ly)</i> , <i>lovely</i> , <i>charming</i> , <i>nice(-ly)</i> , <i>incredible(-ly)</i> , <i>fantastic</i> , <i>fabulous</i> , <i>exceptional(-ly)</i> , <i>brilliant</i> , <i>superb</i> , <i>magnificent</i> , <i>terrific</i> , <i>excellent</i> , <i>spectacular</i> ; <i>astonishing</i> , <i>delightful</i> , <i>enchanting</i> , <i>captivating</i> , <i>beautiful(-ly)</i> , <i>sweet</i> , <i>stunning</i> , <i>pleasant</i> , <i>kind(-ly)</i> , <i>friendly</i> , <i>agreeable</i> , <i>enjoyable</i> , <i>gracious(-ly)</i> , <i>amiable</i> , <i>gentle</i> , <i>thoughtful</i> , <i>cheerful(-ly)</i> , <i>welcoming</i>	153	123

However, specific choices differ. For the original Victorian plays, the adjective “*great*” is more frequent than in the RPG posts (26 to 15), while in the latter, there are more adjectives (and the derived adverbs), “*lovely*” (20 to 3) and “*beautiful*” (18 to 5).

As for intensifiers that are typically used with polite vocabulary and make the speakers sound eager and socially engaged, there is again a certain difference in the original Victorian

plays that use twice as many adverbs “*very*” as RPGs (119 to 61 occurrences), and twice as few “*really*” (32 to 64 occurrences), e.g.:

(18) *Really? That is very kind of you to say. (Beyond the Thames)*

This finding is also a consequence of the contemporary players’ perception of the stylistic colouring of these words. Positive vocabulary can also be combined with negatively coloured words to represent the complex construal typical of Victorian upper-class polite discourse. For example:

(19) *My dear fellow, the way you flirt with Gwendolen is **perfectly disgraceful**. It is almost as bad as the way Gwendolen flirts with you. (Wilde, 1895)*

The players tend to reproduce these devices quite well, demonstrating that this is a distinctly perceived stylistic feature of the Victorian speech:

(20) *You do yourself **a great disservice** by acting **as if** your perspective is unworthy. (Absinthe)*

Here, a complex, cognitively teasing representation of the situation is produced by combining the intensifying positive adjective *great* with a negative noun, “*disservice*”, which in turn is also complex semantically as its meaning is derived from the positive *service*. It is followed by an unreal conditional that prompts the creation of an alternative version of reality.

(21) *...but some of **the best** outcomes have come from **not the greatest** of ideas, though. (Beyond the Thames)*

Superlative degrees in (21) along with negation serve the same purpose, adding some indirectness to the claim, making it less bald.

3.6 Politeness as construal-enriching means in the (Neo-)Victorian social etiquette

In the Neo-Victorian role-playing games, politeness markers often go in succession, enriching the construal of the situation:

(22) *It is very nice to meet your acquaintance but I merely arrived to accompany my mother home, Charles Reading **at your service, I am afraid the honor is not mine**. My mother’s employer is there, **I am afraid**. (Beyond the Thames)*

In (25), there is nominalisation (“*your acquaintance*”, “*the honor*”), explicit politeness markers that shorten the conceptual distance and signal positive disposition towards the

interlocutor (“*at your service*”), and subjectifying humbling markers (“*I am afraid*”). This array of politeness markers enriches the construal and positions the speaker as a politely considerate character following the social etiquette.

(23) *I imagine that it would feel inappropriate to neglect to promote the other Christian virtues... (Absinthe)*

In (26), the speaker again uses a subjectifying marker (“*I imagine*”) alongside the generalisation (“*it would feel inappropriate*”), creating a complex stance. These conversational moves do not require considerable creativity and tap into the classical inventory of the politeness means, and yet help the Neo-Victorian speakers not only to stylise their discourse effectively to resemble the Victorian etiquette-guided speech, but also make the conversations between the characters a ludic exercise in itself, playing with meanings and positioning the speaker in the most intricate ways the language can offer.

Conclusion

In exploring characters’ speech stylisation within Neo-Victorian role-playing forums, we observed players’ expressed use of polite forms as a means of simulating the speech and etiquette conventions. Contemporary RPG creative writers blend the concept of Victorian linguistic politeness from Victorian or Neo-Victorian literature and their knowledge of the period with modern linguistic behaviour norms.

Our analysis has shown that Neo-Victorian players tend to use politeness markers to realise indirect speech acts and align their stylistic choices with an etiquette of indirectness associated with Victorian upper-class discourse. Clusters of nominalisations, hedges, and deference terms often jointly realise complex indirect speech acts, such as a reprimand masked as self-deprecation or advice masked as a general rule.

In our discussion of politeness in Neo-Victorian speech stylisation, we followed the cognitive-pragmatic approach and regarded Victorian politeness not only as a mechanical use of stance markers, but also as conventions for the speaker’s construal of the interaction. In this regard, politeness is the engine of the conversation in itself. Polite forms, compliments, shifts in perspective, indirectness, generalisations, and combinations of these means enrich the construal and pose an enjoyable cognitive challenge for the interlocutor. The politeness norms that dictate indirectness make the conversation more engaging, with a small-talk feel, and reinforce the communicative etiquette of Victorian polite society.

Although RPG participants emulate historical discourse norms, they often rely on modern politeness markers, favouring subjective hedges and informal terms, reflecting their automatic use of modern lexical choices. These choices indicate a blend of historical awareness and contemporary communicative preferences. Importantly, polite distancing strategies are more prevalent in the RPGs sample, suggesting that the modern concept of politeness is inclined towards negativity.

Politeness stylisation makes creative writing in Neo-Victorian forums more enjoyable for the players, requiring them to exercise their language and navigate the socially risky turns in the game that follow Victorian social rules. Combined with the players' agency to rethink the roles of Victorian society in this ludic environment, politeness emerges as a necessary stylisation and an instrument for indirectness and challenging conventions.

Reproduction of the Victorian discursive practices by contemporary players results in their creative engagement with Victorian etiquette. As play-by-post role-playing games create an environment of both aesthetic nostalgia and social challenge, players can experiment with their characters' discourse and receive feedback from other players through conversation, making these exercises interactive and enjoyable, like extremely immersive fiction writing.

Author contributions

Iryna Morozova: conceptualization, methodology, formal analysis, writing – original draft, review and editing.

Valeriia Nikolaienko: conceptualization, data curation, formal analysis, writing – original draft, review and editing.

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