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“SORRY, BUT I HAVE TO SAY”: CRITICISM TRAPPED BY POLITENESS IN THE GENRE OF A THEATRE INTERNET REVIEW

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Abstract. The study is focused on the interaction of criticism and politeness in critical theatre reviews posted on social networks. The sample includes more than 1,000 posts published in a theater lovers group on the VKontakte social network. The concept of polite criticism is introduced in the article. This type of criticism is implemented in the text in several directions. It is established that politeness can bring about modification of the communicative goal, alterations in the genre script, including the omission of aspects that provoke criticism, changes in the narrative strategy, when a critical judgment is placed in the middle of the text, where the severity of criticism is less pungent. The article also describes cases when the object of criticism is shifted by foregrounding the author as the one being criticized, as well as by taking criticism beyond the object that is criticized, i.e. to the level of the situation. It also shows that the situation under consideration can be represented in an abridged format. In linguistic terms, preference is given to lexical and grammatical units that reduce the critical tone of the statement. Logically, concession and contrast are engaged for the criticism to be outplayed by something praiseworthy. Polite criticism results in expressing a critical judgment on the border of bona-fide and non-bona-fide communication.

Key words: politeness, criticism, theatre review, internet review, non-bona-fide communication.

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«ПРОСТИТЕ, НО Я ВСЕ ЖЕ СКАЖУ»: КРИТИКА В ТИСКАХ ВЕЖЛИВОСТИ В ЖАНРЕ ТЕАТРАЛЬНОГО ИНТЕРНЕТ-ОТЗЫВА

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Аннотация. Статья посвящена исследованию проявлений категории вежливости при выражении критики в жанре театрального интернет-отзыва, размещенного в виде поста в социальных сетях. Эмпирическая выборка охватывает более чем 1 000 постов на русском языке, опубликованных в группе любителей театра в социальной сети «ВКонтакте». В статье предлагается понятие вежливой критики в дополнение к имеющимся разновидностям критики. Такая критика реализуется в тексте по нескольким направлениям. Установлено, что вежливость может приводить к смене коммуникативной цели, изменениям в жанровом скрипте вплоть до опущения вызывающих критику аспектов, изменению нарративной стратегии, когда критическое суждение помещается в середину текста, где острота критики менее ощутима. Описаны случаи смещения объекта критики за счет выдвигания в качестве критикуемого самого автора, а также вынесения критики за пределы критикуемого объекта – на уровень ситуации. Показано, что ситуация, которая описывается, может быть подвергнута редуцированию. В языковом плане предпочтение отдается лексическим и грамматическим единицам, которые снижают критическую тональность высказывания. На уровне логического механизма используются уступительные и контрастивные конструкции. В результате автор критического отзыва балансирует на грани двух полярных модусов коммуникации – bona-fide и non-bona-fide.

Ключевые слова: вежливость, критика, театральные отзывы, интернет-отзыв, non-bona-fide-коммуникация.

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Introduction

Even though professionals claim that “criticism need not be aggressive” [Attardo, 2020, p. 67], there is a wide-spread opinion that it really is. Not to sound offensive critics resort to various communicative instruments to get across their ideas without threatening the face of those under criticism. The key to the problem is politeness which could help reach this two-sided goal. Traditionally, politeness is understood as a universal communicative device which leads to “avoiding conflict and maintaining harmonious relations with others” [Holmes, 2009, p. 711]. Thus, criticism molded in politeness loses its assaultive or vindictive mode and becomes acceptable due to the wording which softens and smooths the message. There are various ways to introduce politeness into the text and the skill of a text producer as of a great communicator shows in it. Nevertheless, there are certain genres of texts the aim of which is to give a critical overview and evaluation of works of art. That said, several questions arise. Firstly, how in this case do two extremes – criticism and politeness – go together? Secondly, does politeness diminish the extent of the criticism? Or, thirdly, vice versa, does it help find a constructive solution or a balanced approach to the problem discussed?

The focus of the current study is a theatre review written by a theatre fan and posted in a social network group on the Internet. Theatre reviews have existed as a genre for a long time but traditionally their authors were professional critics. Nowadays with the introduction of electronic media common spectators have a chance to review the performances and express their personal opinion either praising or criticizing them. These fan communities are organized on various social networks and very often they are connected to the theatre they write about so the performers are able to get the spectators’ feedback and appraisal. All reviews may be divided into two major groups – those which contain critique and those which do not. Within the critical ones there are those with overall

criticism and those in which criticism is expressed but in a specific form, so it is kind of disguised or mitigated but linguistic competence still discerns it. This research is constrained to those reviews in which criticism intermingles with politeness, which actually reduces the severity of the judgement. The underlying hypothesis is that the authors resort to politeness as a compromising communicative strategy or as “a mitigation practice” [Locher, Larina, 2019, p. 875] to introduce criticism displaying disagreement, disapproval or some negative attitude to what they write about, on the one hand, and to save the public image of both sides, on the other hand.

This stance is preconditioned by understanding politeness being a communicative category that functions in the role of “a constraint observed in human communicative behaviour, influencing us to avoid communicative discord or offence, and maintain communicative concord” [Leech, Larina, 2014, p. 11]. It is an integral and formative part of communication since it reflects its social parameters, the communicative situation per se, the form of communication, and cultural values of a linguocultural community as well as of a smaller social group [Eslami, Larina, Pashmforoosh, 2023, pp. 11-12]. The major goal of using politeness is to avoid face-threatening situations keeping communication in the bounds of mutual respect and cooperation. Politeness has its verbal markers and, thus, it is predetermined in its expression by the language, on the one hand, and, on the other, it is standardized because it is based on a range of conventional, i.e. well-established and appropriate forms of verbalization. In a certain way, politeness is a social constraint that defines the way communicants are to behave verbally and non-verbally to stay in concord and maintain each other’s face.

This article deals with politeness expressed in a certain type of text which in genre terms is a theatre review posted on a social network in a group of theatre fans. This specification having to do with the type of text brings forward several topical issues. Basically, these texts meet the genre requirements of a theatre review. But

alongside the genre requirements these texts are certainly shaped in many ways by the channel of communication which is a social network representing internet communication. Therefore, it is understandable that critical reviews posted in a social group on the internet will reflect the internet culture, like conversationalization [Young, Fitzgerald, 2006, p. 289]. Moreover, as it is a tool of a certain community there is a set of rules the participants of the community stick to in their reviews. Thus, criticism they express is shaped by the medium of communication and stays in compliance with the conventions of the social community the authors belong to, in other words, the way politeness is understood by the community members has certain boundaries and ways of expression.

Another phenomenon underlying the study is criticism since the research deals with politeness in critical remarks. Criticism as a communicative strategy presents interest for researchers as it presupposes an expression of some negative opinion which mars the image of the one criticized. The way criticism is verbalized in theatre reviews under study accounts for the scale starting with denouncing the object of reviewing on the one pole and reaching a compromise by introducing criticism disguised with the help of different resources on the opposite pole.

To sum up, the study connects four major dominants which come into play and, consequently, should be taken into account, they are criticism, politeness, genre, and internet communication. The object of the research is politeness in critical theatre reviews, while the subject matter may be defined as linguistic resources of expressing politeness within the genre under analysis. The article is aimed at establishing the resources of politeness the authors draw upon in critical theatre reviews. Consequently, the study is to answer a number of questions. First of all, what is polite criticism, does it exist? If it does, then in which way politeness is introduced in critical theatre reviews? Or, putting it into linguistic terms, what linguistic resources are used to make critical remarks polite? Consequently, how does politeness modify a critical judgement, if it does? What changes does a critical review undergo under a molding press of politeness?

Research methods and material

The research draws upon the material taken from the social network represented by a VK group of Mariinsky Theatre fans – Mariinsky Theatre Lovers Society (Общество любителей Мариинского театра). The corpus under analysis encompasses critical theatre reviews in Russian posted daily by members of this social network group. The analysis was conducted for three years, starting in 2022. More than 3,000 theatrical reviews were analyzed to choose about 1,000 of them in which criticism is politely expressed. The original examples of posts quoted in the article in Russian are translated into English by the author of the article.

The methods employed fit into the pragmatic-communicative and discursive paradigm. They include communicative, contextual, functional, pragmatic, stylistic, and narrative analyses. Communicative analysis deals with defining the communicative goal of the utterance or text [Perotto, 2023, pp. 16-17]. Contextual analysis helps to establish contextual meaning of various linguistic units since the word acquires its precise meaning in a certain context [Holmes, 2009, pp. 715-716; Nefjodov, Chernjavskaja, 2020, p. 83]. Stylistic analysis deals with interpreting the role of stylistic devices, as for instance irony, and contributes to their disambiguation. Functional analysis is oriented at revealing the function of certain linguistic units in an utterance or a text as functional linguistics manifests “how the organization of language is related to its use” [Martin, 1997, p. 4]. Pragmatic analysis is necessitated for the study deals with the illocutionary speech acts and reveals the aim of the speaker and the metapragmatics of the utterance [Chernyavskaya, 2020, p. 135]. Last but not least, narrative analysis makes it possible to consider the text of a theatre review as a narrative and disclose how communicants construct meanings through their individual perspective [Tiupa, 2022, pp. 29-30].

The study went through several stages. First of all, the corpus of the empiric material was selected by way of dividing critical reviews into a group with overall unblemished criticism and those in which criticism is expressed in polite terms. At the second stage means of expressing politeness were analyzed and their pragmatic effect was tied

to the communicative goal employed while expressing polite criticism. At the third stage textual resources were examined since the study involved the genre of a theatre review which is a certain text type. Therefore, means of expressing politeness were attributed to different textual resources. This procedure enabled to find certain patterns of expressing polite criticism in the genre of a theatre review posted on a social network. The undertaken analysis proved legitimacy of the notion of polite criticism; its definition is provided in the conclusions as well as future perspectives of exploring the interplay of criticism and politeness are outlined.

Before presenting and discussing the results of the study it is salient to introduce and clarify the conceptual basis and the notions which will be used in the discussion section of the article. Dealing with critical theatre reviews posted on the internet and undergoing the politeness filter necessitates understanding of what criticism is. In terms of politeness theory, Brown and Levinson look upon criticism as a face-threatening act [Brown, Levinson, 1987, p. 66]. Referring to Merriam-Webster and Oxford dictionaries, Haugh and Chang underscore that "the act of criticism involves pointing out some kind of fault (i.e. weakness, failing, misdemeanour or mistake) for which a party is presumed to be responsible, and expressing disapproval of that fault" [Haugh, Chang, 2019, p. 908]. Thus, in brief, criticism may be generalized as faultfinding, it is even associated with communicative aggression or intolerance as many interlocutors look upon it as an embodiment of negative attitude towards people, their activities or whatever is referred to.

Another important aspect of studies concerning criticism is attempts at classifying criticisms. Taking the aim of criticism into account, A.V. Medvedeva singles out constructive and destructive criticism. The latter is further divided into indiscriminate (or sweeping) and adverse (negative) criticism. Indiscriminate or sweeping criticism differs from adverse criticism as the purpose of the former is to defame the object of criticism whereas adverse or negative criticism is not that radical or sweeping [Medvedeva, 2016, pp. 67-70]. Destructive criticism is opposed to constructive or positive criticism that embraces those cases when critical remarks are aimed at suggesting some solutions to the flaws or

weaknesses under criticism and overcoming the drawbacks mentioned [Medvedeva, 2016, p. 59]. Some researchers also single out positive criticism which is close or sometimes similar to constructive criticism, it underscores good intentions of the critic [Medvedeva, 2016, p. 57].

Alongside the types established in previous research, the study conducted and the empirical material it deals with enables to single out polite criticism as a variety of types of criticism, placing it under the rubric of positive criticism. It differs from constructive criticism as it usually does not presuppose any improvement of the object of criticism since the authors of reviews are not members of any professional boards dealing with the production of performances. Their goal is just to express their own opinion and share it with other members of the community. There is a chance that those involved in the production may get familiar with the review but still it is amateurish and does not have anything to do with any executive measures. The introduction of the term "polite criticism" enables to find a niche for the material under study which encompasses cases of a wide-spread communicative practice aimed at expressing your disapproval of or dissatisfaction with some faults but doing it within the boundaries of face-saving communication.

Since theatre reviews are under analysis, it makes sense as well to turn to interpretations of art criticism. Art criticism is an activity aimed at explaining and estimating objects of art [Dauer, 1990, p. 111]. It deals with individual vision and attitude, which makes critics vulnerable as they may be accused of subjectivity. Moreover, P. Pavis adds that art criticism depends on the medium [Pavis, 1991, p. 167], or in his wording, on the mass media engaged, which echoes McLuen's stance about the medium being the message. To sum up, art criticism evaluates merits, advantages and disadvantages of works of art interpreting them from a subjective perspective.

Another theoretical source in the foundation of this research is S. Attardo's theory on mechanisms and resources of humor. In his General Theory of Verbal Humor Attardo approaches humor as a communicative event [Attardo, 2020, p. 95]. He posits that "communication presupposes a system through which an exchange of information is achieved" [Attardo, 2020, p. 96]. Therefore, he builds a

system indicating the parameters or, in other words, knowledge resources humor draws upon in the text. Thus, he distinguishes script, language, narrative strategy, target, situation, and logical mechanism [Attardo, 2020, pp. 113-156], incorporating V. Raskin's semantic theory [Raskin, 1985] as well. In Raskin's words, "the script is a large chunk of semantic information surrounding the word or evoked by it", it is cognitive in nature and "represents the native speaker's knowledge of a small part of the world" [Raskin, 1985, p. 81]. Attardo adds that a script is a semantic network, "an organized cluster of nodes" representing "ideas, thoughts, or meanings" [Attardo, 2020, p. 116] and it may be instantiated by frames or scenarios. Language includes reference to genres, registers, stylistic codes, and various linguistic means pertaining to the phonological, morphological, syntactical and lexical levels of the language system [Attardo, 2020, pp. 138-139]. The narrative strategy deals with the text organization as there are many ways of telling the story [Attardo, 2020, p. 141]. The target presents the activity referred to. The situation resource is associated with the background events, constituting a macro-script [Attardo, 2020, p. 147]. The logical mechanism "accounts for the incongruity (script opposition and overlap)" that is created via the humorous effect since humor is dealt with in Attardo's theory [Attardo, 2020, p. 149]. What is remarkable about this theory is its applicability arising from its generalization potential due to the idea of studying different texts as communicative events which they really are. It has already been successfully applied to other types of texts such as telephone calls, cartoons, satire, and translation [Attardo, 2020, pp. 153-154] and it seems that the range of text types for analysis may be significantly widened. Thus, its heuristics may as well be extrapolated on the texts under analysis as it may help to reveal the textual resources politeness draws upon in critical theatre reviews. Therefore, the levels of textual structure addressed in Attardo's theory will be analyzed to establish how politeness works on each of them.

Having laid out the theoretical basis, I will start with politeness as a communicative strategy and give an overview how the communicative aim alters and overlaps with other communicative aims to implement polite criticism, the term will get some more coverage and preciseness. Further, I

will turn to different levels of the text structure to see what resources on the text level are used in internet reviews to express polite criticism. The discussion of the results will be followed by conclusions.

Results and discussion

Theatre reviews deal with expressing personal estimation which may presuppose positive and negative evaluation. The study is focused on critical remarks about the weaknesses in the performance which are politely expressed by the author of a review posted in an online social group. The first feature of the politeness strategy employed in critical reviews consists in involving communicative devices that seem to be aimed at expressing the communicative goal connected with a positive outlook which is completely different from criticizing. This obvious shift if not total replacement of the genuine communicative goal results in disguising critical remarks which may sound offensive in case the criticism is properly worded (the linguistic means testifying to the conclusions made are printed in bold here and further on. Besides, the authors' punctuation and spelling in Russian is preserved in all excerpts):

(1) **Надеюсь**, что, как обычно, шероховатости премьеры со временем приобретут нужные формы) (OLMT, 07.02.2025) – I **hope** that as usual shortcomings of the premier will acquire proper forms with time);

(2) А вот второе платье, розовое, будто из Средневековья какого. **Может, Аиду потом переоденут?**) (OLMT, 07.02.2025) – And the second dress, the pink one, is as if from some Middle Ages. **Maybe, they will change Aida's clothes later?**);

(3) Что касается Ирины Чуриловой-Аиды, то **лично для меня** у нее преобладает более лирическое сопрано, а **хотелось бы** в этой партии более драматического (OLMT, 07.02.2025) – As for Irina Churilova-Aida, for me **personally** her soprano is more lyrical and a more dramatic one **would be better** in this role.

In all these instances politeness mediates criticism turning it into expression of hope (1), hopeful suggestion (2), personal preference (3). This list of communicative goals used, resulting in mitigating criticism, may be extended and include reference to the author's emotional experience or reaction and justification of the drawback by way of explaining why it may have happened (4).

(4) Дмитрий Воропаев меня **расстроил** явным непопаданием в ноты – по верху в одном месте выпустил петуха. **Наверное был не в форме** (OLMT, 06.02.2025) – Dmitry Voropaev **upset** me with his obvious lack of timing – he let out a rooster at one point on top. **He was probably not in shape.**

All these examples of altered communicative goals testify to switching modes of communication resulting in disguising criticism and making the text with a critical remark communicatively acceptable and appropriate. In verbal terms it leads to ousting the language of criticism associated with linguistic units of disagreement or fault finding with the help of those which are seemingly aimed at expressing suggestion or hope or personal preference or offering an explanation which justifies the fault made. Thus, any positive communicative move may be used as long as it saves the face of the one criticized. The goal replacement has a metapragmatic explanation: the critic anticipates the negative reaction on the part of the criticized in case of a face-threatening communicative act and substitutes for what sounds aggressive, thereby softening the verdict.

Though the communicative pragmatic approach facilitates spotting cases of overlapping communicative goals, this analytical instrument does not cover all the instances of expressing politeness in critical theatre reviews. The approach taken by Attardo in his analysis of humor bridges this gap and reveals the whole range of linguistic instruments the authors of critical reviews resort to on different levels of text formation to mitigate, silence, i.e. somehow hide criticism with politeness devices. Since a critical review is a text as well, Attardo's approach could be implemented to yield more versatile results as it covers more ground, starting with the organization of the script, then turning to the language, narrative strategy, target, situation, and logical mechanism.

The script of a theatre review consists of the nodes constituted by words denoting the elements of the performance which are usually evaluated: scenario, production, music, singing, acting, orchestra, choir, decorations, mimance, etc. A critical review polished with politeness presupposes some kind of opposition of advantageous and disadvantageous elements of the script. The negative remark about one of the elements will be outbalanced by referring to some advantageous position or positions. Drawbacks

are never mentioned for their own sake in polite critical reviews. They are represented as something unexpected or surprising compared to everything else which was worth positive evaluation, they somehow dissolve in the text, hidden amid positive appraisal. As a result, the positively marked and critically assessed elements overlap.

(5) В постановке Большого Театра я не увидела **развития и кульминации** в привычном смысле, страсти не кипят, интрига не раскручивается, а все любовные страдания вовсе и не страдания, а кокетливый флирт. Но тут **много забавных героев**. Правда, непонятно, за чьей судьбой нужно следить особенно пристально. Арии словно и не связаны между собой, и даже не сразу ясно, кто тут главный :) Но в этом-то и весь **замысел режиссера**. Именно такой бессюжетный сюжет и позволил поставить эту комическую оперу в "неожиданной трактовке". **И надо же, получилась необычная опера, с элементами перформанса и инсталляции**, если хотите 👍👍 (OLMT, 15.03.2025) – In the Bolshoi Theatre production, I did not see any **development or culmination** in the usual sense; passions do not boil, the intrigue does not unfold, and all the suffering of love is not suffering at all, but a coquettish flirtation. But there are **many funny characters** here. True, it is not clear whose fate should be followed especially closely. The arias seem to be unrelated to each other, and it is not even immediately clear who is the main one here :) But that was **the director's whole idea**. It was precisely this plotless plot that allowed this comic opera to be staged in an "unexpected interpretation." **And what a surprise, it turned out to be an unusual opera, with elements of performance and installation**, if you like 👍👍

Thus, even if authors are in a critical mood, they intersperse positive and negative evaluation as it is implemented in (5) trying to balance or at least to alternate one with the other not to sound overall destructive.

Even though the opposition script is quite popular, some authors choose a different way warning at the beginning that they will only talk about what they enjoyed. As a result, critical remarks are omitted making room for what authors appreciated: this way they resort to negative politeness but it is still politeness. And in this case, all the nodes of the script get only positive rating:

(6) **Не будем останавливаться на неудавшихся партиях** – таких было в процентном отношении

сильно меньше. **Давайте лучше о приятных открытиях**, и здесь речь идет, безусловно, о двух тенорах. (OLMT, 13.03.2025) – **Let’s not dwell on the unsuccessful roles** – there were much fewer of them in percentage terms. **Let’s talk about pleasant discoveries**, and here we are talking, of course, about the two tenors;

(7) Если актерская игра мне понравилась у всех, то с вокалом, к сожалению, сложилось не все. **Не хотелось бы никого обижать, лучше промолчу** (OLMT, 13.03.2025) – If I liked everyone’s acting, then unfortunately, not everything went well with the vocals. **I wouldn’t like to offend anyone, so I’d better keep quiet.**

The language of polite criticism in reviews follows a certain pattern when it comes to the choice of words and grammatical structures. The authors are fond of minimizers expressed by relative pronouns and adverbs (see: [Holmes, 2009, p. 712]), parenthetical words introducing subjective modality or probability – the means aimed at mitigating the severity of criticism, all of them testifying to critical underpinnings but in a subtle way:

(8) Записала немного хор пилигримов, но **что-то глуховато** все звучало (OLMT, 02.02.2025) – I recorded a bit of the pilgrims’ choir, but it all sounded **a bit muffled**;

(9) Иными словами, на инструментальных проигрышах было **как-то** “неуютно”, а певцам особо не мешали (OLMT, 10.03.2025) – In other words, the instrumental passages were **somehow** “uncomfortable”, and the singers were not particularly disturbed;

(10) Вокал **практически** безупречный... (OLMT, 18.03.2025) – The vocals are **almost** flawless...

Critical authors may introduce parenthetical words expressing subjective modality, trying to show empathy, to say that they sympathize with the failure, to estrange themselves from gloating or fault-finding:

(11) **К сожалению**, не слышу в музыке Вайнберга того, что хотел показать в героине Достоевский – невинной жертвы (OLMT, 04.02.2025) – **Unfortunately**, I don’t hear in Weinberg’s music what Dostoevsky wanted to show in the heroine – an innocent victim.

On the whole, minimizers very often expressed in Russian by relative pronouns and epistemics of probability bring about evasiveness

and elusiveness, as a result the reviewer does not sound strict, the critical tonality being less articulated. Besides, trying not to degenerate into aggression some authors introduce humor or figurative expressions diverting the communication into a non-bona-fide mode, which means deviance from “the ‘ordinary’ information-conveying mode” [Raskin, 1985, p. 89]:

(12) Сегодня **вокально-драматическая температура по палате была весьма средней** (OLMT, 12.03.2025) – Today **the vocal-dramatic temperature in the ward was quite average**;

(13) М. Ильюшкина была хороша, **партнер ее** – сосредоточен, но **обедни не испортил** (OLMT, 14.03.2025) – M. Ilyushkina was good, **her partner** was focused, but **did not spoil the service**.

The same effect is achieved by the usage of colloquial words. The reason why critical authors use them is introducing the humorous note and diminishing the seriousness of the criticism, thus again diverting the narrative into a playful mode:

(14) Сама постановка, кстати, тоже вполне удобоваримая, правда, сцена в Виндзорском лесу не зашла. “Нечисть” долго светила фонариками и масками с красными огнями между “деревьев”, пассивно **кучковалась** за своеобразной решеткой, тянула руки к Фальстафу, но все это было в какой-то странной замедленной динамике. Так, что сэр Джон просто **перетапывался** на месте, словно ожидая автобус. Ну абсолютно **как тот Карабас-Барабас: “Ой, баюс-баюс”** (OLMT, 18.03.2025) – The production itself, by the way, is also quite digestible, although the scene in Windsor Forest didn’t go over well. The “evil spirits” shone their lanterns and masks with red lights between the “trees” for a long time, passively **huddled** behind a kind of lattice, stretched out their hands to Falstaff, but all this was in some strange slow motion. So, Sir John just **shuffled around** on the spot, as if waiting for a bus. Just like **that Karabas-Barabas: “Oh, scared-scared”**;

(15) Об оркестре. Странное впечатление. С точки зрения темпов мне показалось все ок. Громкость иногда необоснованно возрастала, заглушая артистов. Соло инструментов было неоднозначно. Флейта, мне кажется, звучала хорошо, а вот арфу (это **пряма моя тема**) **мучили чьи-то шаловливые ручонки. А вот не надо пихать пальцы в струны по самые локти, и дергать так, что резонатор фонит, заглушая соседние струнные. Понаберут хулиганов в оркестр, потом инструменты все поломатые** (OLMT, 14.03.2025) – About the orchestra. A strange impression. In terms of tempos, everything seemed ok

to me. The volume sometimes increased unjustifiably, drowning out the artists. The solo instruments were ambiguous. The flute, it seems to me, sounded good, **but the harp (this is just my thing) was tormented by someone's playful little hands. But you don't have to push your fingers into the strings up to your elbows and pull them so hard that the resonator starts to hum, drowning out the neighboring strings. They'll recruit hooligans into the orchestra, and then all the instruments will be broken.**

Alongside lexical means some grammatical units can be used to blur criticism, thus, questions instead of affirmative sentences are employed to downplay the rigidity of the critical remark by introducing it as a question as if the author suggests something or looks forward to clarification of a moot point.

(16) В очередной раз **задался вопросом** – если на сцене суждено показывать хаос и этот хаос, сбивающий с толку, возникает в твоей голове, как это расценивать: как успех постановки и исполнения, или следствие недостатков в работе над спектаклем? **И не нужна ли этой опере на веки вечная картинная рама, которая появляется в самой середине? Чтобы сузить, сконцентрировать действие, направить его в единое русло, призвать к ногге, привести, наконец, к цельному впечатлению?** (OLMT, 14.03.2025) – Once again, I asked myself the question – if chaos is destined to be shown on stage and this confusing chaos arises in your head, how should this be assessed: as a success of the production and performance, or a consequence of shortcomings in the work on the performance? **And doesn't this opera need a picture frame that will always be there, appearing in the very middle? To narrow and concentrate the action, to direct it into a single channel, to call it to its feet, to finally lead to a complete impression?**

The verbal language with its expression of politeness is also supported by the use of emoticons and other non-verbal signs which help to ease the situation and lighten the mood. It is well-represented in many reviews (as in (1), (2), (5), (17)).

A critical review as a text represents a narrative which in this case is understood as "a representation of a possible world in a linguistic and/or visual medium" [Fludernik, 2009, p. 6]. The narrative strategy may also be helpful for the author to sound polite. Thus, whatever critical remarks were expressed in the review the bon

ton of the group communication is to say thank you to the theatre and the actors for their work at the end. Compared to purely critical reviews which usually start or finish with expressing disagreement or dissatisfaction polite reviewers hide it in the middle to make it less painful.

(17) Сегодня блистали красотой и отличным пением Мария Баянкина (Аида) и Зинаида Царенко (Амнерис). Правда, Амнерис Екатерины Семенчук мне все же вокально ближе) Грозный верховный жрец Рамфис (Геворг Григорян) и царь Египта (Яков Стрижак) звучали великолепно. О вокальном и драматическом таланте Владислава Сулимского (Амонасро) и говорить нечего))) Парил над залом чистый голос Жрицы (Кристина Карицына). Балет, хор, милейший питон, прекрасный оркестр под управлением любимого Кристиана Кнаппа – 🐍🐍🐍. Что касается Ованнеса Айвазяна, то в целом с партией Радамеса он почти справился и играл прекрасно, эмоционально, интересно, **но "Небесную Аиду", простите, в конце просто "запорол"**((Хорошо, что это была первая ария. А так очень хорошие впечатления от оперы остались. И невероятно понравилась игра всех артистов: помоему, выложились на 100%. Молодцы! (OLMT, 07.03.2025) – Today Maria Bayankina (Aida) and Zinaida Tsarenko (Amneris) shone with beauty and excellent singing. True, Ekaterina Semenchuk's Amneris is still vocally closer to me) The formidable high priest Ramfis (Gevorg Grigoryan) and the king of Egypt (Yakov Strizhak) sounded magnificent. There is nothing to say about the vocal and dramatic talent of Vladislav Sulimsky (Amonasro))) The pure voice of the Priestess (Kristina Karitsyna) soared above the hall. Ballet, choir, the cutest python, a wonderful orchestra conducted by beloved Christian Knapp – 🐍🐍🐍. As for Hovhannes Ayvazyan, in general he almost coped with the part of Radames and played it beautifully, emotionally, interestingly, **but "Heavenly Aida", forgive me, he simply "messed up" at the end**((It's good that it was the first aria. Otherwise, I was left with very good impressions of the opera. And I incredibly liked the performance of all the artists: in my opinion, they gave it 100%. Well done!;

(18) Что касается качества исполнения солистами и оркестром п/у Алексея Верещагина – на сей раз даже не хочу вдаваться в детали. **Собственно, кроме гонки солистов за оркестром в самом начале, неожиданно жесткого соло арфы, аккомпанирующей Коринне, да чьей-то визгливой верхней ноты в финальном гимне ничего особо предосудительного не заметила.** Оркестр вокалистов не заглушал. Состав исполнителей был ровным, голоса хорошие, ансамбли достойные, актерские рабо-

ты запоминающиеся. Bravo, москвичи! 🍷🍷 (OLMT, 14.03.2025) – As for the quality of the performance by the soloists and the orchestra under the direction of Alexei Vereshchagin – this time I don’t even want to go into details. **Actually, apart from the soloists’ race after the orchestra at the very beginning, the unexpectedly harsh solo of the harp accompanying Corinna, and someone’s shrill upper note in the final hymn, I didn’t notice anything particularly reprehensible.** The orchestra did not drown out the vocalists. The cast was even, the voices were good, the ensembles were worthy, the acting was memorable. Bravo, Muscovites! 🍷🍷

Another resource is connected with shifting the target of criticism. To save the face of the reviewee critics shift the blame, even onto themselves explaining that it may have been them who did not manage to appreciate something. This is achieved by changing the subject and object of the action which in the end results in less categorical statements as the true target is replaced (21) or the critic downgrades themselves in some way, for example, as being amateurish or biased (20), (22) or having a different taste (19) or some other excuses are found to justify the drawback.

(19) Татьяна Сержан на своем уровне опытного исполнителя итальянской оперы. Хорошая партия, делающая спектакль крепким, но лишний раз убеждаюсь, что это **не совсем мой тип голоса, не “улетаю” от него** (OLMT, 18.03.2025) – Tatyana Serzhan is at her level as an experienced performer of Italian opera. A good part, making the performance strong, but I am once again convinced **that this is not quite my type of voice, I do not “fly away” from it;**

(20) Однако думаю, что поклонники у спектакля все же будут, **не все такие брюзги как я** (OLMT, 15.03.2025) – However, I think that the play will still have fans, not all of them are **such grumps as me;**

(21) Что-то в этот раз спектакль оказался эмоционально сдержанным, не знаю что произошло, в атмосфере, **или что-то со мной не так**, но мне было реально скучно. И я вскидывалась и шла на голос любимой певицы Татьяны Сержан, который объективно вызывает во мне сильные чувства. В этот день она была по особенному очень трогательна и лирична (OLMT, 14.03.2025) – This time the performance was emotionally restrained, I don’t know what happened, in the atmosphere, **or something wrong with me**, but I was really bored. And I would jump up and go to the voice of my favorite singer Tatyana Serzhan, which objectively evokes strong feelings in me. That day she was especially touching and lyrical;

(22) И это «наша» третья «Травиата». Сразу скажу – не лучшая. **Это мое частное мнение, может и предвзятое** (OLMT, 13.03.2025) – And this is “our” third “La Traviata”. I’ll say right away – it’s not the best. **This is my personal opinion, maybe biased.**

The situation presupposes the environment in which the events took place [Attardo, 2020, p. 147]. The author sometimes takes into account the situational context trying to find an explanation to the shortcomings, like bad acoustics, the shape the performer is in or such like.

(23) **Страстным вчера был** и дирижер Кристиан Кнапп: **оркестр порой заглушал солистов** (OLMT, 22.03.2025) – Conductor Christian Knappe was **also passionate yesterday: the orchestra sometimes drowned out the soloists;**

(24) У Е. Семенчук в первом действии **был не слишком удачный наряд** и у меня создалось такое впечатление, что он ее немного стеснял, а во втором действии пела чудесно и наряд очень ей шел (OLMT, 22.03.2025) – E. Semenchuk’s **outfit in the first act was not very suitable** and I got the impression that it was a bit embarrassing for her, but in the second act she sang wonderfully and the outfit suited her very well;

(25) Аида 07.02 меня не вдохновила, я для себя **списала на неудачное место сбоку близко к сцене, и что постановка новая** (OLMT, 23.05.2025) – Aida 07.02 did not inspire me, I **attributed it to the bad location on the side close to the stage, and that the production was new.**

And the last but not least is the logical mechanism employed by the critic. Concessions and contrasts are widely employed, which results in multiple uses of the conjunctions *хотя*, *но* (*although*, *but*).

(26) Постановка, стилизованная под классические постановки 18 века статична и, к сожалению, не была оживлена артистами. **Тем не менее**, не могу не сказать спасибо маэстро Кнаппу, который всеми силами оживлял происходящее, передавая легкий, игривый характер музыки Моцарта (OLMT, 12.03.2025) – The production, stylized as a classical production of the 18th century, is static and, unfortunately, was not enlivened by the artists. **However**, I cannot help but thank Maestro Knappe, who did his best to enliven the proceedings, conveying the light, playful character of Mozart’s music;

(27) **Хотя** я не поклонница минимализма в декорациях и костюмах. **Но** необычная, повторяющаяся, **хотя** где то и однообразная, **но** четкая музыка Филипа Гласса, ритмичные и предельно ровные

движения кордебалета завораживали и убеждали (OLMT, 28.02.2025) – **Although** I am not a fan of minimalism in decorations and costumes. **But** the unusual, repetitive, **although** sometimes monotonous, **but** clear music of Philip Glass, the rhythmic and extremely smooth movements of the corps de ballet were fascinating and convincing.

Sometimes several resources come into play strengthening the mitigating effect: the opposing script combines with a humorous simile contributing to a playful non-bona-fide mode; minimizers downgrade the disapproval; the positive resume at the end strengthens the impression of approval in (28), whereas in (29) the target is shifted, epistemics are introduced and a logical mechanism helps outbalance the drawbacks with merits:

(28) Ованнес Айвазян **как ковбой на глазах “объезжает” как норовистого коня свой новый голос**. Сегодня я **буквально в паре мест** услышала “швы” при переходе на пиано в верхний регистр – а потом все **как-то** выровнялось и под конец он **очень** убедительно страдал на пиано на высоких нотах. **Все остальное было пропето так ярко, мощно, выразительно и осмысленно, с такой страстью и таким ровным, летящим красивым звуком, что хотелось слушать и слушать** (OLMT, 13.03.2025) – Hovhannes Ayvazyan, like a cowboy, **“breaks in” his new voice like a spirited horse**. Today I literally heard “seams” in **a couple of places** when switching to the piano in the upper register – and then everything somehow evened out and towards the end he **very** convincingly suffered on the piano on high notes. **Everything else was sung so brightly, powerfully, expressively and meaningfully, with such passion and such a smooth, flying beautiful sound that you wanted to listen and listen;**

(29) **На мое ухо**, не все у нее **пока** прозвучало ровно, **но** главная ария была прекрасна – и со второго действия **как будто** включились новые силы. Под конец, **мне показалось**, подустала – **но** эмоционально была **очень** убедительна (OLMT, 11.03.2025) – **To my ear**, not everything sounded even **so far, but** the main aria was wonderful – and from the second act it was **as if** new forces had been activated. Towards the end, **it seemed to me**, she was **a bit tired** – **but** emotionally she was very convincing.

To sum up, positive criticism does exist. It is proved by the recursive character of the resources applied. Thus, the shift of the communicative goal which results in replacing criticism by positive remarks is aimed at smoothing or even glossing over the critical effect of the review and employs

various resources belonging to the textual level of the criticism expressed, including the script, its language, the narrative strategy, the target, the situation, and the logical mechanism. Sometimes it leads to non-bona-fide communication, i.e. the mode of communication that diverges from the real situation [Attardo, 2020, p. 133; Raskin, 1985, pp. 89, 91; Shilikhina, 2013, p. 53; 2017]. Actually, K.M. Shilikhina posits that sometimes the transfer to the non-bona-fide mode may be explained by the speaker’s disagreement with the point of view expressed earlier [Shilikhina, 2013, p. 56]. This is the case when politeness goes hand in hand with criticism downplaying the latter. Politeness in critical reviews really tends to violate Grice’s Maxim of Quality (see: [Grice, 1975, p. 46]) as there is a certain distortion of what critics really mean and what they say. Nevertheless, to maintain the bona-fide communication the authors resort to different resources trying to make the ends meet. The balancing line is thin that’s why they engage various means to stay true to themselves, on the one hand, and not to threaten the face of those they write about, on the other. Thus, polite criticism, i.e. expressing disagreement in a polite way, may affect the quality of communication diverting it into the non-bona-fide mode but in so doing saving the face of those criticized. As a result, criticism yields to politeness and polite critics may find themselves on the verge of non-bona-fide communication.

Conclusion

Politeness has attracted researchers for a long time: the reasons for this never-ending interest can be found in its nature as a multifaceted category aimed at maintaining positive communication. No wonder, it often combines with criticism mitigating the negative effect of the latter. The positivity politeness brings into communication results from its face-saving communicative capacity which is achieved by way of activating versatile resources the format of communication provides. A wide range of positive communicative means are employed to muffle or at least to soften the critical sounding of the remark. On the other hand, it leads to non-bona-fide communication since critics put themselves as the ones responsible for the fault.

Although the analysis of overlapping communicative goals sheds some light on *how* politeness may be introduced into a critical theatre review, it does not reveal the intricacies of *what* in particular helps critics to sound less categorical.

The question about *what* resources are available to the reviewer to lower down the critical tonality by way of using politeness instruments finds its answer in case the analytical procedure proposed by Attardo to the analysis of humorous texts is applied. Since this approach is based on tackling the text as a communicative event, it enables to indicate the levels in the text responsible for the expression of polite criticism revealing *what* in particular happens to the criticism within the text of a critical review when it combines with politeness. Thus, reviewers employ the resources, the script provides either opposing the advantageous and disadvantageous elements of the performance making the latter less pronounced and somehow overshadowed by positive feedback, or completely omitting the elements of the script, which cause criticism, and referring only to laudable ones. The implication is that there is something authors do not enjoy but they do not feel like touching upon it so as not to introduce the apple of discord. The language of the review also reflects the turn to politeness as it is filled with evasive lexical units, including minimizers, epistemics of probability and parenthetical words conveying subjective modality, or using questions instead of statements, which altogether introduces less categorical tonality. Critics also use emoji which gives way to some playful mode. The narrative strategy may also be at hand when the author puts critical remarks in the middle of the text where they are less visible and do not arrest as much attention as if they were placed at the beginning or at the end which are strong positions in the text. The target of criticism may be shifted from the real object of criticism onto the imaginary one which foregrounds some other circumstances allegedly guilty for the failure, or the situation may be represented in an abridged format. At last, on the part of the logical mechanism concession and contrast may also be engaged for the criticism to be outplayed by something praiseworthy. Thus, polite criticism presupposes the use of various politeness devices while expressing disagreement or disapproval aimed at mitigating the negative effect of the critical judgement. All these resources

more often than not may contribute to converting communication into the non-bona-fide mode. The molding press of politeness makes critics reformat criticism as the fear of appearing offensive tends to overcome truthfulness of communication. Actually, this perspective may become an object of further research focused on studying the effects of using politeness in different types of critical communication.

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