

Queen Elizabeth II and Paddington Bear: Some Features of a Popularity-Maintaining Discourse

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Abstract

The paper analyses a short two-and-a-half-minute sketch, a video presented to the U.K. public on the occasion of the Queen's Platinum Jubilee celebrations in June 2022. The BAFTA-winning video features Queen Elizabeth II receiving Paddington Bear, the fictional character in children's literature, for tea at the Palace at the time of the Jubilee party. For most people, this was one of the last images of the Queen making a public appearance before her subsequent death in September that year. Her association with the endeared character proved to be exceptionally strong in the public conscience as representative for values that she wished to embody: politeness, kindness and tolerance, as the nation's „grandmother” reassures, through her presence, that her people has been properly inspired and imprinted by such qualities. The article focuses on linguistic, mainly pragmatic features of the characters' interaction, trying to determine how the monarch's Image could be projected as a discourse construct.

Keywords: Queen Elizabeth II, discourse, pragmatics, politeness, Paddington Bear

Rezumat

Lucrarea analizează o scurtă schiță de două minute și jumătate, un material video prezentat publicului din Regatul Unit cu ocazia festivităților din cadrul Jubileului de Platină al Reginei din iunie 2022. Distins cu un premiu BAFTA, filmul o arată pe Regina Elisabeta a II-a primindu-l pe Ursulețul Paddington, personajul fictiv din literatura pentru copii, pentru a lua ceaiul la Palat în timpul petrecerii Jubileului. Pentru majoritatea oamenilor, aceasta a fost una dintre ultimele imagini ale Reginei făcând o apariție publică înaintea morții sale ulterioare din septembrie în același an. Asocierea sa cu îndrăgitul personaj s-a dovedit a fi de mare impact pentru conștiința colectivă, ca reprezentativă pentru valorile pe care ea a dorit să le personifice: politețe, bunătate și toleranță, dat fiind că „bunica” națiunii asigură, prin prezența ei, că poporul său a fost inspirat și imprimat în mod corespunzător de asemenea calități. Articolul se concentrează pe trăsături lingvistice, în principal pragmatice, ale interacțiunii personajelor, încercând să determine felul în care imaginea monarhului ar putea fi realizată ca un construct al discursului.

Cuvinte-cheie: Regina Elisabeta a II-a, discurs, pragmatică, politețe, Ursulețul Paddington



The Queen's Platinum Jubilee in June 2022 celebrated the monarch's 70 years on the throne of the United Kingdom and other Commonwealth realms, the longest reign in British history. It was a time when the Royal Family was both loved and a controversial topic, the subject of much publicity and debate, with the Queen's image remaining popular and a symbol of stability and continuity. Witnessing the decline of monarchies worldwide as part of the decolonisation process, the British Royal Family is still standing. In our 21st century, in a society characterised by the ubiquity of technology and visual culture, the glamour and aura of the House of Windsor hold global fascination. Their endurance can be identified at the overlap between complex sociological and cultural phenomena, among which the cultivation of a positive brand image has played a significant part.

Correspondingly, the beginning of the Jubilee celebrations was kicked off by the outdoors projection of a surprise two-minute-and-a-half film featuring the Queen and Paddington Bear having tea together, at the end of which the two protagonists are tapping their teacups to the rhythm of music. The huge mass of people gathered in front of Buckingham Palace for the Jubilee are cheerfully coordinating to that rhythm and not coincidentally, the music is an interpretation by Adam Lambert of „We Will Rock You” by the British rock band *Queen*. The energy of the crowd is breath-taking, the sound pace hypnotic, the images and background story rise to mythical proportions: the Queen „is rocking” the people.

The BAFTA-winning video, *Queen Elizabeth and Paddington Bear*, was secretly filmed at Windsor Castle, in March, before the actual Jubilee party took place, as the Queen's health did not allow her to attend the live celebrations themselves. Nevertheless, while not being an easy task, she apparently enjoyed acting in the film and her performance was much appreciated by those working with her: „She absolutely smashed it. [...] She's absolutely glowing in that moment, isn't she?” (BBC News 2022) The director also asked her to resort to her grandmother side for this role:

“The director would come in, Adam, lovely guy: ‘Ma’am, could you just be a bit gentler?’ And she’d be so sweet and she’d go, ‘I’m so sorry – yes, of course,’ „Farnaby said on the RHLSTP podcast. „He’d go, ‘Like you’re talking to your grandchildren.’ She’d say, ‘Oh, of course. I’m so sorry,’ „he added. (Henni 2023)

Paddington Bear is a beloved character in children's literature, who first appeared in a book written by Michael Bond in 1958, „A Bear Called Paddington”, which was followed by many sequels, also by animation films, widely popular in the U.K. and abroad. In an analysis of the film featuring



Queen Elizabeth II next to this character, we need to be aware of the background context established by the bear's story: he is found by a British family in London Paddington Station (hence his name), in his red ragged hat, dirty, hungry and lonely after emigrating from „Darkest Peru”. This is a stereotypical English family, Mr and Mrs Brown, with two children, who quickly decide that the small „foreigner” should come and stay in their home, after listening to his sad account:

“I emigrated, you know.” A sad expression came into his eyes. „I used to live with my Aunt Lucy in Peru, but she had to go into a home for retired bears.” [...] „Aunt Lucy always said she wanted me to emigrate when I was old enough. That’s why she taught me to speak English.” (Bond 1992: 9-10)

The bear is adopted by the Browns, who treat him kindly and offer him experiences to acclimatise him to life in London. In return, he is always polite and helpful, although he is terribly clumsy and is always getting into trouble.

Similarly, reigning over a cultural melting pot, the Queen is the benevolent, good-humoured grandmotherly figure, who offers the hospitality of her Palace and shows tolerance, kindness and politeness to her subjects. The short film that sets in motion the Jubilee party starts with the image of the grand Palace doors opening to reveal the royal chambers, with a Butler carrying a tea serving tray to a table where Paddington is seated across the Queen. The scene is like a magical fairy-tale: the Queen is generous enough as to put on her best show for the unlikely, awe-instilled guest; she smiles warmly and does not get offended at the bear's blunders, even though etiquette is paramount in her presence. After a 70-year-long reign, withstanding major political changes, unrest in both her public and private life, the Queen is as remarkable as to tame any circumstances and accommodate her people. Moreover, she does this elegantly, and without overwhelming superiority: somehow, she succeeds in striking a note of humour, kindness and familiarity, which, given her stature, makes it even more outstanding.

Below is a (*my own*) transcript of the dialogue in the video with Queen Elizabeth II and Paddington Bear (The Royal Family 2022), along with an account of the characters' most conspicuous gestures. There is also a division of the dialogue into six parts, according to their discourse function.

1. *Paddington*: „Thank you for having me. I do hope you're having a lovely Jubilee.”



2. *The Queen*: "Tea?"
Paddington: "Oh, yes, please!" (*He starts guzzling tea from the teapot until the Butler gestures at him to stop.*)
3. *The Butler*: (*Clearing his throat*) „Ahem!”
Paddington: "Oh, terribly sorry!" (*He climbs onto the table, leans forward and tries to pour some tea into the Queen's cup, but there are just a few drops left.*)
The Queen: "Never mind!"
4. *Paddington*: (*He loses balance, nearly drops the teapot and clumsily puts his paw in the dessert, which splashes on the Butler's face.*)
 "Oh dear! Um, perhaps you would like a marmalade sandwich? I always keep one for emergencies." (*He takes a sandwich out of his hat.*)
The Queen: "So do I. I keep mine in here. (*She takes her own sandwich out of her handbag.*)
Paddington: "Oh!"
The Queen: "For later."
5. *The Butler*: "The party is about to start, Your Majesty."
 6. *Paddington*: (*Taking off his hat*)
 "Happy Jubilee, Ma'am! And thank you, for everything!"
The Queen: "That's very kind."
 (*The Queen starts tapping her cup with her teaspoon to the rhythm of the music from the party outside, with Paddington readily joining in.*)

The most prominent feature in the exchange of replies between the three characters is **politeness**, which is imposed by the presence of the monarch. According to David Crystal (2008), politeness is indicated by „special discourse markers (*please*), appropriate tones of voice and acceptable forms of address [...]" (373). At this general level, in this text, we can identify all three features as follows: „Yes, please”, „Thank you” (two times), „Terribly sorry”, „Never mind”, „That's very kind” as discourse markers.

Secondly, the speakers' tones of voice have a calm pitch throughout, there are no interruptions, and there are marked pauses before a change of turn, with the words being clearly articulated. This is a type of **conversational style** which George Yule (2005) describes along these lines:

speakers use a slower rate, expect longer pauses between turns, do not overlap, and avoid interruption or completion of the other's turn. This non-interrupting, non-imposing style has been called a **high considerateness style**. (76)



Thirdly, the forms of address used by the two characters interacting with the Queen are specific to the royal style of address: „Your Majesty” and „Ma’am”. With regard to the Queen herself, she does not use a specific form of address when she speaks to Paddington, keeping her contribution minimal, to the point, in a dignified manner. But as we have already established from the film director’s comments, the tonality of her voice was meant to be „gentle”, something which she successfully accomplished, and which brings communication beyond the neutral lines of politeness. While her overall body language remains composed, her facial expressions convey a range of feelings, such as surprise, amusement, playfulness, heartfelt gratitude, humanising the scene and giving it an air of ease and warmth.

Paddington starts the dialogue by thanking the Queen for her invitation and hospitality, with a specific conventional expression: „Thank you for having me.” He continues with a declarative sentence containing an implicative non-factive verb (“hope”) preceded by the auxiliary „do” added for emphasis and stressed in speech: „I do hope you’re having a lovely Jubilee.” The complement „that” sentence of the mental verb „hope” expresses the bear’s wish for the Queen to enjoy the event held in her honour. This first line of dialogue can be interpreted as **positive politeness** from the bear’s part.

When analysing politeness, we need to talk about **face saving acts**, in the sense that participants to an interaction show, through their words, that the other person’s public image, or „face”, is not threatened in any way. Yule (2005) makes the distinction between **negative** and **positive face**:

A person’s **negative face** is the need to be independent, to have freedom of action, and not to be imposed on by others. [...] A person’s **positive face** is the need to be accepted, even liked, by others, to be treated as a member of the same group, and to know that his or her wants are shared by others. [...] So, a face saving act which is oriented to the person’s negative face will tend to show deference, emphasize the importance of the other’s time or concerns, and even include an apology for the imposition or interruption. This is also called **negative politeness**. A face saving act which is concerned with the person’s positive face will tend to show solidarity, emphasize that both speakers want the same thing, and that they have a common goal. This is also called **positive politeness**. (Yule 2005: 61-62)

The dialogue continues with the Queen employing a positive politeness strategy in order to offer Paddington some tea. She uses non-clausal material, a one-word question under the form of a noun: „Tea?” By



trying to meet her guest's needs, the Queen is also employing a positive politeness strategy. Moreover, by not employing an elaborate phrasing in her offer, she makes it sound more familiar and informal, which also adds to positive politeness. The Queen's question is the first part of an **adjacency pair**, an automatic sequence in which the production of an utterance expects another one to follow, this being a case of offer-acceptance.

Discussing **preference structure**, Yule (2005) explains that speakers evaluate acceptance as structurally more probable than a refusal, calling this likelihood **preference**. He notes that „Preference structure divides second parts into **preferred** and **dispreferred** social acts. The preferred is the structurally expected next act and the dispreferred is the structurally unexpected next act.” (Yule 2005: 79)

Paddington proceeds with a preferred social act, by eagerly producing the second part of the adjacency pair, using the socially appropriate discourse marker „yes, please!” The interjection „Oh” preceding this, along with the character's intonation, show his eagerness to accept the offer. Conversely, his subsequent behaviour does not conform to the norms of politeness, as he puts the teapot spout into his muzzle and starts guzzling tea. But instead of being offended, the Queen silently watches the bear in disbelief until the Butler intervenes.

This brings along the next section of the dialogue, in which the Butler uses a negative politeness strategy in order to draw Paddington's attention to behave himself: the former uses the interjection „Ahem!” when clearing his throat, a hint which the bear readily catches. The Butler has not addressed Paddington directly, but his gesture has been successfully decoded **off record** (see this term in Yule 2005), thus managing to communicate more than he actually says.

Paddington, in his turn, also uses negative politeness by apologising with an exclamation: „Oh, terribly sorry!” This constitutes another first part of an adjacency pair, which the Queen completes by a positive politeness act: „Never mind!” In spite of the bear's series of blunders perched on top of the table, the Queen's reply signals that she does not feel offended. Thus, instead of interpreting the scene as painfully awkward, we can appreciate the humour of the situation.

The fourth part of the interaction is marked by Paddington culminating in his faux pas by losing his balance, putting his paw in the dessert and splashing it onto the Butler's face. Again, the Queen's reaction is a broad, forgiving smile. The bear attempts an apology (negative politeness) by uttering an interjection showing his embarrassment: „Oh dear!”. He proceeds with a filler (“Um”), showing his hesitation about what he is going to say next, which is also a form of negative politeness. In order



to make up for ruining the desert, he makes an offer to the Queen by producing something which he informally keeps under his ragged hat: „Perhaps you would like a marmalade sandwich?” The adverb „perhaps” represents a **hedge**, which adds to the negative politeness strategy: by showing hesitation, Paddington implies that he does not impose his offer upon the Queen. He continues with an explanation (“I always keep one for emergencies.”), a statement through which he complies with the **cooperative principle** in conversation, by following the **quantity maxim**: „Make your contribution as informative as is required for the current purposes of the exchange.” (Yule 2006: 37) Paddington elucidates the function of the sandwich lying under his hat, thus continuing his negative politeness strategy, as his interlocutor is not left the task of speculating about the reasons leading to this improbable display.

The Queen replies through an agreeing echoing statement, with inversion after the adverb „so” (“So do I.”) and continues with her own surprising, symmetrical gesture, as she also produces a sandwich out of her elegant, go-to black handbag: „I keep mine in here.” With the Queen giving this account, the story reaches its climax: one of the most recognisable figures on the planet, the ultimate symbol of tradition, stability and status reveals herself as versatile enough to find common ground with Paddington Bear. The latter expresses his astonishment through an exclamatory interjection (“Oh!”), then the Queen completes her account with an adverbial phrase of purpose: „For later.” While the surface effect of the scene is humorous, the association between the two characters bears much deeper significance, as Paddington is able to reflect endearment, familiarity, innocence and the magic of story-telling.

The last part of the dialogue begins by the Butler’s observation that the Jubilee celebrations are imminent, with the crowds cheering outside: „The party is about to start, Your Majesty.” His politeness is marked by the royal form of address, „Your Majesty”, which also constitutes a positive politeness strategy.

The last sequence of replies is another adjacency pair. Relying on the previous cue regarding the Jubilee, Paddington follows the **relation maxim** of the cooperative principle, „Be relevant.” (Yule 2006: 37). He ceremoniously takes off his hat while professing the aim of the celebrations, which is rejoicing and thanking, echoing the voice of the people outside: „Happy Jubilee, Ma’am! And thank you, for everything!” The Queen responds to this positive politeness act by her own turn of positive politeness, with a conventional expression: „That’s very kind.”

A final note refers to a proof of how compelling was the message delivered to the public by the video featuring Paddington and the Queen. Here is an account by Reuters regarding the events later that year:



More than 1,000 Paddingtons and other teddy bears left by well-wishers as a tribute to Queen Elizabeth after her death last month, will be handed over to a children's charity, Buckingham Palace said on Saturday. [...] As the public mourned her death, the Royal Parks asked people not to leave Paddington bears and marmalade sandwiches because so many people had brought them. (Reuters 2022)

In conclusion, the present analysis identifies several discourse strategies through which the image of the Queen retains its popularity. The values that she stood for along her life, which are politeness, kindness towards the people, sense of humour, friendliness, carry new implications when set against a background expanded by the power of imagination. The interaction with Paddington Bear seems ordinary, the mechanisms of their linguistic or gestural turns look easily decipherable, but neither of the two characters is easy or ordinary: Queen Elizabeth II is one of the most outstanding monarchs in history, while Paddington is fictional, hence „magic”. The effectiveness of their interaction creates synergy, their qualities merge, and the rhetoric of the discourse becomes most powerful, as it is able to appeal to the collective conscience.

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