

HISTORICITY IN METAPRAGMATICS – A STUDY ON ‘DISCERNMENT’ IN ITALIAN METADISOURSE¹

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Abstract

The present paper contributes to metapragmatics, by examining the question of how historicity influences the validity of certain modern metaterms that are accepted as ‘neutral’ and ‘scientific’ in pragmatics. We argue that it is fundamental to explore the history and development of such metaterms, and also to study their historically situated meanings, in order to increase the self-reflexivity and rigour of analyses. We analyse the notion of ‘discernment’ as a case study, and we will show that the way in which the Italian equivalent of this term (*discernere*) – which supposedly influenced historical English understandings of ‘discernment’ as well – is used in historical Italian metadiscourses contradicts the modern application of this metaterm.

Keywords: Metapragmatics; Self-reflexivity; Historicity; ‘Discernment’; Italian.

1. Introduction

The aim of this paper is to bring a historical perspective into metapragmatics, by examining the historicity of pragmatic metaterms, i.e. words that are applied in scientific metadiscourse on language use as technical definitions. Our objective is to draw attention to the importance of the historicity of metaterms, by exploring a) the history and development of such metaterms, as well as studying b) their historically situated meanings. By merging metapragmatics and historical pragmatics we hope to contribute to the broader endeavour of increasing self-reflexivity in interpersonal and intercultural pragmatic research (see Haugh et al. 2013), and so it is important to point out right at the beginning of the paper that we use historical data primarily with an illustrative purpose (and also to argue that there is an important interface between historical and cross-cultural/intercultural pragmatics, see Section 4).

Our argument is what follows: If an analyst uses an interpersonal pragmatic

¹ We would like to express our gratitude to the anonymous Referees for their insightful comments, which helped us enormously to improve the quality of the present work. Dániel Kádár would like to say a big thank you to Jonathan Culpeper, whose comments on metapragmatics have greatly helped him to consider the scope of the present inquiry. We are also thankful to Liz Marsden for checking the style of the manuscript. It is perhaps needless to say that all errors are our responsibility.

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metaterm without proper historical retrospection, there is a potential risk that this term will be regarded as ‘scientific’, in that it is supposed to encompass modern scientific conceptualisations – that are broadly agreed in a certain research area – as being valid across space and time. Such an acritical application may or may not cause significant problems. For example, in the realm of historical politeness research it is broadly agreed that the researcher can use the metaterm ‘politeness’ as a scientific notion to describe politeness behaviour across space and time, provided that they make it clear that this term is used in a modern and scientific sense, and that it is applied to data types in which it does not carry situated in-text meanings (see Kádár and Culpeper 2010). This is simply because the particular lexeme ‘politeness’ is a relatively recent English coinage, and so it does not occur in Middle English texts, let alone in a historical Chinese one. However, various other metaterms tend to be historically-loaded from a semantic perspective, and in fact even ‘politeness’ can be problematic if one attempts to apply it e.g. on Victorian English data, in which it is defined differently (see e.g. Watts 1999). As the present paper illustrates, this issue becomes important in the case of those modern metaterms that exist in some form in historical proto-scientific discourses (Kádár and Haugh 2013), in particular if they are used in cross-cultural/intercultural pragmatics to describe culture-specific behaviour. Consequently, if one applies such modern metaterms uncritically, a contradiction may occur between their modern and historical understandings and implications.

This research is not an isolated attempt, as it contributes to intercultural/cross-cultural pragmatics and metapragmatic research in a broader sense. On the one hand cross-cultural studies such as Blum-Kulka and Sheffer (1993), Haugh and Obana (2007), Kádár (2013), Kádár and Mills (2013), and Kádár and Ran (2015) have argued that it is essential to carefully compare interpersonal pragmatic metaterms across cultures, instead of uncritically using English metaterms as analytic artefacts, as this unavoidably makes us presuppose that we analyse the same phenomena across cultures, even if we do not. Historical pragmaticians, on the other hand, such as Paternoster (2010), Jucker (2010), various scholars in Busse and Hübler (2012), and Culpeper (forthcoming), have drawn attention to the importance of studying historical metaterms, which help us to understand historically situated interpretations of interpersonal pragmatic phenomena³. In addition, in a recent article Verschueren (2012) has convincingly argued that historicity is a key issue in studying modern metaterms, even though he has not ventured into detailed historical pragmatic research. Yet, previous research has failed to discuss the important group of interpersonal pragmatic metaterms, which are used in both historical and modern analytic discourses. Figure 1 illustrates this knowledge gap.

In terms of spaces, which includes cultural, linguistic and geographical spaces, existing research has investigated the relationship between Western (usually English) interpersonal pragmatic metaterms and their culture-specific equivalents, such as English ‘face’ and its Sino-Japanese equivalents. The same applies to time: Historical pragmaticians have studied similarities and differences between modern and historical metaterms, and the implications of these differences. However, as the dotted arrow indicates, previous research has not studied a) the diachronic development of metaterms

³ The mutual interest of cross-cultural and historical scholars in this area is not coincidental: As Kádár and Culpeper (2010) argue, cross-cultural and historical pragmatics have a lot in common, as both of them serve as ‘testing grounds’ for major pragmatic concepts.

that were used in historical scientific discussions on language use and are still used in present day interpersonal pragmatics, and b) the implications of this development (but see Kádár 2015a as an exception). As the remaining part of this section argues, studying the above points is particularly important in the case of metaterms that are used in both cross-cultural/intercultural pragmatics and historical pragmatics.

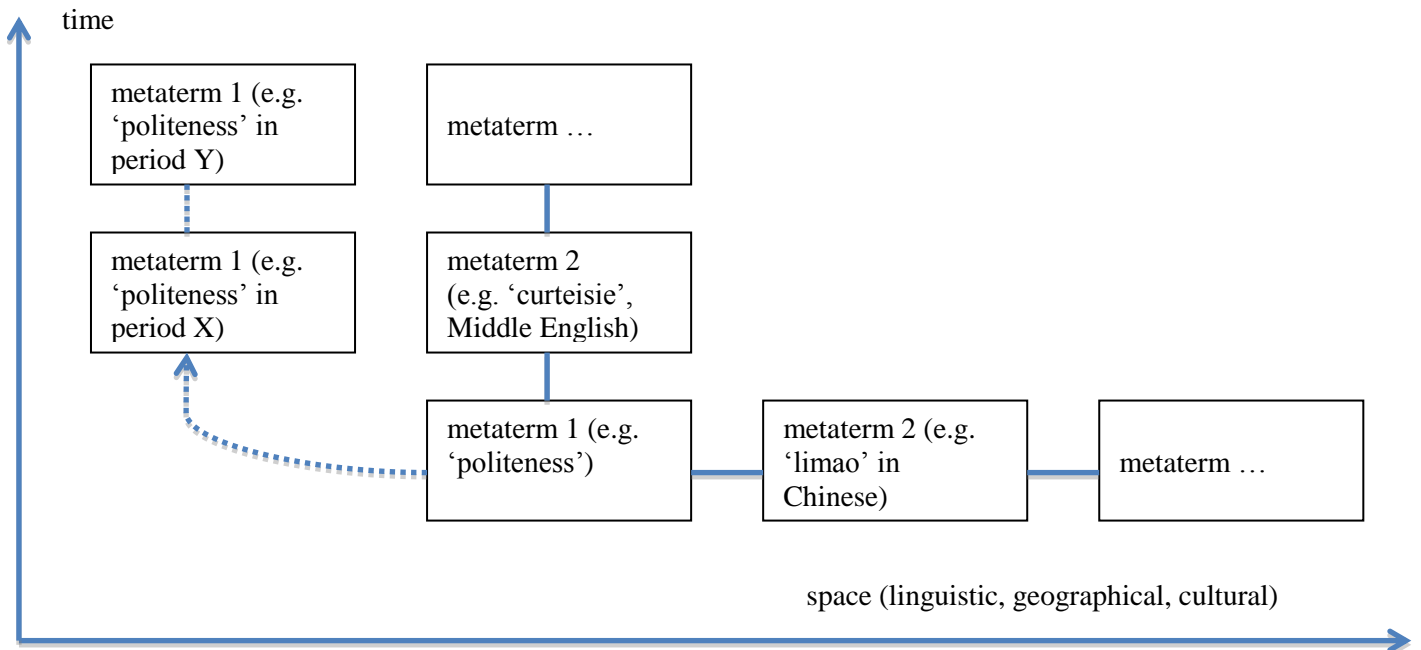


Figure 1: Current gap in metapragmatic research

The case study: 'discernment'

We intend to take the now widely used (and debated) concept of 'discernment' as a case study in this article. 'Discernment' has been introduced into the field of linguistic politeness research by Ide (1989), who elaborated the concept of 'discernment'–volition as a critique of Brown and Levinson (1987). Ide (1989, see also Ide 1992) argues that a weak point in the Brown and Levinsonian universal model is its Gricean worldview, i.e. it relies on the idea that politeness comes into existence when the speaker flouts conversational maxims through the means-ends reasoning of individuals (i.e. as speakers use language in 'strategic' ways, in order to trigger a certain inference associated with politeness). Drawing from the Japanese emic metaterm of *wakimae* ('discernment'), Ide (1989) argues that, in Japanese, one's behaviour tends to be judged as polite when one discerns the appropriate communal norm that applies in the situation, and this overrides individual rationality. Thus, 'discernment' involves "the socially dominant norms of relationally constructive conventional and ritualistic behaviour" (Kádár and Mills 2013: 143). This differs from dominant 'Western' practices of politeness, which operate through the means-ends reasoning of individuals, defined as 'volition' by Ide. As a representative example for the operation of 'discernment', Ide refers to the Japanese honorific register, which, according to her definition, tends to be

used in a non-strategic way as the interactants follow societal norms in the use of a given register in Japanese.

The concept of ‘discernment’ has been thoroughly criticised in cross-cultural pragmatics: Several scholars have challenged the notion that honorific style is always used non-strategically (‘discernment’). O’Driscoll (1996) raised this issue when criticising Hill et al. (1986), whilst Okamoto (1999) and Usami (2002) have shown that the usage of honorifics can be strategic in Japanese. Kádár (2007) has illustrated that the same is the case in other ‘honorific-rich’ languages such as historical vernacular Chinese. Pizziconi (2003: 1471; see also Pizziconi 2011) argues that “the principles regulating the use of honorific devices in Japanese are not substantially different from those of English, both being similarly strategic.” Furthermore, in a recent paper, Kádár and Mills (2013) argue that the ‘discernment’-volition pair is conceptually inappropriate, due to two interrelated reasons:

1. Ide uses a culture-specific concept, *wakimae*, to set up a broader (culture-outsider) scientific metaterm, ‘discernment’, which can be used to describe differences across languages and cultures.⁴ It is obvious, then, that ‘discernment’ has a broader meaning than *wakimae* – however, Ide applies these metaterms in an interchangeable way.
2. Volition is also not on par with *wakimae*, even though Ide refers to it as a typical North American value of politeness behaviour, simply because it is a scientific concept which does not seem to occur in American folk-theory.

Thus, following Kádár and Haugh’s (2013) recent framework, it can be argued that the ‘discernment’/*wakimae*-volition framework is problematic, since it uncritically amalgamates different second-order understandings of politeness.

In spite of these problematic characteristics, the notion of ‘discernment’ has made a significant impact on a number of areas, in particular historical pragmatic research. For example, Jucker (2010) describes Middle English politeness as a ‘discernment’ culture’, Mazzon (2010) draws on this concept in her research on terms of address, and Moreno (2002) applies this notion in the context of historical Spanish formal forms. It seems then that many historical pragmaticians have adopted ‘discernment’ as a ‘modern’ scientific concept directly from cross-cultural pragmatics, without taking cross-cultural pragmatic criticisms of this notion into account. We do not intend to argue against the reason behind this decision: ‘discernment’ seems to work surprisingly well as an umbrella term for historical cultures in which the use of formulaic language was prescribed vis-a-vis a complex nexus of conventions and rituals (see Bax 2010; Paternoster, 2015). However, such an essentialist usage is not without danger, as criticisms raised by cross-cultural/intercultural scholars apply also to the historical context. Even more importantly, from the perspective of our paper, a danger in this view is that historical pragmatic scholars do occasionally use ‘discernment’ to describe interpersonal behaviour in historical periods in which culture-specific equivalents of ‘discernment’ existed and, importantly, greatly influenced (proto-)scientific metadiscourse on proper interpersonal behaviour across Europe. Thus, the

⁴ To be fair, Ide (1989) does not use ‘discernment’ and volition as a clear dichotomy, but rather as tendencies in terms of culture-specific politeness behaviour.

particular notion of ‘discernment’ brings us into the realm of historical intercultural sociopragmatics (see Kádár 2015a).

In order to show the relevance of the historicity of ‘discernment’, our paper traces the development of the Italian verb *discernere*, the contemporary equivalent of ‘discernment’, and its synonyms in Italian conduct manuals written during the 16th century (this group of metaterms are referred to by using *discernere* as a collective term; for detailed discussion see Section 3). We argue that there are at least two reasons why the use of ‘discernment’ is even more problematic in our historical Italian data than what previous cross-cultural criticisms of this notion indicate in terms of modern interactional behaviour:

1. the meaning and implications of *discernere* do, to some extent, not only differ from but *contradict* that of ‘discernment’;
2. it is difficult even to identify *discernere* as the only metapragmatic ‘counterpart’ of ‘discernment’, as this term developed within a broader metapragmatic vocabulary in 16th century Italy.

What makes the picture even more complex is the fact that European cultures have greatly influenced each other, and *discernere*, for instance, had influence well beyond Italy, including the formation of ‘discernment’ in English (see Section 3). This makes the present study also relevant to cross-cultural and intercultural studies (e.g. Wierzbicka 2003; Zhu 2014) that continue to use ‘discernment’ as a valid analytic notion – if various Western cultures received influence by a historical understanding of this metaterm that differs from its modern technical understanding, it is very difficult to use it in the context of cultural divides. Therefore, in our view any historical account should take such intercultural appropriations (Wirth et al. 2008) into account before it adopts a modern metaterm as a broad ‘scientific’ notion, and vice versa, any cross-cultural/intercultural pragmatic account should count with the historicity of metalexems.

In a sense, our work breaks with a ‘convention’ in interpersonal pragmatics. As Kádár and Haugh (2013) argue, it is an unfortunate tendency in interpersonal pragmatics that East Asian languages are often used to test the validity of Western frameworks. Our aim, however, is to use Western data to challenge a theoretical framework that has been developed by the Japanese team of Ide (1989) and her colleagues. By doing so, we follow an uptake of Culpeper and O’Driscoll (2013) who argue that it is essential to probe into Western culture-specific understandings and practices of politeness.

Note that by examining the historicity of ‘discernment’ our main goal is not to simply add a new point of criticism to debates on this notion; as Kádár (2013) has argued, ‘discernment’ has its analytic strength, provided that it is properly applied. Instead of making such a criticism, our primary goal is to illustrate the importance of historicity in metapragmatics, by demonstrating that there is a potential discrepancy between the historical and modern meanings/uses of historically-loaded metaterms. This, in turn, implies that it is potentially problematic to project modern metaterms on historical data because a modern metaterm can have different equivalents. Importantly, by making this argument we do not intend to make a discursive claim that no technical term can be used with certainty, and that researchers need to be extremely careful when they use any kind of metalexeme. This would be shooting on straw targets, as perhaps

nobody would contest that lexemes (and metapragmatic comments) can shift in semantic scope over time, and similarly few would argue that metacomments are stable across the centuries. Instead, our view is that such metapragmatic issues become salient in a particular case, namely when it comes to technical terms with specific historical and cross-cultural pragmatic implications such as ‘discernment’. The number of such terms is arguably limited in the field, and the metapragmatic inquiry proposed in this paper is a more feasible task for future research in this particular area, rather than in pragmatics in a broader sense.

2. Data and methodology

We examine the historically situated understandings of the metaterm *discernere* in the following two main sources:

1. The *Libro del cortigiano*, *Book of the Courtier*, by Baldassarre (or Baldesar, or Baldessar) Castiglione, published in 1528 (compiled between 1513 and 1528).
2. The *Civil conversazione*, *The Civil Conversation*, written by Stefano Guazzo, published in 1574 (an extended version published in 1579).

We have selected these manuals partly because of their importance in contemporary scientific metadiscourses on appropriate behaviour across Europe (see below), and also because the verb *discernere* – and its corresponding noun and adjective – play a central role in them.⁵ The examination of these sources reveals that in 16th century Italian conduct literature (and, consequently, in the conduct literature of other countries influenced by these works up to the 18th century) the verb *discernere* has a meaning that in many ways contradicts with ‘discernment’ as it is understood in modern scientific discourses. In addition, these two manuals, respectively from the first and the last quarter of the century, allow us to demonstrate that a noteworthy development had taken place in the metalexical group of *discernere*-related terms (cf. Section 1).

In what follows, let us briefly introduce the history of the sources studied and the frequency of *discernere* in them. The *Book of the Courtier* is one of the most influential conduct manuals in European history: Burke (1995) identified as many as 153 editions and translations of the work between its publication in 1528 and 1848; notably, 115 of these publications are dated before 1600. These figures speak for themselves, in particular if one takes the fact into consideration that in that period book publication and selling operated at a significantly lower volume and at a slower pace than in modern times (see e.g. Diringer 2013). The text was very quickly translated into Spanish (1534) and into French (1537). Other languages followed in the second half of the century: Latin (1561), English (1561) and German (1565). The only parts of Europe

⁵ The third hugely influential Italian conduct book, continuously reprinted in Italy and printed in translation outside Italy, is *Galateo* by Giovanni Della Casa, published in 1558. Culpeper (forthcoming) investigates how the English translations of *Galateo*, *the Courtier* and *The Civil Conversation* influence the rise of the English metaterm ‘manners’ in the prescriptive context of social regulation. Despite *Galateo*’s obvious impact, here we do not use it as a main source, since it contains no occurrences of *discernere*. We are thankful to Jonathan Culpeper for giving us access to his unpublished paper on this topic.

remaining outside Castiglione's influence sphere were "the Celtic world," the "northern parts of Scandinavia," and to the east, Moscow and the Christian parts of the Ottoman Empire: "Serbia, Moldavia, Wallachia, Bulgaria, etc." (Burke 1995: 156).

The European fortune of Guazzo's *The Civil Conversation* is equally vast. The manual has 43 Italian editions before 1650 (Patrizi 2003), i.e. within less than a century after its publication, and it was translated in French in 1579, and then, from French, into English between 1581 and 1586; subsequently, there were German and Latin versions.

It is important to note that although our paper focuses on Italian data, this language choice has importance and implications beyond Romance studies. This is not only due to a) the broader metapragmatic scope of our inquiry, but also b) due to the fact that Castiglione's and Guazzo's works, and consequently the metalexemes studied, have been translated into English. Although we do not specifically interrogate the historical meaning of the English metaterm 'to discern' here, we would like to emphasise the need for a detailed study on this area. A noteworthy fact is that in the first English translation of *the Courtier* by Thomas Hoby, 1561, every single Italian metapragmatic use of *discernere* (5 occurrences in Castiglione, see Table 1 below) is translated with the English verb 'to discern'; this could possibly mean that in the 16th century the English 'to discern' was used with a metapragmatic meaning different from what Ide (1989) claims for modern 'discernment'.

In terms of methodology, we approach the topic studied through two stages of inquiry. In Section 3 we study the sources from quantitative and semantic perspectives: we examine the frequency of occurrence and meanings of *discernere* and related metaterms. Since metaterms such as *discernere* are not necessarily used in their metapragmatic function, it is important to a) examine each of their contextually situated meanings, and b) capture the relationship between these metapragmatic meanings. In Section 4 we conduct a discourse analytic case study by examining the way in which the metaterm *discernere* is used in the sources studied, in order to capture further differences between modern 'discernment' and its historical Italian 'counterpart.' Whilst we argue in Section 3 that the verbal form *discernere* itself had gradually become less important than some of its synonyms by the time when our second source, *The Civil Conversation*, was published, we believe that it is important to conduct an examination by focusing on this particular metaterm, as a seemingly direct equivalent of 'discern(ment).'

3. *Discernere* and related metaterms

When it comes to a historical metalexical inquiry of the present scope, it is important to be aware of the fact that the historical 'equivalent' of a metaterm, in our case *discernere*, may not only have a different meaning from its modern 'counterpart', but also may have synonyms that a researcher cannot ignore.⁶ We argue that in order to conduct a rigorous examination of the historical metalexicon, any inquiry will benefit from situating a term within its semantic family or field (see also Busse and Hübler

⁶ It is pertinent to note that whilst Lucy (1993: 16) in his groundbreaking work on metapragmatics draws attention to the importance of studying synonyms as regular intralingual forms, few studies have explored this area.

2012; Simon-Vandenberg and Defour 2012). In our specific case, the synonymy is based in etymology, and we will set off by taking an etymological perspective.

In the *Book of the Courtier*, *discernere* appears 11 times, in various tenses and modes.⁷ Whereas in one case the verb *discernere* relates to the action of seeing, indicating a mere sensorial perception, in all other cases it means ‘to distinguish’; of these 10 cases, in 5 it describes cases in which appropriate behaviour has to be chosen in respect of the circumstances, i.e. ‘to distinguish the appropriate choice’. With *discernere the Courtier* distinguishes clearly all the different circumstantial factors, before finding the match between such factors and the choice of appropriate behaviour. Table 1 illustrates the meanings and number of occurrences of *discernere* in *the Courtier*.

<i>Meaning</i>	<i>Number of occurrences</i>
perceive (with one’s eyes)	1
distinguish	5
distinguish the appropriate choice (metalexical use)	5
Total	11

Table 1. Discernere in the Book of the Courtier

Considering that the total length of *the Courtier* is 116,738 words, this number of occurrences is relatively low; however, an important fact that counterbalances sheer quantity is that metalexical *discernere* consistently appears in passages that reflect on the right method for establishing a specific choice of behaviour. It is also pertinent to add that *discernere* has metalexical synonyms in the source: Castiglione never uses the noun *discernimento* (‘discernment’) but instead he applies the nominal form *discrezione*. This nominal form appears 8 times in the text, and in cases in which it refers to appropriate behaviour it means ‘capacity to distinguish the appropriate choice’, as it is made evident by Table 2.

<i>Meaning</i>	<i>Number of occurrences</i>
power to decide	1
capacity to distinguish the appropriate choice (metalexical use)	7
Total	8

Table 2. Discrezion(e) in the Book of the Courtier

In addition, the adjective *discreto* is used in the source in the same metapragmatic meaning, i.e. in reference to someone being ‘able to distinguish the appropriate choice’ in interpersonal communication. Variants of this form (singular, plural, masculine, feminine, adverb, superlative) reach a total of 36 in *the Courtier*, as Table 3 illustrates.

⁷ Concordances of the *Libro del cortigiano* are available at http://www.intratext.com/IXT/ITA1702/_INDEX.HTM.

Meaning	Number of occurrences
able to distinguish the appropriate choice (metalexical use)	36
Total	36

Table 3. *Discreto* in the *Book of the Courtier*

To sum up, *discernere*, *discrezion(e)* and *discreto* are used in a complementary way; this use becomes logical if one considers their etymology, as illustrated by Figure 2.

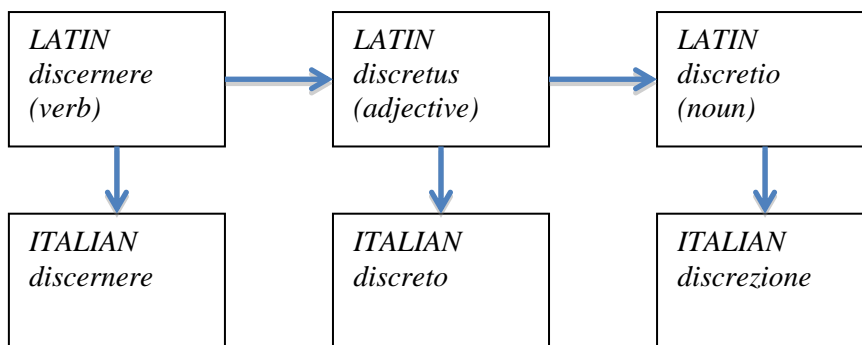


Figure 2. Etymological development of the Italian metaterms studied

Italian *discernere* comes from the Latin verb *discernere*, which is composed of the verb *scernere* ‘to choose’, and the prefix *dis-* ‘by separating’ (Cortelazzo-Zolli 473). This Latin verb has a past participle *discretus*, which in turn has produced the Late Latin noun *discretio*. These Latin expressions made their way directly into Italian. Whilst the Latin terms form a morphological family (they derive from the base *discernere*), the Italian ones do not since they do not derive from each other, but from three separate Latin roots. In other words, *discreto* and *discrezione* were not built from *discernere* in an Italian derivational process.

If one turns to the second source, *The Civil Conversation* by Guazzo,⁸ the complexity of comparing historical and modern metaterms becomes even more evident. An inquiry into this source reveals that there is an additional metaterm used here: *discretezza*. The meaning of this metaterm is close to that of modern Italian *discrezione* (‘discretion’), as it refers to ‘the capacity to not mention certain things in a conversation in order to keep a secret or to avoid causing offence.’ This demonstrates that metaterms are subject to continuous diachronic development, a factor that makes any uncritical projection of modern scientific metaterms on historical data even more difficult.

In what follows, let us examine occurrences of the four metasynonyms in *The Civil Conversations*. In terms of data size, Guazzo’s work is longer than that of Castiglione: It consists of roughly 157,000 words (Guazzo 1993, vol. 1: 479). In a similar way to the *Book of the Courtier*, the frequency of metaterms in the *discernere* group is relatively low on the one hand, whilst on the other hand, these lexemes are

⁸ See <http://www.bibliotecaitaliana.it/indice/visualizza_scheda/bibit000235>.

used in key points of the discussion. The following three tables illustrate the use of *discernere*, *discrezion(e)* and *discreto*:

<i>Meaning</i>	<i>Number of occurrences</i>
perceive (with one's eyes)	1
distinguish	8
distinguish the appropriate choice (metalexical use)	3
Total	12

Table 4. Discernere in The Civil Conversation

<i>Meaning</i>	<i>Number of occurrences</i>
power to decide	3
capacity to distinguish the appropriate choice (metalexical use)	7
Total	10

Table 5. Discrezion(e) in The Civil Conversation

<i>Meaning</i>	<i>Number of occurrences</i>
discreet (metalexical use)	11
able to distinguish the appropriate choice (metalexical use)	24
Total	35

Table 6. Discreto in The Civil Conversation

These tables reveal some noteworthy differences between the metalexical inventories of the sources. It seems that the metalexical meaning of the verbal form *discernere* is somewhat less frequent in *The Civil Conversation* than in the *Book of the Courtier*. Furthermore, *discreto* seems to operate in two metalexical functions: That is, it continues to be used as a reference to the ability for distinguishing the appropriate choice of a certain form of interpersonal behaviour, and it also occurs in the new sense of being discreet. This new use coincides with the presence of the above-mentioned noun *discretezza*, the occurrence of which in *The Civil Conversation* is illustrated by Table 7.

<i>Meaning</i>	<i>Number of occurrences</i>
discretion (metalexical use)	12
able to distinguish the appropriate choice (metalexical use)	7
Total	19

Table 7. Discretezza in The Civil Conversation

Thus, in *The Civil Conversation* two nominal forms, *discrezion(e)* and *discretezza* are used, and *discreto* a) functions as the adjective for both nouns, and b) sometimes means ‘discreet’, and other times ‘able to distinguish the appropriate choice’. The partial synonymy within *discrezione*, *discretezza*, and *discreto* shows that ‘discretion’ and ‘discreet’ (in the modern meaning of withholding potentially offensive comments) are etymologically derived from the concept of having good judgment. That is, having good judgment in the specific context of conversation implies saying less and speaking with moderation, out of considerateness for one’s speech partner’s feelings.

To sum up, the present section has examined the meanings and occurrences of metaterms of the *discernere* group in the sources studied. The following Figures 3 and 4 – in which the boldface and underlined areas represent the metapragmatic use/meaning of a given lexeme – summarise the meanings of these metaterms.

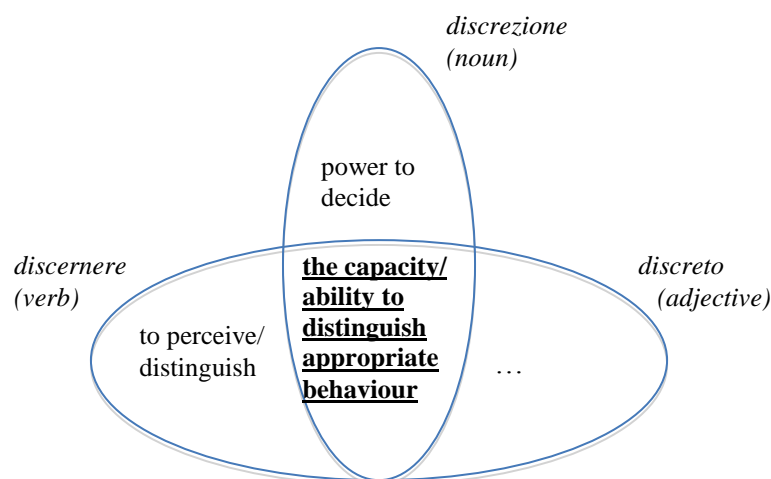


Figure 3. Meanings of *discernere*, *discrezione* and *discreto* in the *Book of the Courtier*

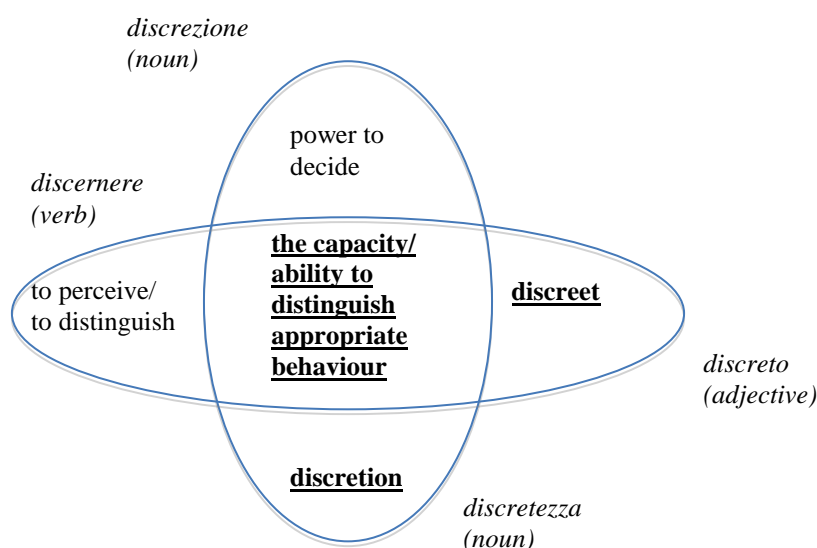


Figure 4. Meanings of *discernere*, *discrezione*, *discretezza*, and *discreto* in *The Civil Conversation*

These figures illustrate the above discussed widening in the metapragmatic use of the *discernere* group.

It is pertinent to note, in addition to this discussion, that the metapragmatic widening observed here is only temporal, in the sense that it reflects a transition between two states of meaning.⁹ If one compares the seven tables above, it becomes evident that, for Guazzo's *discernere*, the meaning of 'to distinguish the appropriate choice' is only present in a quarter of the cases (3 out of 12; see Table 4), whereas in Castiglione it was still present in nearly half of the cases (5 out of 11; see Table 1). Also, for Guazzo's adjective *discreto*, the meaning 'discreet' is already present in just under a third of the occurrences (11 out of 35; see Table 6), whilst in Castiglione there were none (out of 36; see Table 3). If one takes *discrezione* out of the equation, where the metapragmatic meaning of 'distinguishing the appropriate behaviour' is comfortably dominant in Guazzo as well as in Castiglione (see Tables 2 and 5), for *discernere* and *discreto* the metapragmatic reference to 'appropriateness' is losing terrain.

Section 3 has proven the two main interrelated claims of this article, that is, that a) there is a potential discrepancy between the historical and modern meanings/uses of historically-loaded metaterms, and b) that it is potentially problematic to project modern metaterms on historical data because a modern metaterm can have different equivalents that, in addition, are subject to historical development. In what follows, let us conduct a discourse analytic examination of the verbal form *discernere*, in order to further delve into the first point, by capturing differences between 'discernment' and *discernere* on a more in-depth level.

4. Interactional use of *discernere*

We divide the present section into two parts, by examining the metapragmatic meanings of *discernere* in the two sources.

The Book of the Courtier

The Courtier is written as a dialogue: A group of courtiers has gathered at the palace of Urbino to discuss the qualities of the perfect courtier and the perfect lady. The discussions last four evenings, each evening making up the content of one of the four books of the dialogue. Many occurrences of our metaterms appear in Book II. In Book I, the courtiers have discussed the qualities of the perfect courtier: He needs to be of noble birth, behave with effortless grace, speak and write properly. Although his real vocation is in military service, he has to have a sound knowledge of literature, he needs to master the art of drawing (useful for military maps!) and of performing music. In the first half of Book II, then, the courtiers talk about the appropriate way in which the courtier's qualities listed in Book I need to be adapted to specific circumstances. This is

⁹ It is pertinent to note regarding the above discussed phenomenon of 'metapragmatic widening' that the present day connotation of these Italian lexemes tend to follow the patterns that were identified for Guazzo. Only *discernere* has lost its metalexical meaning and is now used exclusively as 'to distinguish', however, *discernimento* and *discrezione* have preserved the specific metalexical and heuristic meaning that refers to the mental process of making an appropriate judgment. In *discretezza* and *discreto*, this meaning has evolved into the capacity to act with moderation and measure, putting emphasis on the resulting behaviour rather than on the preceding mental process. As in Guazzo, in present day Italian *discrezione*, *discretezza* and *discreto* also refer to the capacity to maintain a secret.

where *discernere* appears first, as example (1) below shows, in a context that defines the intellectual capacity necessary to act appropriately. In this conversation the main speaker, Federico Fregoso, discusses the risk of wrongly applying general rules of interpersonal behavioural norms in actual conversations, without carefully considering the actual situation:

(1)

E potrà occorrere che l'uomo si astenerà da una sciocchezza pubblica e troppo chiara [...] e non saprà poi astenersi di lodare se stesso fuori di proposito, di usare una presunzione fastidiosa, di dire talora una parola pensando di fare ridere, la quale per essere detta fuori di tempo, riuscirà fredda e senza grazia alcuna. E spesso questi errori sono coperti di un certo velo, che scorgere non li lascia da chi li fa, se con diligenza non vi si mira. E benché per molte cause la vista nostra poco discerna, pure sopra tutto per l'ambizione diviene tenebrosa: che ognuno volentieri si mostra in quello che si persuade di sapere, o vera o falsa che sia quella persuasione. (2002a: 105–6)

And a man may happen to refrain from some public and all too obvious folly [...], and yet not have sense enough to refrain from praising himself on the wrong occasion, or from indulging in tiresome presumption, or from saying something which he thinks will provoke laughter but which, because said at the wrong time, falls cold and completely flat. And often these errors are covered with a kind of veil that prevents the one who commits them from seeing them unless he keeps in this a diligent watch; and although there are many reasons why our eyes are wanting in 'discernment' ["and although for many causes our sight *discerneth* but little" (1561:56¹⁰)], it is by ambition that they are especially blurred, because everyone is ready to put himself forward in that wherein he thinks himself to be knowledgeable, no matter whether it be true or not. (2002b: 70)

Federico identifies a basic problem: It is difficult to choose the right form of behaviour in cases in which the terms of the decision are unclear. Here *discernere* covers the mental process by which *the Courtier* distinguishes neatly the hazy terms of an alternative, between the appropriate and the inappropriate option, before choosing one of them and committing to action. *Discernere* therefore uses a heuristic method to reach a decision on appropriateness in a specific interactional context – unlike modern 'discernment', which implies the ability of behaving according to pre-existing interactional norms, with little individual responsibility in the decision making process. According to example (1), when trying to distinguish between appropriate and inappropriate behaviour ("on the wrong occasion", "at the wrong time"), the options can be "veiled",¹¹ especially as the courtier's eyes may be "blurred" by ambition. Since the

¹⁰ As the original source does not have page numbers, these numbers refer to the image of the pdf we have consulted.

¹¹ It is an interesting fact that the notion of 'veil' and 'veiling' is present in modern pragmatics, similarly to 'discernment'. For example, Mey (1985: 63) distinguishes the notion of "veiling", which refers to "using a language that claims to deal with reality in an objective, correct, matter-of-fact way, while hiding reality from language's users."

options appear to be veiled, the courtier needs to discern his options before taking any interpersonal communicative action.

Consequently, *discernere* is an individual skill, called “good judgment”, as the following section makes clear:

(2)

E benché il cortigiano sia di così buon giudizio che possa discernere queste differenze, non è però che più facile non gli sia conseguire quello che cerca, essendogli aperto il pensiero con qualche precetto. (2002a: 106)

And although the courtier may be of such good judgment as to perceive these differences [“that he can *discerne* these differences” (1561: 56)], it will surely be easier for him to do what he is striving to do if his mind’s eye is made attentive by some precept. (2002b: 70–71)

Social norms, which make someone’s mind’s eye “attentive”, hence facilitating individual decisions, are rather simple in *the Courtier*: There is only one specific behavioural norm, the need of avoiding affectation, as example (3) illustrates:

(3)

Voglio adunque che il nostro cortigiano in ciò che egli faccia o dica usi alcune regole universali le quali io estimo che brevemente contengano tutto quello che a me si appartiene di dire. E per la prima e più importante, fugga [...] sopra tutto l'affettazione. Appresso consideri bene che cosa è quella che egli fa o dice, e il luogo dove la fa, in presenza di cui, a che tempo, la causa perché la fa, l'età sua, la professione, il fine dove tende, e i mezzi che a quello condurre lo possono. E così, con queste avvertenze, si accomodi discretamente a tutto quello che fare o dire vuole. (2002a: 108)

Therefore, in all that he does or says, I would have our Courtier follow certain general rules which, in my opinion, briefly comprise all I have to say. And the first and most important of these is that he should avoid affectation above all else [...]. Next, let him consider well what he does or says, the place where he does it, in whose presence, its timeliness, the reason for doing it, his own age, his profession, the end at which he aims, and the means by which he can reach it; thus, keeping these points in mind, let him act accordingly in whatever he may choose to do or say. (2002b: 72)

Apart from the specific notion of avoiding affectation, Federico’s discussion remains general, as he advises the courtier to “act accordingly” (“*si accomodi discretamente*”), i.e. distinguishing the different circumstances before making an interpersonal behavioural choice. The notion of ‘circumstances’ is considerably vague in the discussion: Later in the text Federico names some substantial circumstances to consider (the *circumstantiae locutionis* of classical rhetoric; Eden 1997), including the notions of “*quis, quid, cui dicas, cur, quomodo, quando?*” “who, what, with whom, why, how, when?” As the norms discussed here have a broad meaning, it is not a coincidence that one of Federico’s speech partners Morello da Ortona makes a sarcastic remark, by making an analogy between Federico’s notion of appropriate behaviour and the act of

confession, where the degree of sin depends indeed on the ‘circumstances’ in which it was committed:

(4)

[...] *benché mi ricordi ancora qualche altra volta averle udite dai frati coi quali confessato mi sono. E parmi che le chiamino le circostanze.* (2002a: 108)

[...] although I do remember having heard them sometimes from friars when I was at confession, and they call them ‘the circumstances’, it seems to me. (2002b: 72)

In sum, *discernere* involves an individualistic act/ability, which implies responsibility in a vague context. Interestingly, the individualistic character of *discernere* becomes even more evident as it is presented as a capacity with which the individual needs to supplement the inherent limitations of the conduct manual. This use is illustrated by example (5), in which Ludovico Pio is asking what a courtier is to do if his prince were to ask him to perform “dishonorable and disgraceful” acts (2002b: 85). Federico gives the following response:

(5)

“Vero è che molte cose paiono al primo aspetto buone che sono male, e molte paiono male eppure sono buone. Però è lecito talora per servizio dei suoi signori ammazzare non un uomo ma diecimila, e fare molte altre cose, le quali, a chi non le considerasse come si deve, pareriano male, eppure non sono.”

Rispose allora il signor Gaspare Pallavicino: “Deh, per vostra fede, ragionate un poco sopra questo e insegnateci come si possano discernere le cose veramente buone dalle apparenti.”

“Perdonatemi,” disse messer Federico “io non voglio entrare qua che troppo ci saria che dire, ma il tutto si rimetta alla discrezione vostra.” (2002a: 129–130)

“It is true that many things that are evil appear at first sight to be good, and many appear evil and yet are good. Hence, when serving one’s master it is sometimes permitted to kill not one man but ten thousand men, and do many other things that might seem evil to a man who did not look upon them as one ought, and yet are not evil.”

Then Signor Gaspar Pallavicino replied: “I pray you, by your faith, go into this a bit more, and teach us how one can distinguish what is really good [“how we maie descerne thinges good in deede” (1561: 67)] from what appears to be good.” “Excuse me,” said messer Federico, “I do not wish to go into that, for there would be too much to say; but let the whole question be left to your discretion.” (2002b: 86)

In example (5) both *discernere* and its nominal variant *discrezion* are used. Unsatisfied with the generic reply, Gaspar asks Federico to be more specific, to distinguish (using metapragmatic *discernere*). Federico provides a tautology as a response: In order to distinguish the appropriate choice, Gaspar needs to use *discrezione*, the capacity of distinguishing the appropriate choice. Instead of developing rules for specific cases, Federico substitutes regulation with the courtier’s personal judgment.

A noteworthy feature of example (5) is that it ventures outside the realm of etiquette – or ‘social oughts’ (see Culpeper 2011) – and brings appropriate behaviour into the world of moral choices or ‘moral oughts’ (see Kádár and Marquez-Reiter 2015). This is another feature that distinguishes *discernere*, and other metaterms in the lexical group, from ‘discernment’, as the latter is basically a social rather than a moral concept. This calls for a further contextualisation of Castiglione’s metapragmatic terms under examination. ‘Discernment’ as a moral capacity to separate right from wrong is present in the treatises of the Church fathers, where the notion appears in Latin (see Pappasogli 2013). Whilst the examination of this topic is beyond the scope of this paper, it is useful here to refer to the religious application of Latin *discretio* – the equivalent of *discrezione* in example (5) – in Saint Ignatius of Loyola. Loyola’s *Spiritual Exercises* (first published in Latin as the *Exercitia spiritualia* in 1548) was written between 1522 and 1524, when Castiglione was in the last stages of writing *the Courtier*. The *Spiritual Exercises* is a manual for meditation, written mainly for Jesuit novices; it consists of exercises for self-review, which help the novice to meditate about the true nature of his vocation. One of the main aims of the *Exercises* is to develop *discretio* in the novice, that is, the ability to distinguish between good desires and evil desires, between Godliness and sinfulness, in cases where evil may be veiled as good, and this good is only an apparent good. This notion seems to represent an explicitly religious and moral version of Castiglione’s social and moral concept of *discernere* as represented by example (5).

The Civil Conversation

As *discernere* only appears 3 times with a metapragmatic meaning, in what follows we analyse all the occurrences of the term in the text. The first manifestation of *discernere* occurs within an elaborate discussion of the question of whether socialising with noblemen who play betting games with cards and dice in public on the town square is appropriate or not. The question is framed as a ‘judgment’ (*giudicio*; 1993: 45), and the author of the text considers several arguments: Two opposing views and a middle ground. The first argument is in favour of the idea of such socialisation practices: The author argues that playing cards in public is an accepted practice. The second one is an argument against mingling with these people, as playing cards in public has always been considered a scandalous act. The third argument, involving *discernere*, reads as follows:

(6)

Tuttavia fra queste estreme ragioni io ne discerno una nel mezo, che mi fa conchiudere che questi s’abbiano a sopportare, conciosiacosaché se bene hanno per consuetudine questo abuso, voi troverete però che comunemente non se ne servono a quell’ingordo e vizioso fine ove tendono alcuni giocatori, anzi giuntatori, ma sì bene per passatempo e per maniera di trastullo. (1993: 45)

Notwithstanding, betwéene these two extrémee reasons, I sée one in the midst betwéene them, which maketh méee of opinion that these men are to bée counted tollerable, for that though they haue by vse this abuse of playing, yet you shall finde that they apply it not to that ende, which other gamesters doe, to make a gaine of it, but for pastetime and recreation sake. (1581, vol.1: 26)

Discernere here indicates the decisive step in the decision making process that determines the choice of an appropriate form of behaviour (joining or not the group). Example (6) seems to be closely related to Castiglione's use of *discernere* as a method for establishing the appropriate decision in interpersonal behaviour.

In the other examples studied here, *discernere* appears both in discussions of the extreme difficulty of distinguishing between a friend and a flatterer, that is, between a true friend and a false friend, and in how to avoid being considered as a flatterer by others:

(7)

E con tutto che alcuni valenti scrittori abbiano trattato de' modi co' quali si conosce l'amico dall'adulatore, nondimeno è cosa molto malagevole, per non dir impossibile, il conseguir questa conoscenza, così perché il mondo è ripieno di queste fiere domestiche, come perché non si può chiaramente discernere quel male che ha sembianza di bene. (1993: 57)

And albeit some famous writers haue intreated of the meanes to discerne a friend from a flatterer, yet is it in my opinion verie harde (that I may not say impossible) to attaine to that knowledge, as well for that the worlde is full of these tame beastes, as also for that it is harde to discerne the euill which resembleth the good. (1581, vol. 1: 32)¹²

(8)

Poiché l'amico e l'adulatore hanno tanta conformità insieme, che con fatica si discernono, mi piacerebbe che m'insegnaste come farò sì ch'io non sia tenuto adulatore. (1993: 62)

For so much as the friend, and the flatterer haue so great conformitie together, that hardly one can bée knowne from the other, I woulde gladly haue you instruct mée howe I ought to behaue my selfe not to bée reputed a flatterer. (1581, vol. 1: 39)

Similarly to the previous examples in Section 4, *discernere* appears as an individualistic and moral evaluation of, and choice between, an evil (flattering) act veiled as good (friendship) and genuine behaviour.

In sum, the present section has shown that *discernere* is used in a consistent way in 16th century Italian manuals on appropriate behaviour. On the basis of the 8 examples studied in this section, we can conclude that 16th century understandings of *discernere* include the following properties of this notion:

1. an individualistic act/ability;
2. an act/ability that implies the responsibility of an individual;
3. it operates in different context types;
4. it not only fulfils a social ought but also, potentially, a moral value in the philosophical sense of the word.

¹² Note that the translator uses 'to discern' twice, whereas in Italian it occurs only once.

These characteristics are clearly different from ‘discernment’, which according to Ide (1989) is:

1. pre-negotiated and part of interactional expectations (i.e. everyone in a given culture should have the skill to communicate by observing it);
2. consequently, once it is followed, the individual has no responsibility;
3. it operates in specific contexts;
4. it is a social ought, and although it is subject to moralising discourses it is not necessarily a moral value by itself.

It could be argued, as regards point 4, that the Japanese notion of *wakimae* is a moral value similarly to ‘discernment’. Let us put aside the problem here that the concept of ‘discernment’ has lost its analytic rigour, as Ide (1989) has implicitly drawn equality between ‘discernment’ and *wakimae*. As far as one attributes the characteristics of *wakimae* to the broader concept of ‘discernment’ it is possible to argue that this concept is moral in a philosophical sense. However, we believe that it is important to draw a distinction between ‘discernment’ and *discernere* in terms of morality, not only because the notion of ‘discernment’ (if rigorously applied) is inherently technical – and as such void of any moral implication – but also because there is an important divide between *wakimae* and *discernere*. That is, *discernere* is an essentially positive value, and so it is not a coincidence that it occurs in Loyola’s religious discourses. *Wakimae*, on the other hand – unlike some other concepts such as *reigi tadashi* 礼義正し (‘polite’), see Haugh and Kádár (2015) – is often perceived negatively as a ‘social ought’ rather than a moral need in Japanese metadiscourses on interpersonal behaviour.¹³

In addition to these significant differences between *discernere* and ‘discernment’, let us recall the argument of Section 3, even at the cost of sounding repetitive, that *discernere* is just one of the various metasynonyms in a group, which started to decline when *The Civil Conversation* was written. This further demonstrates the extreme complexity of using modern, historically-loaded metalexemes without proper historical retrospection.

5. Conclusion

The present paper has studied the historical ‘load’ of ‘discernment’, in order to provide a case study as to why historicity is important in metapragmatics. Whilst the problem studied here may not be valid for every single metaterm, it is certainly an issue for the metapragmatician to consider in order to maintain analytic rigour. Although – as Verschueren (2012) has shown – drawing historicity into metapragmatics may not entail a strict-sense historical pragmatic inquiry, this area provides an excellent melting pot for metapragmatics and historical pragmatics.

The present research has also shown an intersection between cross-cultural/intercultural pragmatics and historical pragmatics. We have argued that even if a metaterm seems to operate adequately for the analysis of certain data types, unless

¹³ As Haugh and Kádár (2015) argue, such metadiscourses on *wakimae* and related notions are similar to British metadiscourses on the concept of ‘politeness’.

both its cross-cultural/intercultural pragmatic and historical pragmatic validities are tested, its use tends to raise certain concerns. For example, whilst ‘discernment’ seems to work surprisingly well for the analysis of Middle English data (e.g. Jucker 2010), its acritical use in a historical English context inherently ignores the intercultural significant fact that this metalexeme has been used in historical metadiscussions of certain historical periods in England, due to the popularity of Italian conduct manuals. In a similar vein, whereas in cross-cultural and intercultural pragmatics ‘discernment’ can operate neatly (e.g. Wierzbicka 2003; Zhu 2014), there is an imminent risk behind claiming an East-West divide, or even minor differences, by using a notion which has a different semantic load from what it is supposed to represent in terms of intercultural differences.

Apart from contributing to the debate that surrounds ‘discernment’, the present paper has raised rather than resolved problems, although in our view such a problem-raising is, by itself, an important contribution to the field as it increases self-reflexivity and academic rigour. It is pertinent to note that the present research has been conducted as part of two broader research projects. First, Paternoster is currently conducting a research project (see footnote 2) dedicated to the study of how historical ‘discernment’ (or the aristocratic conduct code of ceremonial behaviour) had transformed through social and political changes in 19th century Italy. This project interrogates how the rise of the bourgeoisie and the growing emphasis on family life pushed ceremonial behaviour into very specific interactional contexts, leaving space for a modern understanding of interpersonal politeness. Secondly, Kádár (2015b) is conducting a project on ritual behaviour, intercultural communication and metapragmatics, and the analytic pattern presented here plays an important role in the project. Importantly, this analytic pattern is replicable, and it is hoped that further research will be dedicated to the historical and intercultural/cross-cultural revision of pragmatic metaterms. Again, as we explained in the introduction of this paper, such research attempts should be cross-cultural and historical in scope – we do not think that all the technical terms that we use in pragmatics are potentially dangerous due to their historicity, but we do believe that this issue is a key when it comes to these particular areas within pragmatics.

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