

Requests in the Qurra Dossier

A Cross-Cultural Pragmatic Approach

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Abstract Linguistic contact in Late Antique Egypt has received much scholarly interest, with several studies dedicated to multilingual communicative practice. Such investigations of papyrus documents have primarily focused on formulation and language choice. The current contribution will focus on the pragmatics of Request in Greek and Arabic from a cross-cultural perspective, based on the letters in the Qurra dossier. This is a collection of official letters from the governor of Egypt between 709 and 715 AD, to the pagarch of Aphrodito. This will shed light on the historical pragmatics of both linguacultures and investigate the effects of contact.

Keywords Cross-cultural pragmatics. Arabic. Greek. Multilingualism. Documentary papyri.

Summary 1 Introduction. – 1.1 The Corpus. – 1.2 Rhetorical Structure of the Greek and Arabic Letters. – 1.2.1 Rhetorical Structure of the Greek Letters. – 1.2.2 Rhetorical Structure of the Arabic Letters. – 1.3 Speech Acts and Historical Sociopragmatics. – 2 The Greek Letters. – 2.1 Requests. – 2.2 Threats and Admonitions. – 3 The Arabic Letters. – 3.1 Requests. – 3.2 Threats and Admonitions. – 4 Comparative Discussion and Conclusions.

1 Introduction

Arabic was catapulted onto the world stage by the Arab-Islamic conquests of the seventh century CE. Within a few centuries, it became an international medium of science, communication, and bureaucracy.

This did not happen in a vacuum, and through its expansion Arabic came into contact with other written cultures, an important one of which was Greek. Especially in Egypt, there is robust documentary evidence of contact between Greek and Arabic written culture, which has inspired several studies focusing on formulation and language choice.¹

Within the context of the emerging Arabic bureaucratic writing culture in contact with the long-established Greek one, we will perform a cross-cultural pragmatic analysis of the speech act Request² within Arabic and Greek letters in the bureaucratic correspondence of the Qurra dossier (709-715 AD). This corpus contains Greek and Arabic letters written to Basil, the pagarch of *kōmē Aphroditēs* (*ṣāhib Ishqawh* in Arabic), on behalf of Qurra son of Sharik, who was the governor of Egypt at the time. The comparatively rich social and historical context that is known for this corpus make it uniquely suitable for a comparative study.

In our analysis of the Greek and Arabic letters (§§ 3 and 4), we will focus on requests both from a more formal, linguistic perspective (i.e., what linguistic forms are used to perform requests, how are they internally modified), as well as from a broader, pragmatic perspective, taking into account which sorts of supportive acts are used in the letters, whether mitigating or aggravating. By highlighting the similarities and differences in realisation of this speech act, we want to come to a better understanding of the cultural specificity of the way in which Greek and Arabic requests were framed – both linguistically and pragmatically – in the Qurra dossier. In doing so, we hope to take a first step towards understanding how these two linguacultures³ in contact negotiated potentially differing cultural expectations and how they may have influenced each other.

Before doing so, we briefly discuss the Qurra dossier as a corpus for cross-cultural pragmatic study (§ 1.1), the rhetorical structure⁴ of

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1 E.g. Richter 2010; Luiselli 2008.

2 The term Speech Act was coined by Austin 1962; Searle 1969; 1976; here we are following the definition by House, Kádár 2021, 108. Under Searle's definition Request would fall under the illocutionary act of 'directives'.

3 For the term linguaculture see House, Kádár 2021, 5.

4 We use the term 'rhetorical' here not with reference to classical rhetoric, but to describe the discursive and functional structure of ancient sources. This encompasses

the Greek and Arabic letters respectively (§ 1.2), as well as the notion of ‘speech act’ as it has been developed in historical sociopragmatic research (§ 1.3). We conclude our contribution by making some comparative observations, as well as suggestions for further research (§ 4).

1.1 The Corpus

The Qurra dossier is a collection of documents that were likely part of the archive of the *pagarch* of the *kômē Aphroditēs* (or *ṣāḥib Ishqawh* in Arabic), situated some 50 km south of Asyut on the western bank of the Nile. A large share of the documents are official letters written to Basil, the *pagarch* of Aphrodito at the time, on behalf of Qurra son of Sharīk, who was the governor of Egypt between 90 AH/709 AD and 96 AH/715 AD. It is the largest published multilingual group of associated texts from the late first/early eighth century and has featured prominently in many works on the administration and taxation of early Umayyad Egypt.⁵

In terms of quantity, the main publications of the Qurra documents are Becker’s editions of the Arabic documents from the Heidelberg and London collections, Abbott’s publication of the Arabic documents of the Oriental Institute at Chicago, and Bell and Crum’s publication of the Greek and Coptic documents at the British Museum.⁶ The name ‘Qurra dossier’ or ‘Qurra papyri’, as is commonly used to refer to the entire archive of Basil, is somewhat of a misnomer, as the archive also contains Greek and Coptic documents that were not written during the time Qurra was governor of Egypt.⁷ The letters under discussion in the present article, however, are all part of the correspondence between Qurra son of Sharīk and Basil.⁸

both the generic conventions that shape these texts and the pragmatic work they perform within those conventions.

⁵ E.g. Bell 1928; Tillier 2017; Sijpesteijn 2013.

⁶ Becker 1906; 1911; Bell 1928; Abbott 1938. Richter 2010 gives an overview of the published documents, divided by language. Since then, some new material has been published, notably by Sijpesteijn 2011. Several fragments of letters were identified by Donner 2016.

⁷ For a complete discussion of the distribution of the documents in the archive of Basil see Richter 2010, 196. One could make the distinction between ‘the archive of Basileios’, to refer to all documents, and ‘the Qurra dossier’, to refer to the portion of the archive that is the correspondence between Basil and Qurra more narrowly. Therefore, we will refer to the documents here as the Qurra dossier, or the Qurra corpus.

⁸ The Trismegistos database gives metadata for the entire archive of Basilios pagarches of Aphrodito. See <https://www.trismegistos.org/archive/124>. The full-text of the Arabic texts is available on the website of the Arabic Papyrology Database (APD), a project under the patronage of the International Society for Arabic Papyrology (ISAP), at <https://www.apd.gwi.uni-muenchen.de/apd/project.jsp>.

As administrative correspondence, the corpus mainly includes letters containing orders and instructions. An important sub-genre of documents, and the only truly bilingual ones, are the tax demand notes (or *entagia*) of which 23 are preserved. As routine notices, these documents are very short and extremely formulaic. Therefore, for this article, we decided to leave them out of our analysis and focus instead on the administrative correspondence structured as individual letters. These letters deal with a range of topics, from requests to deal with fugitives, to delays in tax collection, but invariably centre around a request or order (see the discussion of each language corpus, below, for the exact make-up of each). Because we know the power relation between the two interlocutors and have access to several letters that make similar requests in each language,⁹ we can contextualise some of the social dimensions of the interactions, and it offers several points of close comparison, which makes this corpus ideal for a comparative study between the two linguacultures involved.

1.2 Rhetorical Structure of the Greek and Arabic Letters

Before proceeding with our discussion of Requests, it is important to outline how they are embedded in the larger rhetorical (formulaic) structure of the letters. As part of their rhetorical structure, Greek and Arabic letters written on papyrus, similar to other pre-modern epistolary genres, commonly follow a tri-partite division into an opening section, the body, and a closing. As the opening and closing sections of the letters are typically highly formulaic, the new information conveyed in the letters, in this case the request, typically occurs in the body of a letter, besides more formulaic elements. However, the formulaic opening and closing of the letters likely formed important reading aids to the recipient of a letter, in terms of signaling the type and genre of the letter,¹⁰ by guiding the reader through the structure of the letter,¹¹ and by giving cues to the interactional frame of the letter.¹² In the following, we will briefly discuss some of the relevant elements of the rhetorical structure of the Greek and Arabic letters from the Qurra dossier.

⁹ Given the strong overlap in the content of some of the Arabic and Greek letters, it is generally assumed that the letters were written as pairs, with a Greek and an Arabic version. However, so far no documents can be identified that seem to be direct translations of one another. On language choice in the Qurra dossier see Richter 2010, and more broadly on choices and development in language choice in administration in the early Muslim period, see Garosi 2022.

¹⁰ For a typology of Arabic documents based on their formulaic content see Kaplony 2018.

¹¹ Grob 2010, 29 and 136-55.

¹² Grob 2010, 123.

1.2.1 Rhetorical Structure of the Greek Letters

The structure of Greek private letters on papyrus, and the diachronic changes that structure underwent, has been studied *in extenso*.¹³ However, this is less the case for their official counterparts, especially those from the early Byzantine period.

Unlike contemporary letters written by Christians, which lack the opening (*prescript*) altogether, Greek letters emanating from Muslim chanceries may contain a prescript which seems to mimic Arabic epistolary formulae (on which, see further below).¹⁴ Letters are sometimes preceded by a summary, which is written either in Greek or in Greek and Arabic. The actual opening typically starts with the invocation ἐν ὀνόματι τοῦ θεοῦ ‘in the name of God’ (corresponding to the Arabic *basmala*), followed by the internal address, typically consisting of the name of the initiator, his patronymic and function, and the name of the addressee and his function, as for example Κόρρα υἱὸς Σζερίχ σύμβουλος Βασιλείᾳ διοικητῇ Ἀφροδιτῷ ‘Qurra son of Sharik governor to Basil administrator of Aphrodito’. Two elements that are not obligatory, but that are found in little less than a quarter of our letters are the doxology, εὐχαριστοῦμεν τῷ θεῷ ‘we give thanks to God’, and a transitional phrase of the type μετὰ ταῦτα lit. ‘thereafter’. Since this transitional formula is typically coordinated with the doxology through the use of καί, it is considered part of the opening here.¹⁵

Central to the letters is the request, which is almost always announced through the use of the participial phrase δεχόμενος οὖν τὰ παρόντα γράμματα ‘on receipt of the present letter’, which is also visually highlighted, for example through the introduction of a large *vacat*.¹⁶ The body of each letter typically starts with information that provides background to the request, such as the fact that a certain administrative decision has been taken, or that a certain type of information is needed. Background may also relate more directly to Basil, as when a complaint is voiced that the latter has acted against the orders that had been previously communicated. Moralising remarks about the ‘proper’ conduct of officials may also be included.¹⁷ The background can be introduced by ἐγνώσθη ἡμῖν ‘it was brought to our attention’, or simply start in medias res with past tense forms.

¹³ See Nachtergaele 2023 for an in-depth discussion of the formulaic structure of the openings and closings of Greek private letters.

¹⁴ This new type of Greek prescript in turn seems to have occasionally influenced the opening section of private correspondence, as noted by Luiselli 2008, 697.

¹⁵ Following Luiselli 2008, 697, who notes the use of ἔπειτα as an alternative transitional formula in Greek letters from Arab Palestine.

¹⁶ See Bentein, Kootstra 2024.

¹⁷ As in *P.Lond.* IV 1356 ll. 4-11 (710 AD) = TM 19814.

The request is then typically followed by one or more supportive moves, not all of which are present in every letter. Later on in this contribution, we will discuss threats and admonitions as supportive moves. Other discourse elements that can be found include a reference to a messenger who will be keeping an eye on things (perhaps to be understood as an implicit threat) and a moralising statement about the duties of officials towards the state, which one can compare to the moralising remarks found in the pre-request.

The closing section of the letters is less complex than the opening: it consists only of the date, which is typically introduced by the verb ἐγράφη ‘it was written’ followed by the day and month of the Egyptian calendar and the indictional year. After the date, various letters have a list that specifies information already mentioned in the body of the letter, for example a list of items or men that are requisitioned. On the verso side of the letters, we find the address (X to Y), and the docket with the date (again month and indiction), the name of the courier (ἡνίχθη διὰ ‘it was brought through’), and a summary of the contents.

1.2.2 Rhetorical Structure of the Arabic Letters

Looking at the structure of the Arabic letters, it becomes clear that one of the stylistic features shared by both the Greek and Arabic letters in this corpus is their generic organisation and, particularly, their use of several formulaic elements.

The letters typically start with an opening section with the phrase *bi-ism Allāh al-rahmān al-rahīm* ‘in the name of Allah the merciful the compassionate’ for which we find the Greek parallel ἐν ὀνόματι τοῦ θεοῦ ‘in the name of God’. This is followed by an internal address mentioning the sender and the addressee, and a doxology, praising Allah. Even though the doxology is not used consistently in the Greek letters, it is in the Arabic ones. The first part of the body of the text opens with the phrase *‘ammā ba’d*, which may be translated as ‘now then’ or ‘on to the matter at hand’.¹⁸ Even though this finds its parallel in the Greek μετὰ ταῦτα ‘thereafter’, in Arabic epistolary convention *‘ammā ba’d* is considered part of the body of the text.¹⁹ In most

¹⁸ There is an interesting example from a private letter in which this formula, which typically occurs just once to indicate the transition from the purely formulaic opening to the body of the letter, occurs three times (*PJoySorrow* 16 published in Younes 2013, 149). Each time, it indicates a shift in topic of the letter. More common than to repeat the opening formula exactly is the use of *wa-ba’d* ‘and then’ to structure letters, see Grob 2010, 40 fn. 44.

¹⁹ In early Arabic official correspondence the body of the letter can be visually separated from the opening. In such cases *‘ammā ba’d* is consistently grouped with the body of the text, see Garosi 2022, 185.

letters this is followed by a recapitulation of previous correspondence or a brief outline of the matter at hand which is sometimes combined with an initial request. This section largely functions to give background information, or as a pre-request, similar to the structure of the Greek letters.

Some examples of this are quite to the point, and only give the background to the request (e.g. *P.BeckerNPAF* 2 ll. 1-5). In other letters, this section can be quite elaborate containing, besides the reprimand that Basil is late and a pre-request to come and see Qurra about this, a threat, and an insult as in *P.Qurra* 4 (ll. 1-12), which even contains an oath *'alā 'amr-ī* 'on my life (I swear)' to underline the threat. The next part of the letter, which contains the main request, is then introduced with a formula that is very similar to the one found in the Greek letters: *fa-'iqā jā'a-ka kitāb-ī hādā* 'so when this letter of mine reaches you'. As in the Greek letters, this phrase seems to signal the transition from the pre-request to the actual request in the letter.²⁰ Unlike in the Greek letters, however, there is no evidence for a relationship between the level of politeness of the letter and whether this formula was used to introduce the main content of the letter (on which, see further § 2.1).²¹

Many of the letters that are missing the phrase are incomplete, suggesting that the original may have contained it. Both in *P.BeckerNPAF* 2 and *P.Qurra* 4, mentioned above, the pre-request part of the letter is followed by this phrase, showing that both fairly neutral and quite threatening and insulting letters did contain it. *P.BeckerNPAF* 12, on the other hand, is an example of a letter of which the complete body survives, which does not contain the formula, but which also does not seem particularly harsh or rude. It is short and to the point and ends with two admonitions, but it does not contain any threats or overt reprimands (*P.BeckerNPAF* 12 ll. 1-11).

The closing section of the Arabic letters typically starts with the verb *kataba* 'he wrote (it)', with the name of the scribe as its subject, followed by the Islamic month and year according to the *hijrī*

20 In some letters, the structural function of this formula is visually underlined by placing it on a new line, creating a new paragraph. See, for example *P.RagibQurra* 1 (Inv.Sorb. 2344) in which both the formula *'ammā ba'd* and *fa-'iqā jā'a-ka* are placed on a new line. Image available online as part of the online collection of the Sorbonne <http://www.papyrologie.paris-sorbonne.fr/photos/PArabe/2012344.jpg>. The visual structure of the Qurra papyri is discussed in Bentein, Kootstra 2024.

21 In a more general sense, however, adherence to formulaic epistolary norms can be seen as a form of politic behaviour or conventional politeness, conforming to the reader's expectations of the genre and aiding the comprehension and parsing of the letter. For a discussion of the role of formulae in the information structure and reading comprehension of Arabic letters see Grob 2010, 136-55. And for the use of formulae as conventional politeness see Grob 2010, 123. For the concept of politic behaviour see e.g. Watts 2003, 19.

calendar. A few of the letters also mention who copied (*nasaḥa*) the letter (e.g. *P.Qurra* 3; *P.BeckerNPAF* 8; 9).

1.3 Speech Acts and Historical Sociopragmatics

In the field of historical sociopragmatics and speech act theory, the recognition that the full communicative context, speaker/writer intentions, and hearer/reader ‘uptake’ (that is, their understanding of what is being communicated), are generally not directly recoverable from the data has led to an extensive body of scholarship on data and methodology.²² Since then, several approaches have developed to tackle this.²³

We will depart from a form-based approach,²⁴ collecting the various ways of expressing the speech act Request, based on a close reading of the letters in our corpus. As we only have letters initiated by Qurra, and none of Basil’s responses, a full discourse approach as undertaken by Magdalena Leitner and Andreas Jucker on a sixteenth-century letter exchange between members of a Scottish Highland clan is not available to us.²⁵ However, these individual speech acts can be contextualised within the genre and communicative framework of Qurra sending orders and instructions to a subordinate. Within the letters we can take the discursive context of the individual speech acts into account, and how the letters are structured rhetorically. Moreover, with access to correspondence concerning similar events, some of the documents can offer insights into how escalating matters are addressed, providing further insight into how the communicative framework impacts communicative strategies. In this way, by collecting the formal expressions of the Speech Act Request, we can observe that some are combined with mitigating expressions, and others with aggravating ones.²⁶ Mitigating moves are meant to soften the tone or

²² See, for example, Culpeper, Kytö 2000, in general, and Bertucelli Papi 2000, more specifically on the diachronic study of speech acts.

²³ Approaches range from an ethnographic approach focusing on metalinguistic discourse around specific speech acts by Taavitsainen, Jucker 2007, to more form-based approaches such as Kohnen 2007, and discursive approaches such as demonstrated in Leitner, Jucker 2021.

²⁴ Comparable to that of Kohnen 2007.

²⁵ Leitner, Jucker 2021, 695-702.

²⁶ For an extensive discussion of whether an expression can be ‘inherently’ (im)polite, that is, (im)polite outside of context, see Culpeper 2011, 113-45. He argues for a dual approach on the basis that both a form-based and a context-based approach are different ways of looking at politeness that reinforce our understanding of the phenomenon.

imposition of a request,²⁷ while aggravating expressions are meant to add to the pragmatic force of the request.²⁸

We base our classification of different speech acts on a slightly modified version of the typology developed by Juliane House and Dániel Kádár in their recent work on cross-cultural pragmatics, which was elaborated in the context of the European-funded project ‘Everyday writing in Graeco-Roman and Late Antique Egypt. A socio-semiotic study of communicative variation’ (<http://www.ev writ.ugent.be>, 2018-24),²⁹ and which is also discussed in the contribution by Marta Capano and Klaas Bentein to this volume.³⁰ House and Kádár define the speech act Request as “a speech act in which the requester asks the requestee to do something which is in the interest of the requester”.³¹ Their typology builds on that first developed by Willis Edmondson and Juliane House, which took a strong interactional approach.³² House and Kádár then further adjusted it to rely on categories with a high degree of generality to ensure its applicability to a wide variety of linguacultures.³³ Following the typology proposed by House and Kádár, we do not make a distinction between requests and commands. The difference between them is often not linguistically encoded and only recoverable from the social distance and hierarchical relationship between initiator and addressee, which is not always recoverable in the historical epistolary record. Especially the focus on wide cultural applicability, partially by relying on ‘deep’ categories that “reflect basic human needs”,³⁴ makes this model interesting for our present article, as our data comes from two linguacultures that are both different from each other, but also quite far removed from modern Western languages and linguistic behaviour.

As mentioned before, for the pragmatic contextualisation of the requests, we will take into account the wider context and rhetorical and discursive build-up of the letters that can be used to emphasise or soften the force of the Request. When this is done ‘head-internally’ we will refer to such strategies as upgrading or downgrading modifiers.

²⁷ Comparable to what Brown and Levinson call ‘redressive action’. See Brown, Levinson 1987, 69-70.

²⁸ House, Kádár 2021, 249 with examples on 127.

²⁹ The project-internal documentation is currently not yet publicly available, but we are greatly indebted to Marta Capano for her work on developing the documentation on speech act annotation and document structure for the project’s database.

³⁰ The differences are based on the specific descriptive needs of the historical epistolary genre. Most important is the decision to distinguish between ‘assertion’, ‘statement’ and ‘description’ instead of between ‘opine’ and ‘tell’ as House, Kádár do, 2021, 107-13.

³¹ House, Kádár 2021, 108.

³² Edmondson, House 1981.

³³ House, Kádár 2021, 105-6.

³⁴ House, Kádár 2021, 106.

‘Head-external’ modifications of the Request are referred to as supportive moves. Such moves include mitigating moves such as Appeasement, or aggravating moves such as Threats or Moralising statements, following the coding scheme proposed by Juliane House and Dániel Kádár.³⁵

Two supportive moves that are so prominent in the data that they warrant separate mention are threats and admonitions. These are not listed in House and Kádár’s already extensive list of speech acts.³⁶ This is because they can be considered generic ‘moves’ that can be realised by several speech acts,³⁷ as we intend to show in the discussion below. We define³⁸ admonition as ‘a comment that follows instructions and requests and has the function of stressing what was previously asked’, constituting a more generic order (as in ‘do not forget’) or harsh recommendation (as in ‘do the job properly’). A threat, on the other hand, we define as a statement ‘that implies negative consequences for the receiver, and/or someone else, generally as a punishment for an action or for not having done something’.³⁹ Threats occur elsewhere in the papyrological corpus, too,⁴⁰ but their explicitness and harshness are one of the most striking features of the letters in the Qurra dossier. They range from financial to corporeal⁴¹ and even life-threatening.

2 The Greek Letters

The Qurra dossier contains around one hundred and eight Greek letters, next to the earlier-mentioned *entagia*. For thirty-one of these letters, the body of the text has been more or less completely preserved (sometimes with minor gaps); in other texts, it has been

³⁵ House, Kádár 2021, 125-7. However, as we will see in the discussion of the data, the moralising strategies in the Qurra papyri do not only seem to be there to chastise the addressee but can also hold a promise of (divine) reward.

³⁶ House, Kádár 2021, 107. Note that they recognise threats and moralising as supportive moves (House, Kádár 2021, 127).

³⁷ For the concept of “generic move” see Bhatia 1993.

³⁸ The following definitions have been developed by Marta Capano in the context of her work on the *Everyday Writing* project.

³⁹ Implicit/indirect threats are not annotated as threats; for examples of such indirect threats in the Greek letters, see e.g. *P.Lond.* IV 1338 ll. 12-17 (709 AD) = TM 19796; *P.Lond.* IV 1339 ll. 17-18 (709 AD) = TM 19797; *P.Lond.* IV 1363 ll. 10-12 (710 AD) = TM 19821; *P.Ross.Georg.* IV 6 (710 AD) ll. 25-9 = TM 20491.

⁴⁰ See e.g. *P.Oxy.* I 119 (II-III AD) = TM 28410. For the use of threats as a rhetorical strategy in Greek letters sent by women, see Thoma, Papatthomas 2021.

⁴¹ So e.g. in *P.Lond.* IV 1370 ll. 13-17 (710 AD) = TM 20496, ‘And you will be aware that if, when you come down to us, there is found even one single *artaba* of the said wheat in arrears in your district we shall seize you and bind you until you collect and hand over this by God’s command’.

partially preserved, or only very fragmentarily. For twenty-six texts, no text-structural annotations could be made in the body due to the state of preservation of the letter. The range of the completely preserved texts varies: many of the letters contain less than fifteen lines (including the letter opening, body and closing), such as *P.Lond. IV 1341* (709 AD) = TM 19799 [ten lines], a letter which informs Basil that demand notes (*entagia*) have been sent, and that the requested money should therefore be collected, or *P.Lond. IV 1336* (709 AD) = TM 19794 [13 lines], a letter in which a single carpenter is requisitioned for a period of four months. Other letters contain thirty lines or more: an example is *P.Lond. IV 1356* (710 AD) = TM 19814 [39 lines], in which Basil is instructed to give just judgment to the people in his district, and to ensure that tax assessments are administered fairly. The longest letter in our dossier, which is only partially preserved, is *SB III 7241* (710 AD) = TM 18868 [60 lines]; it deals with the collection of men and supplies for the annual raiding expedition (the *cursus*).

Most of the letters deal with various types of public requisitions that are made by the governor, concerning fees and taxes in money and kind; the enlistment of workmen, supplies for workmen and building materials; and the conscription of sailors and their supplies for naval raids. Other types of requisitions are also made, such as for the governor's household or the upkeep and service of post-horses. Another, relatively large group of letters, deals with fugitives.⁴² In the letter that we mentioned above, *P.Lond. IV 1356*, a matter of private law, to give just judgment, is touched upon, which is quite unique. Given that in all of these letters Qurrah is handing out orders to Basil, it does not come as a surprise that requests constitute the dominant type of speech act. Nevertheless, other speech acts, too, frequently appear, functioning as supportive moves to the request (whether in the pre- or post-request),⁴³ such as *assertion*, *complaint*, *description*, *resolve*, and *statement*. One can try to connect the inclusion of one or more of these supportive moves to socio-pragmatic factors. For the Arabic letters, it was suggested already by Nadia Abbott that a connection can be made between the employment of linguistic and pragmatic strategies and the nature of the request that is being made:

it seems that when a letter dealt with a routine matter, brevity and directness were employed; but in documents referring to gross neglect of duty or to its dire results on entire districts or perhaps

⁴² See the overview presented by Richter 2010, 197-8.

⁴³ Compare Koroili 2020a, 120, who refers to *preparation for the directive* – *formulation of the directive* – *supplement of the directive* as a typical rhetorical pattern found in request letters.

the whole country, threats and repetitions and detailed instructions lengthened and complicated the letter.⁴⁴

We will discuss the Arabic letters in more detail below (§ 3). For now, it is worth noting that similar observations can be made for the Greek letters. A request letter such as *P.Lond.* IV 1336 (709 AD) = TM 19794, for example, in which Qurra requisitions a single carpenter for a period of four months is structurally quite simple (mimicking, to some extent, the simpler *entagia*), with the pre-request (background) consisting of a simple statement (ἐτάξαμεν ‘we requisitioned’), followed by a short request using simple imperatives (πέμψον ‘send’, παράδος ‘hand over’), and no post-request.⁴⁵ One can contrast this with a request letter such as *P.Lond.* IV 1353 (710 AD) = TM 19811, a letter in which sailors, skilled workmen and supplies for the raiding fleet are requisitioned; this letter, too, has a relatively simple pre-request, but a very elaborate request and post-request, with a repeated request, an admonition, threat, etc., with much emphasis on the need for swiftness of execution. Besides the weight of the imposition that is made on the addressee,⁴⁶ and the urgency of the matter at hand, it seems that reiteration of the request due to negligence or transgression also triggers increased pragmatic complexity: when the flow of revenues is endangered by payment arrears or fugitives, we typically get longer, much more complex letters: a letter such as *P.Lond.* IV 1380 (710 AD) = TM 19835, in which Qurra complains about arrears in the payment of public gold taxes, is structurally much more complex, and contains not only repeated requests, but also a moralising assertion,⁴⁷ a threat, an admonition, etc.⁴⁸

A striking element of Qurra’s letters, both the ones written in Greek and in Arabic, is their harsh rhetoric, in particular the reference to severe punishments including fines, corporal punishment and even death, giving the impression of a ruthless, authoritarian governor.⁴⁹

⁴⁴ Abbott 1938, 40.

⁴⁵ For similar examples, see e.g. *P.Lond.* IV 1352 (710 AD) = TM 19810; *P.Lond.* IV 1369 (710 AD) = TM 19819; *P.Lond.* IV 1374 (710 AD) = TM 19830; *P.Lond.* IV 1378 (710 AD) = TM 19833 etc.

⁴⁶ For degree of imposition as a sociological variable, compare Brown, Levinson 1987, 74–83.

⁴⁷ With this term, we mean an assertion that pressures the addressee to act in accordance with what was considered just and moral leadership. See fns 88 and 120 for the link between both Christian and Islamic concepts of justice and the content of the letters. While the link between im/politeness, in/civility, and im/morality is explored within the field of (historical) pragmatics, this is beyond the scope of the current article. See Garcés-Conejos Blitvich, Kádár 2021.

⁴⁸ A similar example is *P.Lond.* IV 1338 (709 AD) = TM 19796. For letters on fugitives, see e.g. *P.Lond.* IV 1384 (708–710 AD) = TM 19838; *P.Ross.Georg.* IV 1 (710 AD) = TM 20487.

⁴⁹ See Bell 1910, xxxv, noting that “this person [Qurra] has become almost a proverb for cruelty and oppression”.

Such rhetoric must be situated in its socio-historical context, however: as Papaconstantinou has observed,⁵⁰ Basil's behaviour – ranging from passive obstruction, deliberate delays, and possibly protecting fugitives, to financial mismanagement and corruption, whether for personal gain or to protect local interests – illustrates the complex challenges faced by the early Islamic administration in consolidating control and enforcing reforms in regions like Egypt. Threats of punishment and the replacement of local officials such as Basil, are best considered as a rhetorical strategy to assert control over local administrations, used besides other strategies such as central control through inspectors and local informants. Qurra's threats never seem to materialise, as both Bell and Papaconstantinou have noted,⁵¹ and do not seem to have been very effective: "the impressive rhetoric of power deployed in [the] letters seems to have been as ineffective as Basileios' tax collection".⁵²

2.1 Requests

Requests are, as we said, the core speech act found in our corpus. In her discussion of Late Antique request letters in Greek, Koroli highlights the large number of options writers had to express requests, which she places on a continuum ranging from very polite to what she calls the more urgent, 'imperative' tone.⁵³ This can be contrasted to earlier periods of Greek, when the use of the direct imperative formed a neutral option in terms of politeness.⁵⁴ In our dossier, second-person requests are nevertheless predominantly formulated in the imperative – the most direct option – typically in the aorist tense;⁵⁵ for hortatory third-person requests and especially prohibitive requests, which occur less frequently, the subjunctive (with or without the negation μή) forms the standard option.⁵⁶

The initial request is recognizable not only through the standard phrase δεχόμενος τὰ παρόντα γράμματα 'on receipt of this letter', but also through the use of the causal discourse particle οὖν 'so', which is

⁵⁰ Papaconstantinou 2015b.

⁵¹ Bell 1910, xxxv; Papaconstantinou 2015a, 45.

⁵² Papaconstantinou 2015b.

⁵³ Koroli 2020b, 82-4.

⁵⁴ Dickey 2010, 337. Dickey 2016 discusses the change from the use of the bare imperative in the Classical period to that of polite request formulae in later periods in terms of egalitarianism.

⁵⁵ For some exceptional present-tense imperatives, see *P.Lond.* IV 1380 l. 16 (710 AD) = TM 19835 (βλέπε); *P.Lond.* IV 1404 l. 12 (709-714 AD) = TM 19852 (ἀπαιτεῖ).

⁵⁶ E.g. *SB* 10 10458 l. 10 (710 AD) = TM 16765 (ἀναλάβωσιν, hortatory).

used not so much to indicate intra- or inter-sentential causality (as it most often is), but rather to indicate a major break in discourse.⁵⁷ The same discourse particle, other causal particles (such as high-register τοίνυν), or more typically additive δέ, are then used for follow-up requests. Another characteristic feature of requests in our dossier is that they are very frequently ‘upgraded’ by modifiers which increase the pragmatic force of the speech act, in particular manner and time adverbs/adverbial phrases such as ἀμελλητί ‘zealously’, ἀνεμποδίστως ‘unhindered’, ἐνδρανῶς ‘with vigor’, εὐθέως ‘immediately’, κατ’ αὐτήν τὴν ὥραν ‘this very moment’, παραχρῆμα ‘immediately’, etc.⁵⁸

An important qualification that needs to be made when it comes to the expression of requests, is that in many of the letters requests are expressed by conjunct participles syntactically agreeing with a preceding or following verb in the imperative mood. The excessive use of the participle in the dossier has also been noted by other scholars;⁵⁹ as this non-finite form was in decline at this period of time, its frequent appearance could, perhaps, be seen as an archaising feature, though more research should be done on the function of the Greek participle in Late Antique and Early Byzantine papyri.⁶⁰ A striking example of the use of the participle can be found in *P.Ross. Georg. IV 6* (710 AD) = TM 20491 (example 1), a letter in which Qurra requests the organisation and training of youths in carpentry and caulking, emphasising the importance of these skills for maintaining ships and other state services, while also instructing oversight of tree planting and diligent execution of specified tasks.⁶¹ In this letter, the entire request consists of participial clauses, with the exception of a single aorist imperative, which is placed immediately after the introductory phrase δεχόμενος οὖν τὰ παρόντα γράμματα ‘on receipt of the present letter’, and which could perhaps be considered the main request in this passage.

- (1) δεχόμενος οὖν τὰ παρόντα γράμμα]τα διάστειλ[ον] | διὰ τῆς πόλεως καὶ συστατικῶν χωρίων καὶ ἐμφανῶν | τῆς διοικήσεώς σου [προσώπων πα]ιδία εἰς[] διδάχ[η]ν | τε[χ]νῶν | τούτους ἐκδιδῶν (l. ἐκδιδούς) τεχνίταις ἐμπείροις καὶ δοκίμοις ἐπισταμένοις | δεόντως τὴν τέχνην καὶ ἐπισκεπτόμενος καὶ ἄδνουμέων | καθ’ ἕκαστον μῆνα, ἐπιθεωρῶν τε καὶ τὸ ἔργον αὐτῶν | πρὸς τὸ μὴ ἀμεληθῆναι ἢ καταφρονηθῆναι, γράφω^ν ἡμῖν | τὸ κατ’

⁵⁷ For parallels from the papyrological corpus, as well as discussion of the diachronic development leading to this use of causal particles, see Bentein 2016; 2021.

⁵⁸ Compare the category of ‘time intensifiers’ in House, Kádár 2021, 124.

⁵⁹ See e.g. Bell 1926, 276-7.

⁶⁰ For the participle’s decline in functional complexity and inflectional capacity, see Manolossou 2005. In our passage, one could say that the participle behaves in gerund-like fashion, which is the function that persists in Modern Greek.

⁶¹ For another example, see *SB III 7241 ll. 34-44* (710 AD) = TM 18868.

ὄνομα καὶ πατρωνο[ι]μίαν (l. πατρωνυμίαν) κατὰ χωρίον τε καὶ κατὰ τ[έ]χ[ην] | ἐκάστου αὐτῶν, παρασκευάζων τὸ ἥμισυ μέρος αὐτῶν | βληθῆναι εἰς τὸ ναυπηγ[ι]κὸν καὶ καλαφατικὸν ἔργον, | γράφων ἡμῖν ὡσαύτως καὶ \ τοὺς / ἐκδοθέντας παῖδας τῆς διοικῆ(σεως) σου / | κατὰ τὸν περυσιανὸν (l. περυσινὸν) χρόνον τῷ αὐτῷ σκαρίφῳ, ἐπιτρέπω[ν] δὲ | τοῖς τῆς διοικήσεως σοφ[ι] / φυτεῦσαι πλῆθος δένδρων | ἔν τε ἀμπέλῳ καὶ ἀκάνθεων (l. ἀκάνθων) καὶ λοιπῶν δένδρων, | μὴ ἀμελῶν ἔν τιν[ι] τ[ῶν] ἐπ[ι]τ[ρ]απέντων σοι ἔν τῇ παρο[ύ]σῃ | ἐπιστολῇ ἄλλ (l. ἄλλ<α>) διὰ σεαυτοῦ περιερχόμενος καὶ ἐπισκεπτ[ό]μεν[ος] | ὥς εἴρηται χάριν τούτων ἀπάντων καὶ γράφων ἡμῖ[ν] τ[ὸ] πῶς | διεγένοι. (P. Ross. Georg. IV 6 ll. 8-25 [710 AD] = TM 20491)

Thus, once you receive the present letter, order throughout the city and villages connected to it, and among the leading people of your district, youths to train in the crafts. Entrust them to skilled and notable craftsmen who know suitably their craft, and observing and monitoring them each month, watch over their work that there is no carelessness and negligence, and write to us the name, patronymic, village and craft of each. Preparing half of them to be cast for work in ship-building and half in caulking, send to us in the same way the names of the youths placed last year in the same kind of list. Order those of your district to plant a multitude of trees, vines, acacias and other trees and do not neglect any of the orders included in the present letter, but go around and observe on your own all of these things, as has been said, and write to us how you have done. (transl. Bell)

While especially in earlier times the Greeks were known for their fondness of the participle, it is used in this and other letters rather excessively; one can note that Bell in his translation has rendered many of these participles as English imperatives. What makes this passage particularly striking is the triple repetition of γράφων ‘write’ (lit. writing), as well as the fact that even the admonition (ll. 22-5), which is usually introduced with a subjunctive of the type μὴ ἀμελήσης ‘do not neglect to’ but is here expressed through the participle μὴ ἀμελῶν, is incorporated into a single, seventeen-line sentence.

While it is debatable whether the choice for the (conjunct) participle instead of the imperative in this and other passages was motivated primarily by the desire to write in a higher register, or rather to soften the succession of requests, one can note the use of θέλησον ‘please’ (lit. ‘want’) in the Greek letters as a pragmatic softener.⁶² The use of this phrase is admittedly very limited in our corpus, as it can be found in only two letters, *P.Lond.* IV 1339 (709 AD) = TM 19797, a letter which unfortunately misses the opening and the first part of the body, and *P.Lond.* IV 1351 (710 AD) = TM 19809, a relatively short but fully preserved letter. What motivated the choice for this more polite option in these two letters is difficult to say: in the first letter, Qurra asks Basil to come down with some men and a register; in the second, Basil is requested to provide a messenger with a boat. Both of these letters contain a request that is somewhat more

⁶² For the use of θέλησον as a politeness strategy, compare Koroli 2020b, 83.

personal than the typical requests in the dossier, which could, perhaps, explain the occurrence of such a polite form. Somewhat strikingly, both letters also contain a threat, underlining the importance of the matter at hand.

Another element that is worth considering here from a socio-pragmatic point of view, is the participial clause δεχόμενος οὖν τὰ παρόντα γράμματα ‘so receiving the present letter’ which standardly introduces the request in the letters in our dossier, and can therefore be seen as a generic cue, together with the use of discourse particles such as οὖν and λοιπόν, which are not exclusive to the introduction of the request. There are some indications that would suggest that this phrase was more than a simple generic cue, that is, that it functioned as a type of pragmatic softener: first of all, the formula appears with some variations in our letters, which would suggest that the phrase was not completely standardised in its discourse-structuring function. In some of the letters, either the mood of the phrase is changed from participle to infinitive (πάραντα οὖν τοῦ δεῖξασθαί σε τὰ παρόντα γρ[άμμα]τ[α] ‘immediately upon the receiving of the present letter’, *P.Ross.Georg.* IV 4 l. 1 (710 AD) = TM 20490), or the phrase is completely nominalised (μετὰ τῇν ἀνάγνωσιν [τῶν παρόντων γραμμάτων] ‘after the reading of the present letters’, *P.Ross.Georg.* IV 27 C (I) l. 1 (709-710 AD) = TM 20502, unfortunately mostly reconstructed).⁶³

A second and perhaps more important indicator of the fact that inclusion of the phrase δεχόμενος οὖν τὰ παρόντα γράμματα was more than a standardised generic element relates to the fact that this participial clause is not found in all of the request letters. This is mostly the case in shorter letters such as *P.Lond.* IV 1336 (709 AD) = TM 19794, *P.Lond.* IV 1342 (709 AD) = TM 19800, and *P.Lond.* IV 1368 (710 AD) = TM 19825, in which the background consists of the verb ἐτάξαμεν ‘we have apportioned’, and the request of a verb in the imperative asking to act accordingly (without a post-request). In these texts, the brevity of the expression might have motivated omission of the participial clause.⁶⁴ *P.Lond.* IV 1380 (710 AD) = TM 19835, however, is a long letter in which Qurra complains about Basil being in arrears with the payment of public gold taxes: similarly to the other letters in our dossier, this letter contains a clear background

⁶³ In one letter, *P.Ross.Georg.* IV 16 (TM 20500), one finds a double request phrase (ll. 5-7), a standard phrase announcing the start of the request, and another, alternative phrase integrated in the background: διὰ τοῦτο] κελεύομεν μετὰ τὴν ἀπόλυσιν | [τῶν παρόντων ἡμῶν γραμμάτων μὴ λεπτισθῆναι τινα. | [δεχόμενος οὖν τὰ παρόντ]α γράμματα παράγγειλον ‘this is why we order that after the deliverance of our present letters no one should be tortured (?). So, after the receipt of our present letter, order etc’.

⁶⁴ One can compare, though, with other shorter letters such as *P.Lond.* IV 1401 (709-714 AD) = TM 19849, which do include the participial clause.

section, in which Qurra complains about Basil's 'unsatisfactory and worthless' work, and his 'evil conduct' in the matter of tax payments (ll. 3-16); in this letter, however, the background is directly followed by a request in the imperative, without any introductory statement (ll. 16-18: βλέπε οὖν τὸ λοιπασθὲν | διὰ τῆς διοικήσεώς σο(υ) ἐκ τοῦ διμοιρομέρους τῶν χρυσικῶν | δημοσίων αὐτῆς 'look then to the arrears in your district of the two-thirds part of its public gold taxes'). One could, perhaps, consider the omission of this participial clause as a conscious form of impoliteness.⁶⁵

2.2 Threats and Admonitions

As we mentioned in the introduction, what we call 'threats' and 'admonitions' are not included in House and Kádár's list of speech acts. Nevertheless, they occur so frequently in our epistolary corpus that it is worth considering them as generic moves that can be variously realised. The threats in our corpus typically occur after the request, stating what will happen if Basil does not comply, but in some of the letters threats – whether or not implicit – occur in the background to the request, when Qurra refers to Basil's 'dangerous' attitude in past events.⁶⁶ The threats (whether in the pre- or post-request) mostly concern Basil, but local inhabitants are occasionally threatened too, as in *P.Lond.* IV 1343 (TM 19801), a letter in which Qurra instructs Basil and by extension the locals to make known fugitives; this letter contains multiple threats, the heaviest of which is saved for the very end of the letter.⁶⁷

Two dominant ways of realisation for Greek threats are either as a *resolve*, with the initiator stating an act that he intends to do,⁶⁸ or as an *assertion*, in which the initiator expresses a strong opinion about something which s/he considers to be true. Both are typically expressed with a futural verbal expression.⁶⁹ In the following two

⁶⁵ For a frame-based approach to impoliteness in Greek, see Bruno 2022. For omissions in a formulaic context, see Bentein 2023a, 455-8.

⁶⁶ See e.g. *P.Lond.* IV 1404 ll. 4-7 (709-714 AD) = TM 19852; *P.Berl.Frisk.* 6 ll. 6-7 (710 AD) = TM 17682.

⁶⁷ Ll. 41-4: μέλλει γὰρ οὗτος μακαρίσαι τοὺς τεθνεώτας | ἐν τῷ μὴ ὑποφέρειν αὐτον (l. αὐτοὺς) τὰ ἐπερχόμενα αὐτῷ δεινὰ | ἄνθ' ὧν παρήκουσεν κελεύσεως ἡμῶν καὶ ἀπετόλμη[σ]εν | κατὰ τῆς ἰδίας ψυχῆς 'for such a man will count the dead happy in that they do not bear the calamities which will come upon him for his disobedience to our command and his reckless disregard of his own life'.

⁶⁸ See House, Kádár 2021, 109.

⁶⁹ There are few instances of the synthetic future in the dossier. An analytic expression that is used is the future of εἰμί with the present participle, though only for the expression ἔσῃ ἐπιστάμενος/γινώσκων 'you will be aware'.

examples (2 and 3) the auxiliary verb μέλλω ‘I will’, followed by the aorist infinitive, is used to express a threat.⁷⁰

- (2) ἔση γὰρ ἐπιστάμενος ὥς ἐὰν καταγνώσθῃ τις | ἐκ τῶν πεμπομένων παρὰ σοῦ/ ἔσχηκώς παρ’ οἰουδήποτε ἀνθρώπου/ | σπóρτουλον εἰς σέ ὅρᾱ ὁ κίδυνος καὶ μέλλεις σὺν <τῷ> καταγινώσκ(ομέν)ῳ | εἰς τοῦτο ἀπολαβεῖν (P.Lond. IV 1332 ll. 12-15 [708 AD] = TM 19791)

for you will be aware that if anyone of the persons you send is convicted of having received a gratuity from anyone whatsoever, the danger is yours and you will receive punishment along with the guilty person. (transl. Bell)

- (3) μὴ εὐρεθῇς παραλείψας τί ποτε ἐν τῇ ἐπιτροπῇ | ἡμῶν εἰς τοῦτο μήτε μὴν διδων (l. διδοῦς) καθ’ εαυτοῦ/ (l. σεαυτοῦ) | τὴν οἶαν οὖν πρόφασιν ἢ σκάνδαλον. μέλλομεν γὰρ | κελεύσει Θεοῦ καλοποιῆσαι τῷ καλῶς διαπραττωμένῳ (l. διαπραττομένῳ), | ἔξαλείψαι δὲ τὸν χαώτην ῥαδιουργόν τε καὶ ἄδικον (P.Lond. IV 1338 ll. 24-9 [709 AD] = TM 19796)

and in fact may you not be found to have omitted anything at all in our commands regarding this matter, nor give any ground of complaint or cause of displeasure whatsoever against yourself; for we intend by God’s command to recompense the man whose conduct is good and to wipe out the unjust and unscrupulous wastrel. (transl. Bell, slightly modified)

The verb μέλλω originally expressed a strong nuance of intention, meaning ‘I intend to do something’ with wilful animate subjects, and ‘something is about to/will happen’ with inanimate subjects.⁷¹ While this original meaning of μέλλω is generally taken to have bleached over time, some of it may have been retained at the time of our dossier (especially with the first person), making the verb particularly suited for resolves and assertions.

Alternative formulations of resolves and assertions can be found, too: instead of μέλλω with an aorist infinitive, we sometimes find the use of a simple present indicative with the value of a future tense – the so-called *praesens pro futuro* – as in the first threat, where we read εἰς σέ ὅρᾱ ὁ κίδυνος, with a futural meaning of [if you do not comply] ‘the danger will be yours’.⁷² Another construction that appears in several of the letters is οὐ μὴ with the subjunctive or future indicative,

⁷⁰ Markopoulos 2009, 90-1, notes a remarkable difference in the infinitival complementation of μέλλω in literary vs. non-literary sources in the Early Byzantine period: papyri almost exclusively use the aorist infinitive, whereas literary sources only contain occasional attestations of this type of infinitive. Markopoulos concludes that μέλλω with the aorist infinitive must have formed a ‘low-register pattern’, to which he sees the Qurra dossier giving testimony.

⁷¹ Markopoulos 2009, 21.

⁷² E.g. SB III 7241 l. 28 (710 AD) = TM 18868; P.Lond. IV 1343 l. 18 (709 AD) = TM 19801; P.Lond. IV 1351 l. 12 (710 AD) = TM 19809; P.Lond. 4.1370 l. 13 (710 AD) = TM 20496.

which, according to standard grammars of the Classical period, expresses “an emphatic denial, a strong belief that something will not be the case”.⁷³ As John Lee has noted, this construction became less frequently used in the Post-classical period, though the construction is still well-attested in the Septuagint.⁷⁴ Lee observes that the construction can be found in the New Testament, too, though noting that it is almost entirely limited to the sayings of Jesus, from which he concludes that the construction “conveyed not only emphasis but more importantly a solemn, biblical tone, especially suited to prophetic utterances and the speech of Jesus”.⁷⁵ In our dossier, the construction may be taken to indicate solemnity and perhaps also a Biblical tone, which would be in line with Bell’s observation that ‘some Biblical uses occur’⁷⁶ in the Greek papyri from our dossier. The construction can be found in main clauses, or embedded in a complement clause, as in example 4:⁷⁷

- (4) κατάλαβε τὰ πρὸς ἡμᾶς μ[ε]τ[ὰ] τ[ῆ]ς συμπληρώσεως | ὥς εἴρηται τῶν χρυσικῶν δημοσίων καὶ ἐκστραορδίνω(ν) | καὶ λοιπῶν στίχων ἐπιζητουμένων διὰ τῆς διοικῆ(σεως) | μὴ ὑστερῶν ἐξ αὐτῶν τι τὸ σύνολον, γινώσκει γὰρ | ὁ Θεός, ὡς οὐ μὴ ἀποκινήθῃς (l. ἀποκινήθῃς) ἐξ ἡμῶν καὶ ἔστι | διὰ σο(ῦ) ἐν λοιπάδει (l. λοιπάδι) ἕως ἐνὸς μιλιαρισίο(υ) καὶ | μόνο(υ) καὶ πιστοφορέθητι εἰς τοῦτο. (*P.Lond.* IV 1338 ll. 4-10 [709 AD] = TM 19796)

come down to us with the complement, as aforesaid, of the public gold taxes and extraordinary taxes and the remaining imposts required from your administrative district, not delaying anything at all of them. For God knows that you shall never depart again from us if there is even one single penny in arrear from you – be sure of that!

Besides the use of a futural expression, whether in the first or the second/third person, the use of the backward causal particle γάρ ‘for’ can be considered a characteristic trait of threats, which is indicative of the high degree of integration of threats and preceding requests, often in the form of admonitions. In our previous examples 3 and 4, threats immediately follow an admonition not to act against the orders that have been given. Even more striking are the

⁷³ van Emde Boas et al. 2019, 440.

⁷⁴ Lee 1985, 18-23.

⁷⁵ Lee 1985, 19.

⁷⁶ Bell 1910, xliii. Lee 1985, 19, lists some more examples from the papyri.

⁷⁷ For other instances of the οὐ μὴ construction, see *P.Lond.* IV 1337 l. 16 (709 AD) = TM 19795 (οὐ μὴ συγχωρήσωμεν); *P.Lond.* IV 1339 ll. 17-18 (709 AD) = TM 19797 (οὐ μὴ δεξιόμεθα); *P.Lond.* IV 1343 l. 33 (709 AD) = TM 19801 (οὐ μὴ παρᾶσωμεν); *P.Lond.* IV 1349 l. 23 (710 AD) = TM 19807 (οὐ μὴ διαλάθῃ ἡμᾶς τί πότε); *P.Lond.* IV 1362 l. 15 (710 AD) = TM 19820 (οὐ μὴ τοῦτο δέξονται).

modifying expressions accompanying threats, in particular second- and third-person comment clauses of the type ἔση γινώσκων/ἔση ἐπιστάμενος ‘you will be aware’, γινώσκει ὁ Θεός/ἐπίσταται ὁ Θεός ‘the Lord knows’, and πιστοφορέθητι ‘be sure’. The pragmatic effect of these comment clauses is not entirely straightforward: in our previous example 4, it seems clear that γινώσκει γὰρ ὁ Θεός ‘for the Lord knows’, preceding the threat, and πιστοφορέθητι εἰς τοῦτο ‘be sure of that’, following the threat, are used to strengthen (upgrade) the assertion made by the initiator, as is also indicated by the use of the οὐ μή construction (οὐ μὴ ἀποκεινηθῇς ‘surely, you will not depart’).⁷⁸ The frequent insertion of ἔση ἐπιστάμενος ‘you will be aware’ before threats, on the other hand, might be taken to decrease what House and Kádár refer to as ‘the level of directness’ of the speech act, that is, ‘the degree to which the speaker’s illocutionary intent is apparent from the locution’.⁷⁹ Given the overall emphasis that is put on the threats, however, it is perhaps more likely that this type of expression had a discourse-structuring role (drawing attention to an important element in the discourse), rather than that it functioned as an upgrader or downgrader, similar to the role of what we term ‘discourse imperatives’ in the Arabic letters (see § 3.2).

Besides comment clauses, another type of modifier that frequently appears in the context of threats are invocations of the type κελεύσει θεοῦ ‘by God’s command’, genitive absolutes of the type τοῦ Θεοῦ συνεργούντος ‘with God’s help’, lit. ‘God helping’ sometimes being used as an alternative.⁸⁰ Here again, the pragmatic effect is not entirely clear: while one would be inclined to consider an expression such as κελεύσει θεοῦ as an upgrader, given that it typically appears after the verb μέλλω that expresses Qurra’s strong resolve to undertake a certain course of (corrective) action, it is striking that the same expression can also be found, though less frequently, in other types of speech acts, such as requests and even statements, along with expressions of the type εἰς τὸν Θεόν ‘by God’ and ἐπ’ ὀνόματος τοῦ Θεοῦ(ῦ) ‘in God’s name’. Example 5 shows κελεύσει θεοῦ in a background statement to the actual request, where the expression can hardly be said to ‘upgrade’ the statement:

- (5) ἡμῶν ἡδη ἐπιτρεψάντων τῷ ἐπικειμένῳ | τῆς ἐργασίας τῶν αὐτῶν καράβων
ἄρξασθαι εἰς κτίσιν | καὶ φιλοκαλείαν αὐτῶν διὰ τῶν αὐτῶν τεχνίτων | [...]
ἐ[...]

⁷⁸ One can also note the use of the emphatic expression ἕως ἐνὸς μιλιαρσίου(υ) καὶ μόνο(υ), translated by Bell as ‘even one single penny’.

⁷⁹ House, Kádár 2021, 119.

⁸⁰ Papaconstantinou 2022, 202 also notes the frequent reference to God in the letters from our dossier, observing that ‘God appears often also in the body of the letters as the one who is ultimately behind the requests made of Basileios’.

τ[α]γμένην δι[α]στολήν τῶν αὐτῶν τεχνίτων. (P.Laur. IV 192 ll. 8-12 [709 AD] = TM 21277)

as we have already ordered to the person in charge of the manufacture of the same ships to begin with the construction and beautification through the same artisans... we have sent written orders, by the command of God, for the below-attached list of the same artisans.

Let us now turn to admonitions, which, like threats, are typically found after the request, constituting, as we noted above, a sort of generalised request – a request to take the entirety of the letter seriously. Admonitions show less variation than threats in the way they are realised: they generally occur as requests, either in the form of an imperative repeating the main request, or, more frequently, as a prohibitive subjunctive stating that the recipient should not act against the request that has been made.⁸¹ Example 6 illustrates not only the different expressive possibilities for admonitions, but also their complex interaction with threats:

- (6) μὴ ἀμελῆς τὲ (l. δὲ) εἰς τὸ ἀποστεῖλαι διὰ πάσης συντομία[ς], εἴ τι | διεστεῖλαμεν διὰ τῆς διοικήσεώς σου λόγῳ τοῦ αὐτοῦ κούρσου | ἀπὸ τε ναυτῶν καὶ τεχνιτῶν καὶ δαπανῶν· ἐπετρέψαμεν γὰρ τῷ | παρόντι ἀποστόλῳ ἡμῶν μὴ ἀποστῆναι ἐκ σοῦ καὶ ἐστι διὰ σοῦ | τί ποτε τὸ καθόλου ἐν λοιπάδει (l. λοιπάδι). λοιπὸν μὴ γένηται ἀμελίας (l. ἀμέλεια) | καὶ ὑστερεθῇ (l. ὑστερηθῇ) τι· ἔσθι γὰρ ἐπιστάμενος, ὥς, εἰ ἀπομείνητι ἐν | λοιπάδει (l. λοιπάδι), μέλλομεν κελεύσει θεοῦ ἀπαιτῆσαί σε αὐτὸ ἐν διπλῇ | ποσότητι ὑπὲρ παρακοῆς καὶ καταφρονήσεως. γινώσκων (l. γινώσκων) τοίνυν, | ὥς ἐπισπούδαστόν ἐστι τὸ πρᾶγμα τοῦ τοιοῦτου κούρσου, [ἀ]μελλήτι | ἐκτέλεσον, μὴ δίδων (l. δίδους) κατὰ σοῦ τὴν οἴαν οὖν ἀφορμήν. (SB III 7241 ll. 45-54 [710 AD] = TM 18868)

Do not be negligent in dispatching with all speed the whole amount assessed on your administrative district for the said raid, both in sailors and artisans and in supplies; for we have instructed the present messenger not to depart from you if you are in arrears with even anything at all. Therefore, let there be no negligence and no deficiency; for you will know that if anything be in arrears, we shall by God's command exact it from you in double measure for your neglect and contumacy. Knowing therefore that the matter of the said raid is one of urgency perform it without delay, not affording us any cause of complaint whatever against you. (transl. Bell)

SB III 7241 is, as we noted in § 2, the longest request letter in our dossier, dealing with the sending of skilled people and supplies. This

⁸¹ Koroli 2020b, 85, also observes the occurrence of repeated requests in Late Antique request letters, which she refers to in terms of 'subsidiary requests'. She notes that 'the formulation of subsidiary requests, repeating emphatically (either identically reproducing or paraphrasing) one or more basic requests is a recurrent linguistic strategy to convey an imperative tone to the request letter'. For the force of repetitions more generally, see Bentein 2023b.

ten-line closing of the body stresses the importance of Basil's complying with the request that is made. It consists of:

- a first admonition introduced by the verbal intensifier *μὴ ἀμελήῃς* 'do not neglect' followed by a prepositional infinitive (ll. 45-7);
- a supportive statement – one that could be viewed as an implicit threat – making reference to a messenger who will keep a close eye on everything (ll. 47-9);
- a second admonition, a variation of the first, again highlighting the importance of not neglecting the order (*μὴ γένηται ἀμέλεια* 'may there not occur any neglect') (ll. 49-50);
- another supportive statement containing an explicit threat (ar-rears will be exacted double) (ll. 50-2);
- a third admonition, this time highlighting the urgency of the request, which also stresses that Basil should not give cause for complaint (perhaps another implicit threat) (ll. 52-4).

The passage not only nicely illustrates the verbal means to express admonitions (mostly *μὴ* with the subjunctive, alternated with the imperative, or the occasional imperatival participle), as well as the typical modifiers (which are similar to those for the main request), but also the use of discourse particles that characterise admonitions. The most important and recognizable of these is *λοιπόν* 'so', lit. 'for the rest', which tends to be used after the first request and draws attention to an important point in the discourse, typically in a summarising, recapitulating way.⁸² As such, it is also, though less frequently, found with repeated threats.⁸³ Another particle that is frequently found with admonitions and that equally signals a break in the discourse is *ἀλλὰ* 'but', which is particularly often found in combination with *μὴ ἀμελήσης*.

As with requests and threats, admonitions tend to be upgraded by a set of modifying expressions, in particular manner and time adverbs/adverbial phrases expressing the need to do an action swiftly and zealously (compare § 2.1), comment clauses emphasising the fact that a request has already been made, such as *ὥς εἴρηται/ὥς λέλεκται* 'as has been said', *καθὼς πολλαχῶς εἴρηται* 'as has often been said'; and second- and third person verbal intensifiers such as *μὴ ἀμελήσης* 'do not neglect to', *μὴ ὑστερήσης* 'do not be late to', *πᾶσαν σπουδὴν ποίησον* 'make every effort to'. Another type of (clausal) expression that we often find with admonitions are conditional clauses of the

⁸² Note, however, that occasionally *λοιπόν* is used to signal the first request, together with *δεχόμενος τὰ παρόντα γράμματα*, instead of the more usual discourse particle *οὖν*. See *P.Lond.* IV 1350 l. 7 (710 AD) = TM 19808; *P.Lond.* IV 1365 l. 1 = TM 19822; *P.Ross.Georg.* IV 2 l. 6 (710 AD) = TM 20488.

⁸³ *P.Lond.* IV 1344 l. 13 (710 AD) = TM 19802; *P.Lond.* IV 1359 l. 20 (710 AD) = TM 19817.

type as ἔαν οὖν ἔστι ἐν σοὶ ἀγαθὸν ‘if there is any good in you’, εἰ μέντοι ἔρρωμένῳ λογισμῷ ὑπάρχεις ‘if you dispose of sane reasoning’, ἔαν ἀγαπᾷς τὴν ψυχὴν σο(υ) ‘if you love your soul’, which could, perhaps be interpreted as a type of implicit threat. Given the degree of syntactic integration as well as the relative implicitness of the threat, we prefer to view these phrases as syntactic ‘upgraders’, rather than real threats.

To conclude our discussion of admonitions, it is worth noting the importance that perception verbs have in the expression of admonitions, either in first- or third-person active constructions of the type μὴ εὔρωμεν ‘may we not find out’, or second- or third-person passive constructions of the type μὴ εὔρεθῇς ‘may you not be found (to have V-ed)’, μὴ γνωσθῇ ‘may it not be brought to our attention (that)’, the complement of which does not express the preferred course of action, as with μὴ ἀμελήσῃς ‘do not neglect (to)’, but rather the action that should be avoided. Besides offering a different perspective to the admonition, such complement-taking expressions could be taken to decrease what we called above the ‘level of directness’, especially when they are used in the passive voice. The same is true for the type of nominal periphrasis that occurred in our last example, μὴ γένηται ἀμέλεια lit. ‘may there not occur any negligence’, which is more indirect than μὴ ἀμελήσῃς. A similar construction is used in Arabic, which mostly occurs with the verb ‘do not let me find out’ *lā ‘a’rifa-nna* (e.g. *P.BeckerNPAF* 1 l. 11, see § 3.3). However, in Arabic this introductory phrase to the admonition is consistently morphologically marked with a verbal mood that communicates assertion (the energetic, see § 3.2), and does not occur in the passive form. Therefore, in the Arabic letters, it is very clear that this is not meant as a downgrader, but more likely functioned as an upgrader to intensify the admonition.

3 The Arabic Letters

The dossier presents 86 letters containing Arabic, which includes 23 bilingual Arabic-Greek tax demand notes (*entagia*), such as *P.Heid. Arab.* I a-i, and letters written in Greek with only an Arabic address and summary line (some 13 examples, e.g. *P.Lond.* 1346). The analysis below is based on 23 Arabic letters that were certainly, or likely, sent from the chancery of Qurra son of Sharik to Basil. These 23 letters represent the published documents that are currently available on the Arabic Papyrology Database (APD),⁸⁴ and that are complete enough to understand the general content and structure of the

⁸⁴ Available at: <https://www.apd.gwi.uni-muenchen.de/apd/project.jsp>.

text. In order to have a dataset of comparable material as that preserved in the surviving Greek documents from the same dossier, judicial rescripts were excluded, as we do not have such documents written in Greek.⁸⁵ As mentioned in the introduction, *entagia* were also excluded.⁸⁶

Texts that are 30-40 lines long are not uncommon (e.g. *P.BeckerNPAF* 1, 2; *P.Qurra* 4), although many now lack the beginning of the text, making it impossible to know the exact number of original lines. Some are shorter instructions, such as *P.Qurra* 1, which is complete, and only consists of 17 lines, instructing Basil to make sure a bishop in his district, who is late with his taxes, will pay what he is due. The longest surviving Arabic text is *P.Heid.Arab.* I 3, which is about 90 lines long. This letter admonishes Basil to make sure people pay their taxes in grain, which he had received a letter about before. The letter then goes into detail on how to organise the tax collection, what measures to use, and how to punish those who defy these orders. An important reason for the urgency behind the letter seems to be the rising grain prices, because of which merchants are holding back grain to speculate with instead of bringing it to the state granary. Another long letter, *P.Heid.Arab.* I 2 (about 40 lines), concerns the same topic of rising grain prices and the required government response to that. Most of the other, longer letters seem to concern overdue tax payments (e.g. *P.BeckerNPAF* 1, 2; *P.SijpesteijnQurra*).

These letters were written to instruct or order Basil to do things. Therefore, it is not surprising that almost all letters contain examples of the speech act Request. In fact, only one of the annotated letters lacks any examples of a direct request, even though the main aim of the letter was to tell Basil that he is in arrears with his taxes and should pay them as soon as he can (*P.BeckerNPAF* 3). Since the beginning and ending of the letter are missing, more direct requests may have been made in the missing portions, but compared to the other (partially) preserved letters it is still striking that the preserved 27 lines only contain an example of a Statement, recalling the order that was given in a previous letter, and an Assertion. From this, one can infer the request being made. However, the use of

⁸⁵ Judicial rescripts document a step in the judiciary system, in which the governor advised the pagarch what to do based on cases that had been brought before the pagarch and which had been sent on to the governor. These letters are characterised by several common formulae. For an in-depth discussion of the formulae that are used in the Arabic judicial rescripts in the Qurra papyri see Tillier 2017.

⁸⁶ The following Arabic letters were included in the analysis: *P.BeckerNPAF* 1, *P.BeckerNPAF* 12, *P.BeckerNPAF* 2, *P.BeckerNPAF* 3, *P.BeckerNPAF* 4, *P.BeckerNPAF* 5, *P.BeckerNPAF* 6, *P.BeckerPAF* 12, *P.BeckerPAF* 3, *P.BeckerPAF* 4, *P.BeckerPAF* 5, *P.GrohmannQorra-Brief*, *P.Heid.Arab.* I 1, *P.Heid.Arab.* I 2, *P.Heid.Arab.* I 3, *P.Heid.Arab.* I 4, *P.Qurra* 1, *P.Qurra* 2, *P.Qurra* 4, *P.Qurra* 5, *P.RagibQurra* 1, *P.RagibQurra* 2, *P.SijpesteijnQurra*.

Assertions to express an indirect request tends to be used as an Admonition in the rest of the Arabic corpus (see § 3.2). All in all, these 23 Arabic texts contain 92 phrases that could formally be annotated as a speech act Request (expressed with imperative forms). Other types of speech acts occur too, such as Descriptions ($n = 26$), Statements ($n = 1$), and Assertions ($n = 20$).

In Arabic historical literature, Qurra son of Sharīk has been depicted as a harsh administrator,⁸⁷ which is partially taken up in the scholarly discussions of the Qurra papyri.⁸⁸ Given the high number of occurrences of emphatic expressions and threats, this first impression is not surprising. However, Becker already observed that even though his tone may be harsh in some of the letters, a returning concern in them was that the people living in the district should be treated justly.⁸⁹ This somewhat justifies his harsh tone in addressing his administrator. Looking more closely at which letters contain most threats and admonitions, we can nuance this somewhat further, as it becomes clear that it is especially in the letters dealing with a transgression that most of the harsher and more expansive language appears.⁹⁰ Moreover, it seems that especially ignoring requests to rectify a situation results in more elaborate and harsher letters.

Looking at the letters that contain explicit threats, we find that these occur most commonly in letters that deal with overdue tax payments (*P.BeckerNPAF* 2; *P.BeckerPAF* 4, 5; *P.SijpesteijnQurra*). Another example of a long and explicitly threatening letter is *P.Heid.Arab.* I 3. In this letter, Qurra is very explicit about the corporeal, financial, and humiliating punishment he expects Basil to inflict on any administrators that over-tax the inhabitants of his district.⁹¹ This long letter with detailed instructions, and many moralising admonitions on good government, states explicitly that this is not the first letter Qurra has sent about this, which seems to have inspired the harsher language and more complex structure of the letter. Another element that likely contributed to the harsh language was the urgency

⁸⁷ See the discussion of the Arabic sources in Becker 1906, 17-19.

⁸⁸ Becker emphasises Qurra's focus on executing tax payments in a way that is just towards the local inhabitants and casts the harshness of the letters in the context of the vision of harsh but just rule in Islamic theological manuals of the time, linking specific vocabulary used in the letters to Quranic usage. See Becker 1906, 33-5. Abbott, similarly to Becker, stresses the religious and moralising aspect of the letters, but also underlines the severity of the language with expressions that are 'well-nigh abuse'. See Abbott 1938, 40. Papaconstantinou 2022 makes a similar link between some of the moralising language in the Greek Qurra papyri and patristic literature.

⁸⁹ Becker 1906, 33-5.

⁹⁰ As Abbott 1938, 40 already observed.

⁹¹ "Punish him with a hundred lashes, shave his beard and his head, and fine him with thirty dinar on top of the amount he over-charged" (*P.Heid.Arab.* I 3 ll. 52-4).

to make sure that the state granaries were filled due to rising grain prices. The sense of urgency is understandable, as the letter indicates that the prices are already rising, and swift action is needed to ensure that this staple food remained available and affordable for the general population. The importance of agricultural production for the profitable collection of taxes, and to feed the population and the troops, likely also explains why the letter pressing Basil to ensure his district's agricultural lands are productive (*P.Qurra* 2) contains a threat (of blame when he does not satisfy the request), even though no transgression has taken place.

There are other examples that show that it is not a transgression per se that warrants a harsh reaction, at least not when it is first addressed. *P.BeckerNPAF* 6, for example, deals with such a transgression. Basil has fined some villagers because of their tax payments, probably because they were in arrears. Qurra informs him in a very short and straightforward manner that he has become aware of this and asks Basil to leave the villagers alone until the two of them have had an opportunity to discuss this matter. The request is followed by a downgrader *'in šā'a Allāh*⁹² 'God willing' before the closing formulae. So, while the just treatment of subjects seems generally important to Qurra, in this first notice he is still short, to the point, and rather polite about it. These examples clearly show how the communicative purpose and framework of each letter shaped the expression of the requests made within them.

⁹² Note that in transcriptions of Arabic text, Arabic letter *šīn* (ش) is transcribed as *š*, in order to maintain a one-to-one relationship between the letters in Arabic and their equivalent in transcription. In English text, however, the equivalent of *šīn* is given as *sh*, for example in the name of the governor Qurra son of Sharik.

3.1 Requests

As in the Greek letters, the Arabic letters from Qurra all contain requests. In Arabic, requests are commonly expressed with direct imperatives. The directness of this expression can then be softened by adding extensive blessings for the addressee in the opening section of the letter and slide-in blessings for the addressee when they are mentioned in the body of the text.⁹³ Such insertions can be called ‘downgraders’. Another common softening supportive move to requests, in the Arabic papyri more generally, is the insertion of phrase ‘*in šā’a Allāh*’ ‘Allah willing’, which is even attested in some of the more curtly phrased official letters.⁹⁴

The Qurra papyri famously contain only minimal blessings in the opening and closing sections, and no slide-in blessings for the addressee, which can likely be taken as a result of the very direct top-down communication they contain.⁹⁵ The downgrader ‘Allah willing’ is attested in several texts, following a request (*P.BeckerNPAF* 2 ll. 19-24; *P.BeckerNPAF* 6 ll. 12-15; *P.BeckerPAF* 5 ll. 7-10; *P.RagibQurra* 1 ll. 18-22). It can follow the request directly, as in example 7, or with a statement about the reason why this is important in between, as in example 8.⁹⁶

- (7) *P.BeckerNPAF* 6 ll. 12-15

fa-lā ta’tariḏanna ‘aḥadan min-hum bi-šāy’ ḥattā ‘uḥaddītu ‘ilay-ka fī-him ‘in šā’a Allāh

do not bother anyone of them with anything until I have talked to you about them, **Allah willing**

- (8) *P.BeckerPAF* 5 ll. 7-10

fa-lā] tu’ahḥiranna min-hā [šāy’ fa-’innī] ‘urīdu ‘an [‘ursila bi-hā] ‘ilā ‘amīr [al-mu’minīn ‘ī]n šā’a Allāh

do not delay [any] of them, for I want to [send them] to the leader [of the believers], **Allah willing**

⁹³ See Grob 2010, 118-20 for a discussion of the pragmatic use of religious elements in Arabic business and private correspondence. For example, in a private petition from the second half of the ninth century: *P.Marchands* II 18 ll. 3-4 “I ask God for help in my affair [...] my brother, may God preserve you, my father and his harshness towards us”.

⁹⁴ Sijpesteijn 2022, 191, gives an example from a curt, official letter from the 9th century, published by Diem 1997, no. 26.

⁹⁵ Sijpesteijn 2022, 191.

⁹⁶ Examples for which the linguistic structure is relevant to the argument will be glossed, in other cases only the Arabic and translation will be given.

Somewhat entertainingly, in example 9, the request is first followed by an admonition, a supportive move which functions to intensify the force of the request (highlighted in italics), and only then the downgrader follows (highlighted in bold):

(9) *P.RagibQurra* 1 ll. 18-22

fa-ib'aṭ 'alā ṣan'a(ti-hu) hāḍā al-ḥubz man yata'ahhadu-hu wa-yuḥsinu ṣan'ata-hu
fa-'innī ḡayr murahḥiṣ la-ka fī-hi 'in šā'a Allāh

So, appoint for the production of this bread someone who will take care (in its production) and who is good at producing it. *I will not make any concession to you on this matter, Allah willing*

As invocations one may compare the use of *Allah willing* in these and other requests to the use of the earlier-mentioned Greek phrase *κελεύσει θεοῦ* 'by God's command', and even more so the genitive absolute construction *τοῦ Θεοῦ συνεργοῦντος* 'with God helping'; however, as we noted, these phrases mostly accompany threats, and are inserted directly after the verb *μέλλω*, expressing Qurra's intention. Even though 'I will not make any concession to you on this matter' may have had a threatening undertone, as an expression of intent it is very different from the many explicit threats in the corpus, that threaten fines or physical harm. Moreover, the other examples of *'in šā'a Allāh* in the Arabic corpus, seem explicitly unthreatening. In example 8 (and in *P.BeckerNPAF* 2 ll. 19-24), the request is followed by an explanation of the reason why this request is important (background information) before the insertion of the invocation. Giving reasons, to ground a request, is generally considered to be a downgrading or mitigating strategy.⁹⁷ Therefore, based on the available examples in this corpus, and its usage in historical and contemporary Arabic more generally, the invocations seem to have had a different function in Greek and Arabic. The invocation *wa-Allāhi* 'by Allah' forms a closer parallel to the invocations of God that occur in the Greek texts as modifiers that frequently appear in the context of threats (see § 3.2, example 24, for some of the Greek examples see § 2.2).

Even though imperatives are the most common way to express requests in the Arabic Qurra letters, we can make a distinction between direct imperatives that express the actual action that is requested, and discourse imperatives that only function to introduce the actual request.⁹⁸ Such discourse imperatives seem to function to

⁹⁷ House, Kádár 2021, 126; Brown, Levinson 1987, 128.

⁹⁸ We would like to thank Marina Terkourafi for highlighting the importance of this distinction during the *How to Ask?* Workshop organised by Gijsbert Rutten and Petra Sijpesteijn at Leiden University, 26-26 May, 2023.

give the reader a cue to structure the text and prepare them for the upcoming request, as a discourse marker, similar to what House and Kádár call an ‘alerter’.⁹⁹ The actual request can then be expressed nominally with a prepositional phrase (example 10) or with a relative clause (examples 11; 12). The following verbs are used as discourse imperatives: *ḥuḍ*¹⁰⁰ ‘take, get to’; *istawṣi*¹⁰¹ ‘concern yourself (with)’; *ta’ahhad*¹⁰² ‘pay attention to, make sure’; *unṣur*¹⁰³ ‘see to it’.¹⁰⁴

(10) *P.BeckerNPAF* 2 ll. 7-8

فخذ في جمع المال		
<i>fa-ḥuḍ</i>	<i>fī</i>	<i>jam’</i>
CONJ-take.IMPER.2SING.MASC	PREP.in	gathering.MASC.SING.GEN.CST
<i>al-māl</i>		
DEF-money.MASC.SING		
get to the collection of the (tax) money		

(11) *P.Heid.Arab.* I 1 ll. 11-12

فخذ فيما على أرضك من الجزية			
<i>fa-ḥuḍ</i>	<i>fī-mā</i>	<i>’alā</i>	<i>’arḍ-ka</i>
CONJ-take.2SING.MASC.IMPER	PREP.in-REL	PREP.on	land.CST-2MASC.SING.POSS
<i>min</i>	<i>al-jizya</i>		
PREP.from	DEF-tax		
get to what is due from your district of the jizya tax			

⁹⁹ House, Kádár 2021, 118. They define an ‘alerter’ as: “an element whose function it is to alert the recipient’s attention to the ensuing speech act”, which mainly modifies the speech act externally. In the case of the discourse imperatives, however, the imperative is still the main verb, as can be seen in the examples.

¹⁰⁰ Two attestations: *P.BeckerNPAF* 2 l. 7; *P.Heid.Arab.* I 1 l. 11.

¹⁰¹ One attestation: *P.GrohmannQorra-Brief* l. 5.

¹⁰² One attestation: *P.BeckerPAF* 5 l. 14.

¹⁰³ Six attestations: *P.Qurra* 1 l. 6; *P.Heid.Arab.* I 2 l. 12 l. 29; *P.BeckerNPAF* 12 l. 1; *P.BeckerPAF* 5 l. 4; *P.SijpesteijnQurra* l. 5.

¹⁰⁴ A verb that functions on the edge between the a direct request for action and an introduction to a request is *mur* ‘order’. Given Basil’s position and responsibilities, these requests represent direct imperatives in the sense that Qurra indeed expects him to order the people of his district to do something, but the main request, and the envisioned outcome of the letter, is of course not Basil giving an order, but his people executing the requested order that then follows.

(12) *P.Qurra* 1 ll. 6-9

فانظر الذي كان بقي على أسقف كورتك ممّا فرض عليه عبد الله بن عبد الملك			
<i>fa-unzur</i>	<i>allaḏī</i>	<i>kāna</i>	<i>baqiya</i>
CONJ-see.IMPER.SING.MASC	REL.MASC.SING	be.3SING.MASC.PERF	leave.3SING.MASC.PERF
<i>‘alā</i>	<i>‘usquf</i>	<i>kūr-ati-ka</i>	<i>mim-mā</i>
PREP.on	bishop.MASC.SING	district-FEM.SING.CST-2MASC.SING.POSS	PREP.from-REL
<i>faraḏa</i>	<i>‘alay-hi</i>		<i>‘Abd Allāh</i>
impose.3SING.MASC.PERF	PREP.on-3MASC.SING		<i>‘Abd Allāh</i>
<i>bin</i>	<i>‘Abd al-Malik</i>		
son.MASC.SING.CST	<i>‘Abd al-Malik</i>		
see to what remains of the dues of the bishop of your district of what was imposed on him by ‘Abd Allah son of ‘Abd al-Malik			

Structurally, these constructions display parallels with some of the upgraders that characterise admonitions in the Greek letters (§ 2.2), in the sense that the (negative) imperative that is used does not signify the main request, but merely the request to act. However, they strongly differ in distribution and pragmatic force and function in both corpora. While in the Greek data these constructions are used to strengthen the request (typically in the form of an admonition), the distribution of the Arabic discourse imperatives clearly shows that their function was to provide structure to the letter and aid the reader in this way, without modifying the strength or urgency of the request.

Of the 64 examples that pragmatically function as Request in the Arabic Qurra papyri, 50 are expressed using a direct imperative, and ten with a discourse imperative. The ten examples with discourse imperatives occur in eight different letters.¹⁰⁵ In all but one of those letters, the Request introduced by a discourse imperative is the first one in the letter, in most cases either directly following the opening formula *‘ammā ba’d* ‘now then’,¹⁰⁶ which separates the introductory blessing formulae from the body of the letter, or following the formula *fa-‘idā jā’a-ka kitāb-ī hādā* ‘when this letter of mine reaches you’,¹⁰⁷ which generally separates the descriptive portion of the body from the actual request in this corpus. This suggests that these discourse imperatives were used to signal, or emphasise, the beginning of the request part of the letter, which mostly contained a series of requests, functionally not unlike the Greek discourse particle οὐν ‘so’ (see § 3.2 for a brief discussion of the Arabic discourse particle *fa-* which forms

¹⁰⁵ *P.BeckerNPAF* 2; *P.Qurra* 1; *P.GrohmannQorra-Brief*; *P.Heid.Arab.* I 1; *P.Heid.Arab.* I 2; *P.BeckerNPAF* 12; *P.BeckerPAF* 5; *P.SijpesteijnQurra*.

¹⁰⁶ *P.Qurra* 1; *P.GrohmannQorra-Brief*; *P.BeckerNPAF* 12; *P.BeckerPAF* 5.

¹⁰⁷ *P.BeckerNPAF* 2; *P.Heid.Arab.* I 1.

a more direct parallel to οὖν as discourse particle).¹⁰⁸ Another imperative that seems to be used as an alerter is *i'lam*¹⁰⁹ 'know that'. However, as it does not urge to act, but to be aware of something, this is used to introduce threats (comparable to Greek phrases such as ἔσθι ἐπιστάμενος 'you will be aware' see §§ 2.2 and 3.2).

The only exception to this is the occurrence in *P.SijpesteijnQurra* 2, where the Request that is introduced with the discourse imperative is the second Request in the letter, following direct Request to 'hurry to send to me what you owe of the jizya' (*P.SijpesteijnQurra* 2 ll. 4-5). Even though the beginning of the letter is damaged, it seems to mention an order that Basil did not follow (l. 2), which suggests that the initial Request is a repetition of information that is presumed to already be known to the recipient. The next order, to see to 'the collection of the taxes and its' surplus' (ll. 5-6) might then be interpreted as the first new Request.

However, even though in most cases these discourse imperatives signal the beginning of the request part of the letter, in *P.Heid.Arab.* I 2 the verb *unzur* 'see that' is used twice, once at the very beginning of the letter, seemingly for the first Request (*P.Heid.Arab.* I 2 ll. 12-14),¹¹⁰ and once towards the end of the letter where it introduces a summary of a series of things Basil needs to ensure the traders in his district do, which were outlined in the preceding lines of the letter in more detail (example 13).

(13) *P.Heid.Arab.* I 2 ll. 29-33

وانظر النصف الباقي فليبيعه في أهل الأرض فإن لم ينفق في الأرض فليحمه إلى الفسطاط					
<i>wa-unzur</i>		<i>al-niṣf</i>		<i>al-bāqiya</i>	
CONJ-see. IMPER.SING.MASC		DEF-half		DEF-remainder	
<i>fa-l-yab'iyū-hu</i>				<i>fī</i>	<i>'ahl</i>
CONJ-ASSEV-sell.3PL.MASC.APOC-3MASC.SING.POSS				PREP.in	people.CST
<i>fa-'in</i>	<i>lam</i>	<i>yanfuq</i>		<i>fī</i>	<i>al-'arḍ</i>
CONJ-CONJ	NEG	sell.3SING.MASC.IMPERF.PASS		PREP.in	DEF-land
<i>fa-l-yahmil-hu</i>				<i>'ilā</i>	<i>al-Fuṣṭāṭ</i>
CONJ-ASSEV-carry.3SING.MASC.APOC-3MASC.SING				PREP.to	DEF-Fuṣṭāṭ
see to the remaining half and (make sure) they will sell it among the people of the countryside and if it is not sold in the countryside that he will bring it to Fuṣṭāṭ					

¹⁰⁸ Note that since the formula 'when this letter of mine reaches you' seems to fulfill a similar function in this corpus, this would make the letters in which this formula is followed by a discourse imperative doubly marked in this respect.

¹⁰⁹ Three attestations: *P.Heid.Arab.* I 3 l. 56; *P.BeckerPAF* 5 l. 11; *P.SijpesteijnQurra* l. 11. Note that *i'lam* 'know that' specifically occurs as an introduction to threats (see § 3.2).

¹¹⁰ The beginning of *P.Heid.Arab.* I 2 is damaged, but based on what is legible it seems like the lines preceding the first request contain a description of the issue and an admonition: "I do not want to hear of any man that he held back his grain to sell" (ll. 9-11).

Here, the verb seems to be used for both its discursive and semantic function. On the one hand, it signals the start of a summarising sequence, while at the same time it stresses Basil's role as overseer and monitor of the situation, rather than the one who needs to take direct action himself.

There is one Request that is expressed as an Assertion, using a second person masculine singular imperfective verb, which can be translated with a future tense (example 14).

(14) *P.Heid.Arab.* 13 ll. 54-6

بعد أن تغرمه ما ازداد على الذي أمرتك به			
<i>ba'd</i>	<i>'an</i>	<i>tuḡarrima-hu</i>	<i>mā</i>
PREP.after	CONJ	fine.2SING.MASC.IMPERF-3MASC.SING.POSS	REL
<i>izdāda</i>	<i>'alā</i>	<i>allaḏī</i>	<i>'amartu-ka</i>
increase.3SING.MASC.PERF	PREP.ON	REL.MASC.SING	order.1SING.PERF-2MASC.SING
<i>bi-hi</i>			
PREP.by-3MASC.SING			
after that, you will fine him for how much he exceeded what I ordered you (to take) from it			

In the most toned-down letter available in the corpus, a direct request is lacking altogether.¹¹¹ What seems to be the main request appears just before the formula 'when this letter of mine reaches you'. Structurally, this suggests that this was meant as the pre-request. However, what follows the formula is an admonition to not handle the tax payments corruptly, which typically follows the main request. This suggests that despite its unusual placement, this letter expresses its main request as an Assertion that Qurra thinks the addressee will have already sent the taxes he collected by the time the letter reaches him (example 15).

(15) *P.BeckerNPAF* 3 ll. 15-19

fa-lā 'aẓunnu kitāb-ī ḥāḏā qādim-an 'alay-ka 'in kāna fī-ka ḥayr 'illā wa-qad ba'aṭṭa bi-allaḏī qad jama'ta min jizya kūratī-ka

I do not think, with this letter of mine before you – if there is any good within you – that you will not have already sent that which you have gathered of the taxes of your district

¹¹¹ Possibly because it was expressed in one of the lost portions of the letter, although the transition formula 'when this letter of mine reaches you' that usually introduces the main request is preserved, together with quite a number of lines preceding and following it.

As shown in the example, the letter contains a moralising insertion ('if there is any good within you'). In addition to this, the letter contains the same type of threats and admonitions as other letters. Therefore, it does not seem to be a particularly gentle or polite letter in terms of its contents. However, both using this statement to express the request, and the initial threats, that seem to be directed at any man who does something wrong (example 16), seem to be careful to not address the intended recipient directly.

(16) *P.BeckerNPAF* 3 ll. 1-3

'uāqibu-**hu** 'ašadd al-'uqūba wa-'uğrimu-**hu** 'atqal al-ğarāma

I will punish **him** with the harshest punishment and I will fine **him** with the heaviest fine

Finally, there are four examples in which a Request is expressed as a prohibition. It is interesting to note that in the Arabic letters all examples of prohibitive Requests are formed using a verb in the energetic mood (see examples 17, 18 and also in *P.Heid.Arab.* I 3 ll. 12-13; *P.BeckerNPAF* 12 ll. 8-9).

(17) *P.BeckerNPAF* 6 ll. 12-14

فلا تعترضنَّ أحدًا منهم بشاي حتَّى أحدثَ إليكَ فيهم			
fa-lā	ta'tariḍ-anna	'aḥad-an	min-hum
CONJ-NEG	hinder.2SING.MASC-ENER	one-INDEF.ACC	PREP.from-3MASC.PL
bi-šāy'	ḥattā	'uḥaddiṭu	'ilay-ka
PREP.by-thing	PREP.until	talk.1SING.IMPERF	PREP.to-2MASC.SING
fī-him			
PREP.in-3MASC.PL			
do not bother any one of them with anything until I talk to you about them			

(18) *P.BeckerPAF* 12 ll. 13-16

فلا تقدمنَّ قرية من كورتك إلَّا سألت أهلها عمَّا في قريتهم من تلك الكتبة ولمن هي			
fa-lā	tuqdam-anna	qariya	min
CONJ-NEG	come.2SING.MASC-ENER	village	PREP.from
kūrati-ka	'illā	sa'al-ta	'ahla-hā
district-2MASC.SING.POSS	CONJ.NEG	ask. 2SING.MASC.PERF	people-3FEM.SING.POSS
'am-ma	fī	qariyati-him	min
CONJ-REL	PREP.in	village-3MASC.PL.POSS	PREP.from
tilka	al-kitba	wa-li-man	hiya
DEM.FEM.SING	DEF-register	CONJ-PREP.to-INDEF.INTER	PRON.3FEM.SING
do not come to any village of your district without asking its people what there is in their village of such a register and to who it belongs			

The energetic is formed by adding a suffix *-anna* (less commonly *-an*) to the short form of the imperfective (jussive) and is most commonly used to express a future event.¹¹² It can be used to form both positive and negative statements. The Qurra papyri are often mentioned for their relatively frequent use of the energetic mood, which is otherwise rare in the Arabic papyri.¹¹³ Fischer states that “the energetic is used to introduce an action that is certain to occur (e.g. in an oath)”.¹¹⁴ However, the energetic mood is often used to express negative wishes, which makes interpreting it as an emphatic or assertive more appropriate, as in example 19.

(19) *P.BeckerPAF 3 ll. 20-1*

		ولا أعرفن ما أخرت منها قليلا ولا كثيرا	
<i>wa-lā</i>	<i>ʾaʿrif-anna</i>	<i>mā</i>	<i>ʾaḥḥarta</i>
CONJ-NEG	know.1SING-ENER	REL	delay.2SING.MASC.PERF
<i>min-hā</i>	<i>qalīl-an</i>	<i>wa-lā</i>	<i>kaṭīr-an</i>
PREP.from-3FEM.SING.PRON	little-INDEF.ACC	CONJ-NEG	much-INDEF.ACC
I do not wish to find out (lit. I will not find out) that you have held (anything) back from it, a little or a lot			

Given the assertive or emphatic meaning of the energetic mood, we can consider it a morphologically marked pragmatic upgrader. The above-mentioned examples of negative Requests containing an energetic verb should therefore, probably, be considered very forceful and possibly closer to an admonition. They were annotated as Request, rather than admonition, because the Request contains enough new information that it may be considered a separate Request and not a repetition of the original Request or a reminder to do it well. In other words, we erred on the side of caution in their annotation to avoid circularity. However, even with these four exceptions, the distribution of the use of the energetic supports its function as a morphological upgrader. The negative second person

¹¹² Jones 2005, 255.

¹¹³ E.g. Becker 1906, 30; Hopkins 1984, 70-1. Note that the energetic is not completely absent from the Arabic papyri. In the period from the earliest papyri until the mid-tenth century AD, we found seventeen attestations of the energetic mood in fifteen different texts (with at least one uncertain reading of the form that has been interpreted as the energetic: e.g. *P.Ryl.Arab.* I XV 59 l. 5); *P.Cair.Arab.* 169 l. 9; *P.Clackson* 45 l. 10; *P.Clackson* 45 l. 8; *P.DiemAmtlicheSchreiben* 2 l. 7. Compare this to the 39 attestations of the energetic spread across 25 different documents in the Qurra papyri, written in a period of just a few years, and it is clear that the energetic had a very different status in the linguistic repertoire of the Qurra scribes than in other documents written on papyrus.

¹¹⁴ Fischer 2001, 110.

singular energetic is most commonly used to express admonitions ($n = 13$), and twice it even functions as a threat (*P.BeckerPAF* 4 ll. 12-13; *P.SijpesteijnQurra* ll. 8-9), both generic moves that are used to repeat, and emphasise a request.

Outside of the Qurra papyri, the energetic mood is more commonly associated with literary genres. Zewi gives several examples from the Quran, *sīra* (accounts of the life of the Prophet Muḥammad), *ḥadīṭ* (accounts of the statements and actions of the Prophet Muḥammad), poetry, and literary prose. The only other text that regularly employs the energetic, however, is the Quran.¹¹⁵ It is unclear whether the frequent use of the energetic in the Qurra papyri was a stylistic choice, referencing the linguistic style of the Quran and literary genres to bolster the official character of the documents, or if it hints at a shared linguistic background with the Quranic Consonantal Text. The stylistic implications of the use of this form, which was likely perceived as quite elevated and potentially even archaic, might be compared to the archaic usage of the conjunct participle in the Greek letters. Another *comparandum* from Greek is the οὐ μή construction, which is equally archaic and strong in tone. In the Greek letters, it typically expresses a strong (negative) assertion, and is used with threats, similar to the use of the energetic in *P.BeckerPAF* 4 ll. 12-13; *P.SijpesteijnQurra* ll. 8-9 (example 27). Given the emphatic meaning of the energetic and its preferred usage in admonitions, it is clear that it was used as a morphological upgrader, to increase the force of the request and to underline the urgency of the matter.

Besides the use of the energetic mood and modifying phrases like ‘Allah willing’, adverbs and adverbial phrases are also used to modify Requests. Even though we noted examples of Greek requests that are modified by manner and time adverbs (such as ἀμελλητί ‘zealously’, and εὐθέως ‘immediately’, in § 2.1) the Arabic letters only contain examples of manner adverbs to pragmatically modify Requests. In some cases the use of such manner adverbs may be interpreted as a specification rather than an upgrader or downgrader, as in examples 20 and 21.

¹¹⁵ Zewi 1999, 34-6.

(20) *P.Qurra* 5 ll. 24-6¹¹⁶

[واكتب] ذلك كتابا بينا مـ[بتا بق]ايا [الفضول]		
[<i>wa-uktub</i>]	<i>dālika</i>	<i>kitāb-an</i>
CONJ-write.IMPER	MASC.SING.DEM	writing-INDEF.ACC
<i>bayyin-an</i>	<i>muṭ[bit-an]</i>	[<i>baq</i>]āyā
Clear-INDEF.ACC	affirming.ACT.PARTIC-INDEF.ACC	remain.PL.ACC.CST
<i>al-fuḍūl</i>		
DEF-extraordinary.taxes		
Write that, writing clearly , showing what was left of the extraordinary taxes		

(21) *P.Heid.Arab.* l 1 ll. 12-13

وعجل بالأول فالأول مما جمعت		
<i>wa-‘ajjil</i>	<i>bi-l-‘awwal</i>	<i>fa-l-‘awwal</i>
CONJ-hurry.to.send.IMPER.SING.MASC	PREP-DEF-one	CONJ-DEF-one
<i>mim-mā</i>	<i>jama‘ta</i>	
PREP.from-REL.What	gather.2SING.MASC.PERF	
hurry to send ⁱ what you gathered, piece by piece		

ⁱ Note that the verb ‘*ajjila* ‘hurry, hurry to send’ is one of the most common ways to ask someone to send something in the Arabic papyri. Therefore, it was likely felt to be much less emphatic and urgent than its translation into English suggests to the modern reader.

In other cases, it is more obvious that it was meant as an upgrader. Especially the use of the cognate adverbial construction, in which the adverb in the indefinite accusative case contains the same root as the main verb, leaves no room for another interpretation than an emphatic, admonishing one (see example 22). This is a construction which is common to Semitic languages, and for which there is no direct Greek parallel in our corpus.

(22) *P.Qurra* 2 ll. 6-7

وحنّهم حنّا عليه		
<i>wa-ḥuṭṭi-him</i>	<i>ḥaṭṭ-an</i>	<i>‘alay-hi</i>
CONJ-urge.IMPER-3MASC.PL	urging-INDEF.ACC	PREP-3MASC.SING
strongly urge them to do this		

¹¹⁶ Following the reading suggested by Diem 1984, 260-1.

Finally, while relative clauses commonly modify Requests syntactically, they are generally used to specify a request (i.e. ‘send what you have gathered’). So, even though such specifying relative clauses syntactically modify the request, they cannot be seen as pragmatic upgraders or downgraders. This suggests that most of the upgrading and downgrading of requests is accomplished through generic moves, such as admonitions, threats, oaths, and invocations, rather than through head-internal modification, with the notable exception of the use of the energetic in this corpus.

3.2 Threats and Admonitions

The previous paragraph already touched upon the usage of the energetic in threats and admonitions in the Arabic papyri as a morphological upgrader. Especially admonitions are common in the Arabic texts ($n = 35$, of which 13 contain an energetic verb), although explicit threats are not uncommon ($n = 9$, of which 2 contain an energetic verb). All examples of threats follow a request or admonition and serve as a warning of what will happen if the request is not carried out, or not carried out properly.

As in the Greek letters, most of the threats are directed at Basil. *P.Heid.Arab.* I 3 contains a general threat that is not specifically directed at Basil, but against whoever performed their administrative duties poorly, which of course did include Basil (see also example 16).¹¹⁷ Even though the more general phrasing probably functioned to downgrade the threat, the addition of the initial invocation *la-‘amr-ī* ‘by my life’, functioned as a modifier to underline the seriousness of the statement, thereby upgrading the force of the threat (example 23). Even though the Greek letters also use invocations as upgraders, such invocations call on God instead of the initiator’s life.

(23) *P.Heid.Arab.* I 3 ll. 20-2

wa-la-‘amr-ī *li-man kāna ‘ājiz-an muḏī-an la-qad istaḥalla min-nī mā yakrahu*

by my life, whoever was ineffective or neglected their duties he can expect things from me that he will dislike

¹¹⁷ In the discussion of the content and tone of the letters, we mentioned a threat against the representatives of Basil’s district, in case they did not collect the taxes fairly from their people (*P.Heid.Arab.* I 3 ll. 52-4). Even though this implies a threat to those people, it is phrased as a request to Basil to make sure that he executes the specified punishments in case they act corruptly.

P.BeckerPAF 5 ll. 11-13 (example 24) is another example of a threat, in this case directed at Basil, that is combined with different downgraders and upgraders. Syntactically, it uses the form *i'lam* 'know that' (comparable to the Greek use of ἔση ἐπιστάμενος 'you will be aware', see § 2.2) as a discourse imperative, which seems to function as an alerter¹¹⁸ here, instead of an actual request. It is used to introduce a conditional clause with an impersonal third person singular verb in the energetic mood, which functions as a morphological upgrader, in the apodosis. On the other hand, the threat is preceded by an explanation of why it is important that Basil promptly performs the main request in the letter, and the downgrading modifier 'in *šā'a Allāh* 'Allah willing' (example 8), which both seem intended to soften the preceding request and following threat.

(24) *P.BeckerPAF* 5 ll. 11-13

واعلم أنّي لأئن أخرجت منها شيئا ليصديقك مني ما يضرك في نفسك			
<i>i'lam</i>	<i>'an-nī</i>	<i>la-'in</i>	<i>'aḥḥarta</i>
know.IMPER.SING.MASC	PART-1SING.PRON	ASSER.PART-PART	delay.2SING.MASC.PERF
<i>min-hā</i>	<i>šay'-an</i>	<i>la-yuṣīb-anna-ka</i>	
PREP-3FEM.SING	thing-INDEF.ACC	ASSER.PART-befall.3SING.MASC-ENER-2MASC.SING	
<i>min-nī</i>	<i>mā</i>	<i>yaḍurru-ka</i>	<i>fī</i>
PREP-1SING	REL	harm.2SING.MASC.IMPERF	PREP
<i>nafsi-ka</i>			
self-2MASC.SING			
And know that if you are late on any of it, then (what you did) will befall you yourself			

Another way to modify a statement to upgrade it to a threat, is the use of adverbs. In *P.SijpesteijnQurra* ll. 24-5 the scribe uses an adverbial construction which modifies the verb with an adverb of the same root and an intensifying adverb, which is common in Arabic and other Semitic languages. The phrase is initiated with the discourse imperative 'know that...' and upgraded with the modifying invocation 'by Allah', which can idiomatically be translated as 'I swear' (example 25). Invocations and introductory statements like 'be aware that' are also commonly found with admonitions and threats in the Greek letters (§ 2.3).

¹¹⁸ See the discussion of the discourse imperatives above, where we saw that imperatives like *ḥud* 'take, get to' and *unzur* 'see that' are mostly used to introduce the first mention of the main request in the letters (§ 3.1). Here, we follow the definition of the term 'alerter' as set out in House, Kádár 2021, 118-19.

(25) *P.SijpesteijnQurra* ll. 24-5

		واعلم والله إنني آخذك بالمال أخذًا شديدًا	
<i>wa-i'lam</i>	<i>wa-Allāh-i</i>	<i>'in-nī</i>	
CONJ-know.IMPER.SING.MASC	CONJ-Allāh-GEN	PART-1SING	
<i>'āḥuḍu-ka</i>		<i>bi-al-māl</i>	<i>'aḥḍ-an</i>
take.1SING.IMPERF-2MASC.SING		PREP-DEF-taxes	taking-INDEF.ACC
<i>šadīd-an</i>			
strong-INDEF.ACC			
know, by Allah, that I will take the taxes from you violently			

In the previous section on requests, we already saw some examples of the use of the negative energetic. As was mentioned there, we find the same constructions more commonly used to express threats and admonitions. Negated first person singular forms are used to express negative wishes (example 26), while in the second person singular the negated forms function more straightforwardly as prohibitive commands (example 27).

(26) *P.Qurra* 2 ll. 12-13

		ولا ألومَنَّكَ فيه
<i>wa-lā</i>	<i>'alūm-anna-ka</i>	<i>fī-hi</i>
CONJ-NEG	blame.1SING-ENER-2MASC.SING	PREP-3MASC.SING
I do not wish to blame you for the matter		

(27) *P.SijpesteijnQurra* ll. 8-9

				فلا تخلينَّ إليَّ أن أبعث اليك من يؤذيك
<i>fa-lā</i>	<i>tuḥalliy-anna</i>	<i>'ilay-ya</i>	<i>'an</i>	
CONJ-NEG	leave.2SING.MASC-ENER	PREP-1SING	PART	
<i>'ab'aṭa</i>	<i>'ilay-ka</i>	<i>man</i>	<i>yuḍi-ka</i>	
send.1SING.IMPERF	PREP-2MASC.SING	REL	harm.2SING.MASC.IMPERF-2MASC.SING	
do not leave me to send someone to you to harm you				

Most of the expressions that can be recognised as the subtype 'admonition', because they function to stress what was previously asked (see § 1.3), are expressed as direct requests with an (negative) imperative (24 of 36). The rest are expressed as assertions, using energetic forms ($n = 9$), as a wish using a passive participle ($n = 1$), or as statements ($n = 1$). The assertions are most commonly formed using the phrase *lā 'a'rifanna...* 'I do not wish to find out...' ($n = 6$), with as a variant *lā 'unba'anna...* 'I do not wish to hear...' (*P.Heid.Arab.* I 2 l. 9). The other form, which recurs three times (*P.Qurra* 4 ll. 27-9;

P.Heid.Arab. I 1; 20-2; *P.SijpesteijnQurra* l. 25-26), uses an impersonal third person singular form of the verb ‘to be’ in the energetic mood (example 28).

(28) *P.Qurra* 4 ll. 27-9

wa-lā yakūnanna li-mā qibala-ka ḥabs wa-’iyyā-ka wa-al-’ilal

let there be no withholding of what you owe, and no excuses

One can make a comparison here with the use of perception verbs in the Greek admonitions, in particular expressions of the type μή εὔρωμεν ‘may we not find out’, μή εὔρεθῆς ‘may you not be found’, μή γνωσθῇ ‘may it not be brought to our attention’, which, however, in Greek are much less frequent than verbal intensifiers of the type μή ἀμελήσης ‘may you not neglect to’. Greek μή γένηται ἀμέλεια lit. ‘let there not occur a negligence’ is another parallel for the use of the impersonal third person singular form of the verb ‘to be’ in Arabic.

A very similar construction to that in example 28 is used in an admonition in *P.SijpesteijnQurra* ll. 25-6 (example 29), which immediately follows the threat in example 25, above. In example 29, the energetic seems to be used with a meaning that is more in line with how Fischer¹¹⁹ described it, to express certainty. However, as it still expresses the initiator’s belief and point of view, it is used as an Assertion here, rather than a Statement.

(29) *P.SijpesteijnQurra* ll. 25-6:

fa-lā takūnanna la-ka ġirra wa-lā ’illa

for **you cannot claim** ignorance and there are no excuses

The following assertion in example 30 expresses a wish, but functions to reiterate the main request in general terms, casting it in moralising language. Therefore, it can probably still be considered an admonition. Connecting the will of Allah to the ‘right’ (*ḥaqq*) of the Amīr of the believers to be paid his taxes taps into the religious ideal of divine and just rule that both the Greek and Arabic letters of the Qurra corpus appeal to.¹²⁰

¹¹⁹ Fischer 2001, 110.

¹²⁰ Papaconstantinou 2022 discusses the religious aspects of the rhetoric of governance in the Greek letters of the Qurra corpus, while Becker 1906, 33-5 already discussed this aspect of the Arabic letters. The relation between literary works on just governance and other Arabic administrative letters is further discussed by Sijpesteijn 2022.

(30) *P.Heid.Arab.* I 1 ll. 18-20

ṭumma 'inna Allāh mu'īnu-hum 'alā mā kāna 'alay-him min ḥaqq 'amīr al-mu'minīn

so may Allah help them with what they owe in terms of the right of the Amīr of the believers

The one admonition that is expressed as a Statement is less forceful, but still clearly functions to reiterate the request and press for its proper completion. Example 31 uses a statement about the content of a previous letter to reiterate the request that was made in it.

(31) *P.BeckerNPAF* 3 ll. 6-10

la-'amrī ḥāl al-'ajal munḍu 'akṭar min ṣahrayn wa-qad katabtu 'ilay-ka qabl kitābī ḥāqā 'āmuru-ka 'an tu'ajjila 'ilay-nā bi-mā qad jama'ta min jizya kūratī-ka

On my life, the term passed by more than two months since I wrote to you before this letter of mine (in which) I ordered you to hurry to send to us what you had gathered of the jizya of your district

4 Comparative Discussion and Conclusions

While previous work on the Qurra dossier has included discussion of the language, style,¹²¹ and aspects of rhetoric of the letters,¹²² this contribution has focused on the pragmatics of Request. With the socio-pragmatic approach that we have developed in this contribution, we hope to have shed at least some light on the way requests were framed, and to have elucidated some of the pragmatic motivations behind the structure of the letters, moving from a sentence-level to a discourse-level approach.

It may be clear that the Greek and Arabic letters of the Qurra corpus have several features in common with each other, especially in terms of style, structure, and content. The letters seem to stand out for their rather archaic,¹²³ or literary-inspired linguistic usage. Request letters in both languages follow a rhetorical structure that is very similar, consisting of an opening, pre-request, request, post-request, and closing. In both languages, the transition from the

¹²¹ Bell 1926, 276-7.

¹²² E.g. Abbott 1938, 40; Papaconstantinou 2022.

¹²³ Note, however, that the Arabic letters, even though they are praised in some of the modern publications of the letters for their 'nearly perfect' Standard Arabic, do also contain features of what is commonly called 'middle Arabic'. The masculine plural suffix, for example, is used almost exclusively in its oblique form *-ina*, in both nominative and oblique syntactic position as is common in the language of the Arabic papyri (see e.g. Hopkins 1984, 106).

pre-request to the request is crucially signalled through a version of the phrase 'when this letter of mine reaches you'. In the way that such structuring formulae were to some degree expected and were meant to aid the comprehension of the reader, they may be considered conventionally polite elements in the letters.

In terms of how the Greek and Arabic letters express Requests, however, each corpus seems to employ quite different strategies. Particularly in terms of morpho-syntax, each language has its own preferences, even when comparable constructions exist. For example, the Arabic letters seem more comfortable than the Greek ones to use plain direct imperatives to make requests. This use of direct imperatives is not unique for the Qurra papyri, and seems to have been the most common, and polite way to make requests in Arabic in this period. In the Greek letters, the participle plays an important role in the expression of requests, which, we have argued, may have played a downgrading role. Arabic requests, on the other hand, are more commonly downgraded by adding external modifiers such as *'in šā'a Allāh* 'Allah willing', although Qurra's position of power over Basil means that such downgraders are not very common in the corpus. Constructions such as discourse imperatives and the energetic are specific to Arabic; verbal intensifiers and the οὐ μὴ construction can be considered an indirect formal/functional parallel in Greek, but with a different pragmatic distribution. The same can be noted with regard to the use and distribution of modifying elements: some of these are specific to either Arabic or Greek (e.g. the Arabic use of cognate accusative constructions as upgrader), and when there are parallels the pragmatic distribution is often, though not always, different. At a higher-order level, it does seem that the use of threats and admonitions as supportive moves is similar in the two languages. However, more research would be needed to uncover the specificities of their usage, and the socio-pragmatic factors that determined their inclusion or omission (such as degree of imposition, urgency of the matter at hand, transgression of previous requests etc.).

So, it seems that even though the general style, structure, and rhetorical strategies used in the Greek and Arabic letters are quite similar, the morphological and syntactic expression of requests and associated upgraders and downgraders remained lingua-culture specific. As socio-pragmatic studies of contemporary Arabic and Greek documentary material are still largely lacking, further research in this direction is needed in order to understand how unique the framing of requests in these dossiers was, both at a linguistic and discourse-structural level, as well as to understand the pragmatic effect of linguistic and rhetorical choices.

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