

“Oh! you are liars, & God will stop the mouth of liars”: Impolite and aggressive discourse in Salem witchcraft trial examinations 1692

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Abstract

The Salem witchcraft documents give us a possibility to take a look into people's lives in late 17th-century New England. In this paper we discuss the examination records of six people, four women and two men, in the Salem witch-hunt in 1692. The defendants argued for their innocence in the examinations by using such discourse strategies and expressions that could be interpreted as impolite or even aggressive. These strategies included asking questions, giving advice to the examiner(s), accusing the witnesses of lying, and reacting to the accusations with sarcastic comments or laughter. Their behaviour can be regarded as bold in the very exceptional Salem courtroom environment.

1. Introduction

The Salem witch trial documents offer challenging material for many different approaches. For historians and sociohistorians they offer a view into the strictly regulated life and customs of an early Puritan community. Various linguistic frameworks can be applied to the data, depending on which aspects of the discourse are in focus. But, as scholars we should be wary of viewing “discourse as an omnipotent force to create reality” (Kotthoff & Wodak 1997: xi). And dealing with historical material and original manuscripts, we also have to keep in mind that “each manuscript, perhaps even more than any printed text, has a communicative story to tell” (Pahta & Jucker 2011: 3).

Miscommunication is also very obvious in Salem trials and the documents recorded from them, as it is obvious that emotions ran high during the witch-

hunt and people were not prepared for the accusations, evidence and statements of witnesses brought against them, not to talk about gossiping and problems in relations between the villagers. Therefore it would be a great mistake to deal with these documents in isolation without paying attention to the sociohistorical context, social hierarchies, and so on. The context has to be (re)constructed on the basis of written records, and it is obvious that courtroom records always involve interpretation and selection.

2. Earlier studies

Hiltunen (2010: 61), when emphasizing the importance of context, distinguishes between at least four different contexts to be taken into account in an analysis of documents like the Salem trial records, i.e. (1) the historical, social and cultural context, involving not only the historical background and social structures of Salem, but also considerations of the “invisible” world of witchcraft: “spectral evidence” and the involvement of the Devil in people’s lives; (2) the legal context, involving the genre conventions shaping the records; (3) the scribal context, involving the representation of original spoken discourse in writing, and (4) the communicative context, involving the discourse strategies of the actual trials. Scholars have written widely on these aspects, and space does not allow us to give proper credit to all those studies (see e.g. Kryk-Kastovsky 2006a). But at least a few should be mentioned: Archer (2002, 2005) on questions and answers, Hiltunen (1996, 2004, 2010) and Doty and Hiltunen (2002, 2009) on speech acts; Hiltunen and Peikola (2007) and Grund (2007) on the role of the recorders; Kytö and Walker (2003) on data problems, Doty (2010) on courtroom discourse more generally; Kahlas-Tarkka and Rissanen (2007), Kryk-Kastovsky (2006b, 2010), Nevala (2010) and several authors in Bousfield & Locher (eds. 2008) on power and impoliteness.

A relatively recent approach to accused people’s response strategies in particular has been offered by the concept of self-face and self-politeness (see especially Chen 2001, Chaemsaithong 2009). According to this approach, it is more realistic to examine the responses of the accused from the point of view of “what the accused thought others thought of them”, which is part of their “face” (Chaemsaithong 2009: 56). The self-politeness strategies allowed the examinees with sufficient courage and confidence to defend themselves and also to restore, at least partly, their public image (*ibid.*).

3. Defendants' attitudes

The Salem examinations reflect a very special law court discourse situation. On most occasions there are only three discourse participants: the examiner(s), the defendant and the witnesses. No defence attorneys or other people supporting the defendant were present.

In our discussion we concentrate on the role and attitudes of the defendants. In the Salem proceedings impolite or aggressive utterances were often made by the defendants, while in many earlier studies of courtroom impoliteness the analysis has been focused on the examiner's role and utterances. In addition to simple answers to the examiner's questions, the defendant's utterances can be divided into three types:

1. Addressing the examiner(s) and/or witnesses
2. Reacting to the examiner's or witnesses' utterances
3. Describing the defendant's character, religious purity, and role in the Salem community.

The first and second types include discourse features which easily result in impoliteness or even aggressiveness (see Kahlas-Tarkka and Rissanen 2011). The most obvious forms of addressing are (1) questions to the examiner or witnesses, (2) giving advice or even orders to the examiner using imperatives or other deontic expressions, and (3) accusing the witnesses of lying or ignorance. The most typical impolite reactions to the examiner's or witnesses' utterances include sarcastic comments and laughter. These reactions are often related to saving self-face.

Impoliteness and aggressiveness are closely related, as pointed out in several earlier studies, e.g. Culpeper (2008) and Archer (2008). It is possible to be impolite without being aggressive, but not the other way round. These attitudes are of course connected to power relations (see, e.g., Kryk-Kastovsky 2010). The default power setting in the law court is obvious: the examiner represents power, while the defendant's role is to accept this by only answering the questions asked by the examiner as accurately and truthfully as possible, avoiding any initiatives. The impoliteness factor of the defendant's questions, sarcasm, or laughter is to a large extent based on disturbing the expected power relations.

4. Salem witches

Salem Village, like Puritan New England as a whole, was a society with strict gender roles. An interesting question is why women were more often singled out as perpetrators of bewitchments, both in everyday life and in criminal trials (de Blécourt 2000: 288). Even though witch-hunts were not directly gender-based, they were gender-related to quite an extent (see e.g. Bever 2002, de Blécourt 2000, Reis 1998). A witch could be either male or female, but according to the statistics, in New England, the convicted witch was mostly (some 80%) a woman above forty years of age, even though all age groups, children included, could be accused of witchcraft (Karlsen 1987). Why should it be that the majority of the accused and convicted people were women? According to Bever (2002: 968), both genders have similar capacities for aggression, but they manifest them rather differently: men are more likely than women to use direct physical aggression, whereas women are prone to use indirect aggression, spreading gossip, manipulating surrogates, and other covert attack. This would at least partly explain why women were more eager to accuse others and also be targets for accusations.

According to Culpeper and Kytö (2010: 332), “In public and formal discourse, women generally speak less than men in mixed-sex interactions, except in situations, such as the courtroom, where cooperation can be coerced”. This claim holds true to quite an extent in Salem, where several women exhibited notable verbosity in examination situations.

In addition to gender, power relations and social hierarchies in Salem, as in other witch-hunts, played an important role. On average, those who were convicted were elderly women from the less well-to-do end of the social scale, and in many cases, with some dubious personal experiences in their past. They were thus socially more vulnerable. There must have been some kind of “crisis of confidence”, scepticism, religious scruples, legal concerns, and probably some medical problems in Salem at the time of the outbreak and during the hunt (Bever 2002: 955).

In February 1692, some young girls in Salem, New England, began to behave in a curious way. They claimed they were bewitched, “afflicted”, and they accused some villagers, mainly women but also men, of this horrible activity. This was the beginning of a tragic process of law court examinations and trials, which resulted in the death of at least 25 citizens and the imprisonment of more than a hundred. Fortunately, this tragedy only lasted for a few months: by the end of the same year, the Governor of Massachusetts, had put an end to the trials (see Rosenthal *et al.* 2009: 15–43).

“The tongue is a witch”, was a warning by the Anglican minister George Webbe in 1619, and this is the way Jane Kamensky (1998: 25–6) starts off when

writing about female speech in Early New England. She continues with Webbe's words, "[T]here is no crime so capitall, no offence so heinous, but the Tongue is either principal in it, or accessary into it". Two generations later, and on the other side of the ocean, Cotton Mather reminded the godly women of New England to attend to the psalmist's words: "I will take heed... that I sin not with my Tongue; I will keep my Mouth with a Bridle." Both Webbe and Mather probably had two things in mind which they would have agreed on when they pronounced these thoughts: that women's tongues were particularly prone to all kinds of evils, and that witchcraft was a crime frequently enacted by certain kinds of female speech. According to Mather, women especially should cultivate what he called a "silver tongue": speech rare and pure, free of boastful "dross". He urged that you should "be careful that you don't Speak too soon... And be careful that you don't Speak too much... 'Tis the Whore, that is Clamorous" (Kamensky 1998: 26).

5. Examinations of Salem women

To illustrate different defence strategies, attitudes and discursal behaviour, we have selected four female and two male defendants for a close reading of their examinations. This corresponds roughly with the ratio between accused women and accused men. Common to these six defendants is that they denied guilt, apart from Dorcas Hoar who later confessed, after she had first been condemned to death, and thus saved her life. In the Puritan community of Salem it must have been unexpected that these women were bold enough to disagree with those accusing and examining them and to address them with aggressive language and other means of strong disagreement.

Dorcas Hoar, a woman in her late fifties, who has inspired the title of our paper, does not hesitate for a moment to defend her innocence and clearly show what she thinks of her trial. Much is not known about her life or living conditions, but in her examination (Rosenthal *et al.* 2009: 102)¹ she shows strong confidence in God's power and probably thus also in fair judgment in the end. On the whole, the examination gives an impression of speedy exchange of questions and short answers. Hoar's attitude is reserved and even strongly negative to her examiner.

Dorcas Hoar why do you hurt these?

I never hurt any child in my life.

¹ The numbers refer to the document numbers in Rosenthal *et al.* (2009). In the quotations, the utterances of the examinees are given in bold.

It is you, or your appearance.

How can I help it?

What is it from you that hurts these?

I never saw worse than my self.

To the claim that a black man had been seen whispering in her ears, Hoar exclaims:

Oh! you are liars, & God will stop the mouth of liars

You are not to speak after this manner in the Court.

I will speak the Truth as long as I live.

And later, she addresses the examiner with a question, and even worse, she resorts to a half-serious retort, which the examiners regard as particularly threatening:

They say the Devil is whispering in your ear.

I cannot help it if they do se it.

Cannot you confess what you think of these things?

Why should I confess that I do not know.

...

Oh said some of the afflicted there is one whispering in her ears

There is some body will rub your ears shortly, said the Examinant

...

Why do you threaten they should be Rubb'd?

I did not speak a word of Rubbing.

Many testified she did.

My meaning was God would bring things to light.

The quotes from Hoar's examination clearly show how disorganized the whole examination was. The trial discourse is upset by the fits of the accusers during the hearing, and this leads to an incoherent flow of questions and answers, change of topics and so on, a completely chaotic scene.

Sarah Good was in her forties. She was the daughter of a prosperous innkeeper, but reduced to poverty by the time of the Salem outbreak. She lived a life of begging and poverty in Salem Village. Sarah was regarded as an unsavoury person, a stereotypical witch, a disreputable old hag. She is one of the two women who even resorts to aggressiveness in her examination. Good's answers to questions are very blunt and straightforward, accompanied by an almost complete lack of respect for the Puritan authorities (Rosenthal *et al.* 2009: 3):

(H) [= Hathorne] why doe you hurt these children (g) [= Good] **I doe not hurt them I scorn it.** (H) who doe you imploy then to doe it (g) **I imploy no body,** (H) what creature doe you imploy then (g) **no creature but I am falsely accused**

...

(H) <?>who doe you imploy then (g) **I imploy no body I scorn it** (H) how came they thus tormented, (g) **what doe I know you bring others here and now you charge me with it**

...

(H) what is it that you say when you goe muttering away from persons houses ^{(g)} **if I must tell I will tell** (H) doe tell us then (g) **if I must tell I will tell it is the commandments I may say my commandments I hope** (H) what commandment is it (g) **if I must tell you I will tell it is a psalm**

In her direct discourse, Good is not really aggressive, only perhaps somewhat laconic. She shows her strong negative attitude to the examiner and the accusations and is bold enough to say it directly. One could speculate that she has resorted to such strong face-threatening discourse, and at such speed, that the recorder has simply given up writing it all down in dialogue form. Towards the end of her examination record, there is a clear comment which allows for such an interpretation:

though shee was not willing to mention the word God her answers were in a very wicked, spitfull manner reflecting and retorting aganst the authority with base and abuseive words and many lies she was taken in. it was here said that her housband had said that he was afraid that shee either was a witch or would be one very quickly the worsh m^r Harthon asked him his Re reason why he said so of her whether he had ever seen any thing by her he answered no not in this nature but it was her bad carriage to him and indeed said he I may say with tears that shee is an enemy to all good

Martha Cory, in her seventies, had a reputation for being a pious, intelligent but somewhat overbearing woman. Her examination (Rosenthal *et al.* 2009: 16) gives us a clear idea of how the examination was conducted and how this “Gospel woman” managed to stand firm and defend her innocence. Cory is very verbose, and one might suggest that she is also trying to distract her examiner by asking for permission to go and pray. There is no such aggressiveness in her answers as there is in Dorcas Hoar’s answers, but there is, however, pointed sarcasm.

Pray give me leave to goe to prayer

This request was made sundry times

We do not send for you to go to prayer
But tell me why you hurt these?

I am an innocent person: I never had to do with Witchcraft since I was born. I am a Gosple Woman

Do not you see these complain of you

The Lord open the eyes of the Magistrates & Ministers: the Lord show his power to discover the guilty.

...

Do not you see how these afflicted do charge you

We must not beleive distracted persons

Who do you improve to hurt them.

I improved none

Did not you say our eyes were blinded you would open them

Yes to accuse the innocent

...

Now tell me y^e truth will you, why did you say that the Magistrates & Ministers eyes were blinded you would open them

She laught & denyed it.

...

Do you deny these words

Yes

...

What do you say to all these thing<s> that are apparent

If you will all go hang me how can I help it.

Were you to serve the Devil ten years tell how many

She laught

Her attitude is strongly negative, her answers pertinent and sober, and she consistently denies her guilt throughout the examination (Kahlas-Tarkka 2012: 65). We could say that she has the upper hand, given that she shows a kind of protective and understanding attitude in saying *we must not beleive distracted persons*, without being aggressive, but using indirect criticism against her examiners.

In terms of self-face and strategies of saving face, Cory is very talented and is one of the bravest challengers of the motives for her being accused. She uses rhetorical questions, presents positive aspects of herself, replies with a question, opts out at times when asking for permission to go to prayer, behaves even in a slightly condescending, “motherly” or protective manner, and is bold enough to laugh. On the whole, she gives the impression of being a sincere woman, who may have believed in the power of her social standing and religious conviction as a

strong enough means to convince the examiners of her innocence. Thus she differs slightly from the more openly aggressive female examinees.

Susannah Martin (Rosenthal *et al.* 2009: 104) was a widow, close to the age of seventy. She shows a similar kind of strong negative attitude to her examiner as Dorcas Hoar, but one of her strategies that Hoar does not resort to is sarcasm. No direct aggressiveness or violence can be detected – instead, biting sarcasm, laughter and bold indirect resistance are used to challenge the accusations.

The examinant laught.

What do you laugh at it?

Well I may at such folly.

...

Tell me your thoughts about them.

Why my thoughts are my own, when they are in, but when they are out they are anothers.

...

Pray God discover you, if you be guilty.

Amen. Amen. A false tongue w<ill> never make a guilty person.

You have been a long time coming to the Court to day, you can come fast enough in the night. Said Mercy Lewes

No, sweet heart, said the Examinant

...

Have you not compassion for these afflicted

No, I have none

...

Do not you see how God evidently [Lost] you?

No, not a bit for that.

All the congregation think so.

Let them think w^t they will.

What is the reason these [some of the accusers] cannot come near you

I do not know but they can if they will <or> else if you please, I will come to them

Martin resorts to clear denial of guilt, but at the same time she tries to protect her self-face by laughing and making strong argumentations against the accusations. There is a bold assertiveness in her reply *Let them think w^t they will*. Where she is different from Cory is that she does not try to convince her examiner that she is a good Christian, even though she wants to “lead herself to the word of God”. Her attitude is more sarcastic, as she is making fun of religious discourse (*Amen, amen*).

A false tongue will never make a guilty person). She takes the liberty to address one of the witnesses as “sweet heart”. But she also stands by the truth and clearly does not want to save her life by telling a lie.

As mentioned above, the utterances which are most likely to increase impolite or even aggressive elements in courtroom examination occasions are linked to addressing other participants in the discourse event. The most obvious forms of impoliteness, besides outright statements that the receiver is wrong or lying, are related to asking questions, giving advice, making sarcastic comments, or laughing at the other participant’s utterance.

6. Examinations of Salem men

The defendant who most effectively and even systematically uses methods of expressing impoliteness in the Salem examinations is George Jacobs, Sr. He was an old man in his seventies, and he says that he cannot read. But his power of argumentation is truly impressive. The examination record (Rosenthal *et al.* 2009: 133)² includes lively first-person dialogue between Jacobs and the examiners – and it seems that in the course of the examination, Jacobs is able to upset the situation and invert the power relations.

The very beginning of the examination differs from the openings of most other examination records. The examiner does not begin with an outright statement claiming the defendant’s association with witchcraft (e.g., “What evil spirit have you familiarity with”, Examinations of Sarah Good, Sarah Osburn, & Tituba, Rosenthal *et al.* 2009: 3) but opens the examination in a more indirect way:

Here are them that accuse you of acts of witchcraft.

Jacobs seems to observe this cautious opening and takes the initiative at once. He addresses the investigators with an imperative phrase. Even his opening discourse marker, “well”, may indicate lack of politeness (Kryk-Kastovsky 2006b: 230). The examiner seems to have been taken by surprise and gives a simple answer. Jacobs underlines his impoliteness by laughing. The examiner’s next question is not recorded, but judging by Jacobs’s reply he asks why Jacobs has laughed. Jacobs

2 The extracts are taken from the first examination of George Jacobs, Sr., 10 May, 1692. The second examination took place on the following day, but its contents are less interesting from the discourse point of view.

includes a statement of false accusation in his reply, and asks another question. The examiner and the examinee in fact change roles:

Well, let vs hear who are they, & what are they.

Abigail Williams

Jacobs laught

Because I am falsly accused – Your worships all of you do you think this is true?

Nay: what do you think?

I never did it.

Who did it?

Don't ask me.

The examiner's reply shows his embarrassment: *Nay* could be interpreted as a loss of his accuser role. This possible slip of the tongue might imply that he does not think that the accusation is true. The apparently lame counter-question *what do you think?* could confirm this. After Jacobs's denial, the examiner continues with the less powerful *wh*-question *Who did it?* Jacobs's reply, *Don't ask me*, with the negative imperative, is again impolite.

The examiner's next statement shows once again uncertainty, and Jacobs continues his powerful argumentation. He says he is as innocent as a new-born baby, and, breaking Grice's maxims of quantity and relation, continues that he has lived 33 years in Salem. The examiner's response is either puzzled or ironic: *What then?* Jacobs does not bother to elaborate on his statement but continues with a conditional clause indicating that the accusations are false.

Why should we not ask you? Sarah Churchwell accuseth you, there she is.

I am as innocent as the child born to night, I have lived .33. yeares here in Salem.

What then?

If you can prove that I am guilty, I will lye under it.

After that Jacobs boldly compares himself with the examiners and advises them using an openly impolite commanding expression beginning with *you must*. A little later follows the word-play that could be analysed as a means of saving self-face by way of amusing the audience:

Pray do not accuse me, I am as clear as your Worships; You must do right judgment

...

You tax me for a Wizard, you may as well tax me for a Buzard. I have done no harm.

Towards the end of the examination Jacobs shows his tactical skill by referring to religion and Christ. He points out that Christ has suffered three times for him, and his final comment (beginning again with the discourse particle *well*) is again impressive:

Well! burn me, or hang me, I will stand in the truth of Christ, I know nothing of it.

This discourse offers, of course, possibilities for various interpretations. It is, however, difficult to avoid the impression that the power relations have, at least to a certain extent, been upset in Jacobs's examination. This is mainly effected by his open impoliteness underlined by systematically addressing the investigators. From the very beginning of the examination, Jacobs asks questions, and throughout the event he – either consciously or instinctively – uses discursual devices that can be defined as impoliteness: laughter, irony, conditional clauses, imperatives and discourse particles. This discourse seems to suggest changing power relations between the examiner and the examinee (see Rissanen 2012).

There are only a few other examination documents of male defendants denying guilt and recorded in the form of first-person direct-speech dialogue: those of William Hobbs and John Willard. In Hobbs's examination (Rosenthal *et al.* 2009: 90) there are hardly any defendant's utterances that could be interpreted as impolite (see Rissanen 2012), but Willard's defence (Rosenthal *et al.* 2009: 173, 174) is, to some extent, comparable with Jacobs's.

John Willard was a much younger man than Jacobs, possibly in his thirties. His responses to the examiner's questions include some characteristics similar to Jacobs's, although in a less systematic or emphatic form. He was a deputy constable in Salem, but it is said that he left that office because he felt that the villagers were unjustly accused of witchcraft. This might suggest a brave and independent character. The beginning of the examination does not show the same aggressiveness as Jacobs's (Rosenthal *et al.* 2009: 173).

Here is a returne of the warrant that you were fled from Authority that is an acknowledgement of guilt, but yet notwithstanding this we require you to confesse the truth in this matter.

I shall, as I hope, I shall be assisted by the Lord of Heaven, & for my going away I was affrighted & I thought by my withdrawing it might

be better, I fear not but the Lord in his due time will make me as white as snow.

What do you say? Why do you hurt them, it is you or your appearance?

I know nothing of appearance.

But a little later he corrects the examiner by pointing out that only the minister has the right to estimate his sins – not the examiner; this can be regarded as mild impoliteness:

If you desire mercy from God, then confesse & give glory to God.

S^r as for sins I am guilty of if the Minister askt me I am ready to confess.

His next reply can be interpreted as sarcasm:

Open your mouth, don't your lips

I will stand with my mouth open, or I will keep it shut, I will stand any how, if you will tell me how

Willard also advises the examiners to call certain people that should be heard as witnesses, his wife and Aaron Wey, and says that some of the witnesses have lied. He also asks that Ann Putnam should not approach him but some other person.

There are a great many lyes told, I would desire my wife might be called
Peter Prescott testified that he with his own mouth told him of his beating of his wife

He urged Aaron Wey to speak

Aaron wey thereupon said if I must speak, I will, I can say you have been very cruell to poor creatures.

Let some person go to him

Ann Putman said she would go.

He said **let not that person but another come**

According to the scribe, Willard laughs when he fails to say the Lord's Prayer. His laughter seems to indicate his disbelief in the claim that the accusing girls were bewitched:

It is a strange thing, I can say it at another time. I think I am bewicht as well as they & laught

Willard's examination does not, however, show similarly consistent use of impoliteness as a means of gaining power in the discourse situation as Jacobs's examination. The main difference is that Willard does not ask questions and is less active in trying to create a debate with the examiner(s) (Rissanen 2012).

7. Concluding remarks

As we mentioned above, the utterances which most likely increase impolite or even aggressive elements in courtroom examinations are related to the addressing of the other participants of the discourse event. The most obvious forms of impoliteness are, besides outright statements that the receiver is wrong or lying, related to asking questions, giving advice, making sarcastic comments, or laughing at the other participant's utterance.

In any analysis of the language and discourse of the Salem documents, the question of the role played by the scribe or recorder of the documents is of course highly relevant, and the degree of his intervention is hard to estimate. Do the words and utterances quoted come from the mouths of the defendants, or do they show the scribe's or recorder's creative inventiveness (see e.g. Doty 2007)? It is difficult to believe, however, that the scribe would invent Jacobs's word-play wizard/buzzard, Sarah Good's "I scorn it", or Susannah Martin's "No sweet heart", and so on. The recorders of most of the first-person dialogue documents seem to have done their best to reproduce the utterances as accurately as possible. They were well aware that these dialogues would be of essential importance in the trials at the Court of Oyer and Terminer. Some degree of scribal interference is, of course, unavoidable, but perhaps we can say that these records bring us as close as possible to the spoken expression and discourse, with reference to seventeenth-century law court circumstances in the New World.

The Salem examination documents give us a possibility to peek into the lives of people in Salem during the tragic witch-hunt. Sociohistorical study would reveal a lot about intrigues between neighbours: envy, religious fanaticism, and the importance of basic socio-linguistic factors like age, gender and social and educational background. But even a close reading of the documents and their expression gives us glimpses into authentic communication and dialogue between people and how their personal traits are reflected in their discourse even in moments of extreme pressure and fear of death. One is struck today by the courage shown by many of the defendants in denying their guilt, and questioning the fairness of the accusations and the authority of the court officials.

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