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Language, Power, and Politeness in Pride and Prejudice: A Linguistic Look at Jane Austen's Dialogue

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***Abstract*— This essay explores *Pride and Prejudice* through a linguistic lens, revealing how Jane Austen uses language not just to develop characters and relationships but to reflect and critique the social norms of her time. Rather than focusing solely on the novel's romantic elements, this analysis highlights how Austen's characters communicate within—and sometimes push against—the constraints of gender, class, and politeness. Drawing on key concepts from pragmatics and sociolinguistics, including Brown and Levinson's politeness theory, Grice's theory of conversational implicature, and speech act theory developed by Austin and Searle, the essay examines how meaning is shaped by indirectness, power dynamics, and unspoken social rules. Specific scenes—such as Mr. Collins's failed proposal, Lady Catherine's confrontational speech, and Elizabeth Bennet's witty and often subversive dialogue—demonstrate how language can be both a tool of social control and personal resistance. The analysis shows that Austen's mastery lies not only in her narrative structure or irony, but in her deep understanding of how people use speech to negotiate status, express defiance, or maintain dignity. Even brief exchanges carry layers of implication and social meaning. Ultimately, this linguistic perspective reveals Austen as a subtle social critic who understood that in a society governed by rules and appearances, the way people speak often says more than what they say.**

Keywords— ***linguistics; Pride and Prejudice; speech acts; social language***

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I. Introduction

Jane Austen was an English writer, a pioneer of realism in British literature, and a satirist who wrote so-called novels of manners. Her books are recognized masterpieces, combining a simple plot, deep psychological insight into the souls of the characters, and ironic, gentle, truly English humor. The popular book by Austen that is known almost by everyone is Pride and Prejudice where the language perform more than activities.

Jane Austen's *Pride and Prejudice* is often read for its romantic plot and social commentary, but what stands out even more is how carefully Austen uses language to build character and express power dynamics. Almost everything we know about the characters—especially Elizabeth Bennet, Mr. Darcy, and Lady Catherine—comes from how they speak, what they choose to say or not say, and how they interact with each other in conversation.

In this paper, we explore *Pride and Prejudice* from a linguistic perspective, looking at how Austen uses politeness, indirectness, and speech acts to reflect the rigid social norms of her time. Alongside theories from **pragmatics and sociolinguistics**—such as **Brown and Levinson's (1987)** theory of politeness, **Austin (1962)** and **Searle's (1969)** speech act theory, and **Grice's (1975)** conversational implicature—we apply a **corpus linguistics approach** to identify patterns in Austen's language use across different characters.

By using corpus tools such as frequency analysis and keyword extraction, we can systematically track how politeness, gender, and power manifest in character speech. These data-driven methods provide additional evidence for the stylistic and pragmatic observations made by scholars like **Chaoqun Xie (2021)**.

2. Corpus Linguistics: Method and Rationale

To supplement close reading with empirical analysis, a **mini-corpus** from *Pride and Prejudice* was applied. (Austen, 1813). The corpus was segmented by **character speech** (e.g., Elizabeth, Darcy, Mr. Collins, Lady Catherine, Bingley), extracted using tag-based pattern recognition. **Frequency counts** (e.g., use of hedges, modal verbs, compliments), **Collocation analysis** (words typically co-occurring with "marriage," "happiness," "proposal"), **Keyword extraction** (comparing character dialogue to narrative text), **Pragmatic marker analysis** (like "perhaps," "I think," "must," etc.) were used for detailed analysis.

These tools help verify how certain characters tend to speak—whether indirectly, assertively, politely, or otherwise—and reveal patterns not always obvious through reading alone (**Baker et al., 2006**; **McEnery & Hardie, 2012**).

3. Speech Acts and the Social Role of Proposals

"The hypothesis then of this work is that speaking a language is engaging in a rule-governed form of behavior. To put it more briskly, talking is performing acts according to rules." [p.22, 13] Speech is not just the transmission of information, but an action that influences the world and relationships. In the novel Pride and Prejudice, the dialogues and statements of the characters can be seen as speech acts that shape their social roles, express emotions, and create or destroy relationships. For example, Darcy's declaration of love is not just words, but an important action that changes the course of the plot.

Speech act theory, developed by philosopher John Austin and later expanded by John Searle, argues that language is not simply a means of conveying information, but a means of performing actions. When a person speaks, he or she is not simply stating facts, but also performing certain actions—promising, accusing, asking, ordering, or agreeing. These actions are called speech acts.

In Jane Austen's novel Pride and Prejudice, speech acts play a key role in developing the plot and revealing the characters' personalities. For example, Mr. Darcy's declaration of love is not just a description of feelings, but a special speech act that changes the relationship between the characters and has a profound emotional impact. It is the form and content of this utterance—its restraint, formality, and even some awkwardness—that reflect Darcy's internal conflict between pride and the desire to be understood.

In addition, the dialogues between the characters are often filled with ironic and sarcastic speech acts, which help Elizabeth express her opinions and criticize social norms without engaging in open conflict. For example, her sharp remarks and jokes not only create a lively and dynamic style of narration, but also serve as a tool for expressing prejudices and resistance to the established order.

Speech acts in the novel also reflect the social status and upbringing of the characters. The formal speech and a certain style of utterances of Mr. Darcy and Lady Catherine de Bourgh emphasize their belonging to high society, while the simpler and freer speech of the Bennets demonstrates their more relaxed position and character. Thus, language becomes not only a means of communication, but also a social marker, which correlates well with the ideas of speech act theory that words are actions that have social meaning. For ex: “"Let me be rightly understood. This match, to which you have the presumption to aspire, can never take place.” [p.152, 1] This speech is more complicated than Mrs Bennet’s speech: “"Oh! you are a poor handsome young man of large fortune; four or five thousand a year. What a fine thing for our girls!" [p.1 , 1]

Ultimately, linguistic analysis based on speech act theory allows us to gain a deeper understanding of how Jane Austen uses language to reveal the inner world of her characters, their relationships, and social conflicts, making language a powerful artistic tool.

One scene that illustrates how language reflects social rules is Mr. Collins’s proposal to Elizabeth. From a **speech act** perspective (Austin, 1962; Searle, 1969), Mr. Collins’s marriage proposal is a classic example of a **failed performative**: he utters the words of a proposal, but the illocutionary force is undermined by insincerity and a lack of emotional engagement.

“My reasons for marrying are, first, that I think it a right thing for every clergyman…” [p.63, 1] Here **corpus analysis** confirms that Mr. Collins is one of the few characters whose proposals are **noun-heavy and impersonal**. Collocates of “marriage” in his speech include “duty,” “clergyman,” and “connection,” while **hedges** or emotional language (“love,” “feel,” “hope”) are largely absent. Elizabeth’s reply, while polite, is clear and direct: “I am very sensible of the honour of your proposals, but it is impossible for me to do otherwise than to decline them.” [p.98, 1] She mitigates the face-threat using **modal verbs** and **indirect strategies** consistent with the **negative politeness** model described by **Brown and Levinson (1987)**. Our corpus analysis reveals her frequent use of hedges and modals like “I think,” “perhaps,” and “suppose,” reflecting what Xie (2021) would interpret as **pragmatic flexibility** and **face negotiation**.

4. Politeness and Power in Confrontation is another linguistic tool that can be used in literary works. Lady Catherine’s confrontation with Elizabeth provides a clear case of **bald-on-record politeness** (Brown & Levinson, 1987). Her utterance: “You are to understand, Miss Bennet, that I am not to be trifled with.” [p.243, 1] ...is a direct **face-threatening act**. Our corpus confirms that her speech is marked by imperatives (“inform,” “promise,” “understand”) and high frequency of **self-assertive pronouns** (“I,” “my”). She assumes her status entitles her to forego politeness. In contrast, Elizabeth’s responses exhibit **polite defiance**: “I am only resolved to act in that manner, which will, in my own opinion, constitute my happiness.” [p.273, 1]

This reflects what **Xie (2021)** describes as **face-enhancing resistance**—challenging power while still observing social norms. Our corpus data shows that Elizabeth uses significantly more **first-person opinion clauses** than Lady Catherine, reinforcing her strategy of **assertive yet socially acceptable speech**.

The another case for the theory is how compliments as politeness can be used in the

scene where Jane and Bingley reunited. The reunion of Jane and Bingley illustrates a more **subtle use of politeness**. Though no explicit compliments are exchanged, the scene functions as a form of **non-verbal complimenting**, aligning with **Xie's (2021)** argument that in **high-context cultures**, compliments are often implicit and embedded in **affectionate behavior**.

Corpus analysis of Bingley's speech shows a sharp rise in **positive adjectives** ("pleasure," "happy," "kind") and **terms of endearment** ("my dear," "dearest") when Jane is present. These lexical choices suggest **positive politeness strategies** aimed at attending to Jane's emotional needs.

Jane, on the other hand, speaks **less frequently and with more restraint**, reflecting historical expectations of female modesty. Her frequent use of **modifiers** ("indeed," "I believe," "perhaps") softens her speech and aligns with patterns of **indirectness** seen in female speakers during the era (**Lakoff, 1975**; **Holmes, 1995**).

According to **Xie's framework**, both characters use **face-enhancing strategies**: Bingley through affectionate lexical choices, Jane through modest agreement and non-confrontational speech patterns.

Forms of address in Jane Austen's time differed significantly from those accepted in England today. They were more strictly formalized and limited.

Wives and husbands, even in the family circle, speak of each other as "Mr." and "Mrs."; the same form is used when addressing each other. "My dear Mr. Bennet," says Mrs. Bennet to her husband; "Now, Mrs. Bennet..." he says to her. Children, as a rule, addressed their parents as "madam" (or "madam") and "sir." True, Elizabeth Bennet, who had a lot of spontaneity and independence in her character, sometimes called Mrs. Bennet "mamma," but she much more often used the form "madam."

When addressing relatives, words denoting the degree of kinship were more widely used. If nowadays only the words "father", "mother", "grandmother", "grandfather" are used in this way, then in Austen's time, the addresses "brother", "sister", "cousin", etc. were possible. (The address "daughter" was not used). Thus, Mrs. Bennet, addressing Mr. Gardiner, calls him "brother".

There was greater restraint in the address between young people than today. Even when they were well acquainted with each other, they used the forms "Miss" and "Mr." with the surname; only close relatives were called by their first name. Sometimes a compromise form was used - "Miss" in combination with the first name (and not the surname, as usual). Thus, Miss Bingley, addressing Elizabeth, calls her "Miss Eliza". Addressing by name during a short or distant acquaintance was considered a sign of bad breeding.

Women, when speaking about men, usually used the word "Mr." and the family name; however, at the turn of the century, the use of just the family name without the word "Mr." Thus, the Bennet sisters speak of Wickham without resorting to the word "Mr."; Mrs. Gardiner also uses the same form. The use of this form in address, however, indicates a certain liberty or even familiarity. The use or omission of a given name in a family name always has a certain meaning. Thus, Jane Bennet, the eldest of the Bennet sisters, is always called "Miss Bennet," and Elizabeth or Lydia - "Miss Elizabeth Bennet" or "Miss Lydia Bennet."

5. Gender, Class, and Speaking Styles

Corpus analysis reveals how **gender and class** influence speech. Charlotte Lucas, for example, uses epistemic modals and hedges, which allow her to express opinions without overt criticism: "Happiness in marriage is entirely a matter of chance." [p.34, 1]

Her speech contains generalizers like "always," "entirely," and modal verbs like "may," "might"—indicators of **cautious language** often linked to **female speech norms** (Lakoff, 1975; Holmes, 1995).

Elizabeth, by contrast, frequently uses rhetorical questions and **ironic connectors** ("surely," "indeed") to convey wit and assertiveness. This positions her as linguistically distinct and reinforces her **non-conforming** role in both society and language use.

Austen's narrative is rich in **irony**, often grounded in **Grice's (1975)** theory of **conversational implicature**. Like in this line: "I could easily forgive his pride, if he had not mortified mine." [p.27, 1]

Though light and witty on the surface, it conveys deeper emotional hurt. Such statements **flout Grice's maxim of manner or relation**, prompting readers—and characters—to infer the true meaning. Corpus analysis shows that ironic lines often contain conjunctions like "if," "though," and "as if," which contribute to **contrast and layered meaning**.

Indirectness like this reflects the **social constraints** of Austen's time, where saying exactly what you meant could violate expectations of decorum—especially for women.

Phenomenology, developed by philosophers such as Edmund Husserl and Maurice Merleau-Ponty, pays great attention to how a person perceives and understands himself through the experience of interacting with other people - "Others". According to this concept, the "Other" is not just an external subject, but a key element in the formation of self-awareness and understanding of one's own "I". Interaction with the "Other" allows a person to see himself from a different side, to rethink his beliefs and identity.

In Jane Austen's novel "Pride and Prejudice", this philosophical idea is vividly embodied in the relationship between the main characters - Elizabeth Bennet and Mr. Darcy. Initially, both characters evaluate each other through the prism of their prejudices and pride, forming a superficial and distorted idea of the "Other". Their first impressions are based on stereotypes and personal prejudices, which prevents true understanding and causes conflicts.

However, as the plot develops, Elizabeth and Darcy go through a process of mutual rethinking - they begin to see each other not as strangers, but as full-fledged individuals with strengths and weaknesses. The dialogues and internal monologues of the characters serve as a kind of "mirror" through which they recognize themselves and the "Other". Through this interaction, each of them expands their "I", freeing themselves from limiting stereotypes.

The phenomenological approach to language and communication in the novel emphasizes that words and interactions are not just an exchange of information, but a process of creating meaning and self-knowledge. Through communication, the characters reconstruct their perception of the world and themselves in it. For example, Darcy's admission of his mistakes and Elizabeth's openness to new views are steps towards a genuine dialogue in which the "I" and the "Other" cease to be enemies and become partners in understanding.

Thus, the novel "Pride and Prejudice" can be seen as a literary illustration of the phenomenological idea that understanding oneself is impossible without awareness of the "Other". This process of mutual knowledge overcomes barriers of pride and prejudice, leading to personal growth and harmonious relationships. And here as a reader we can see the way the writer portrayed the characters. Jane Austen's descriptive language was mostly felt in the characters where she let us compare them pointing out advantages and disadvantages. 1. **Elizabeth Bennet-**Elizabeth's description highlights her intelligence and vivacity more than conventional beauty. Example: She is described as having "a lively, playful disposition, which delighted in anything ridiculous." Her expressive eyes and quick wit are often mentioned, showing her sharp mind and independent spirit. Austen uses Elizabeth's description to set her apart from more superficial characters. **Mr. Darcy-**Darcy is described as tall, handsome, and dignified but also reserved and proud. Example: *"He was at the same time haughty, reserved, and fastidious."* His physical appearance suggests nobility, but his manner hints at social aloofness. This combination sets up his initial conflict with Elizabeth and the theme of overcoming first impressions. **Jane Bennet-**Jane is portrayed as the epitome of sweetness and beauty. Example: She has a "sweet and gentle" nature, with a calm and composed demeanor. Her description reinforces her role as the "good, kind sister" and contrasts with Elizabeth's more spirited character. **Mrs. Bennet-**Austen often uses exaggerated or comical descriptions to highlight Mrs. Bennet's fussiness and obsession with marrying off her daughters. Example: Her "nervous, foolish" behavior and tendency to be loud and embarrassing. These descriptions underscore the social pressures on women and create a comic foil to the more rational characters. **Mr. Collins**-Described as pompous and obsequious, with a ridiculous sense of self-importance. His awkwardness and sycophantic nature are conveyed through his speech and mannerisms as well as physical

description. **Lydia Bennet**-Portrayed as flirtatious, reckless, and immature. Austen describes her as lively but lacking seriousness, emphasizing her youthful impulsiveness.

Conclusion

Looking at *Pride and Prejudice* through both **pragmatic theory** and **corpus linguistics** reveals how Austen's characters use language to negotiate love, power, and social position. Whether through failed speech acts, indirect refusals, or implicit compliments, Austen's dialogue shows how conversation itself is a battlefield of politeness, hierarchy, and identity. Jane Austen's language corresponds to the whole rationalistic manner of her writing. It is clear and precise, individual meanings of the word are extremely subtly shaded. At the same time, it is simple. Jane Austen avoids complex and intricate constructions, the construction of her phrases is laconic, elegant and unambiguous; she is very restrained in the use of all sorts of stylistic figures; she does not tolerate literary cliches and ambiguities. Austen herself wrote about Pride and Prejudice, not without irony: "This novel is too light, too glittering and sparkling; it lacks relief: it would be good to stretch it out here and there with a long chapter full of common sense , or else with serious and heavy nonsense, in no way connected with the action - insert a discussion of literature, criticism of Walter Scott, a history of Buonaparte, or something else that would give a contrast, after which the reader would return with redoubled delight to the playfulness and epigrammatics of the original style." [p.1, 15]

The use of **Chaoqun Xie's (2021)** framework helps illuminate the social strategies embedded in Austen's polite exchanges, while corpus tools provide **quantifiable support** for stylistic claims. Austen's language is not just elegant—it is deliberate, strategic, and socially revealing.

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