

SPEECH ACTS AND POLITENESS STRUCTURE IN JANE AUSTEN'S EMMA

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Abstract. *This study examines the realization of speech acts and politeness structures in Jane Austen's Emma through the theoretical frameworks of pragmatics and discourse analysis.*

The research investigates how Austen employs speech acts as communicative strategies to construct social relationships, reveal character intentions, and reflect class-based interactional norms within Regency society. Drawing upon speech act theory developed by John Austin and John Searle, as well as politeness theory proposed by Penelope Brown and Stephen Levinson, the study analyzes representative, directive, commissive, expressive, and declarative acts in selected dialogues from the novel.

The findings indicate that Austen's discourse reflects the sociolinguistic conventions of Regency England while simultaneously exposing the tensions embedded within class-conscious communication. The study confirms that pragmatic analysis offers valuable insight into literary discourse and highlights the significance of speech act theory and politeness theory as effective tools for interpreting character interaction and narrative meaning in nineteenth-century fiction.

Keywords: *speech acts, politeness theory, pragmatics, discourse analysis, Jane Austen, Emma, social hierarchy, literary communication.*

Introduction

Language serves as a dynamic social tool that people use to negotiate authority, build relationships, and carry out deliberate actions in addition to being a means of communication.

Language in literary discourse exposes hidden social systems that influence character interactions in addition to explicit meaning. A useful framework for analyzing how language acts and reflects social norms is provided by pragmatics, a subfield of linguistics that focuses on meaning in context. Speech act theory and politeness theory, two of its most important ideas, provide useful analytical tools for examining communication behavior in literary texts.

The study of speech acts, first introduced by John Austin and later systematized by John Searle, focuses on the functional capacity of utterances to perform actions such as asserting, requesting, promising, apologizing, and declaring. These linguistic acts are shaped by context and social intention, making them particularly relevant to literary analysis, where character relationships are often encoded through subtle patterns of dialogue. Similarly, politeness theory

Jane Austen's Emma provides an especially rich setting for pragmatic study. The work, published in 1815, depicts Regency England's highly regulated social environment, in which verbal engagement is governed by rigorous class, decorum, and emotional restraint. Austen's conversation is distinguished by clarity, irony, and indirectness, making it ideal for analyzing speech acts and etiquette methods. Austen uses verbal encounters to establish complex social identities and highlight contradictions between appearance and intention, sincerity and manipulation, authority and vulnerability.

Theoretical Framework

The link between language and social action has always played an important role in linguistic scholarship. Modern pragmatic theory developed in response to solely structural approaches to language, emphasizing the role of context, intention, and interaction in meaning production. Within this subject, speech act theory and politeness theory have emerged as critical analytical frameworks for understanding how language functions beyond its literal semantic content. John Austin's landmark book *How to Do Things with Words* was the first to thoroughly explain speech act theory. Austin challenged the traditional belief that language only describes reality, contending that words frequently conduct actions. He divided between locutionary acts, which include the creation of meaningful language expressions; illocutionary acts, which transmit communicative intention; and perlocutionary acts, which have an effect on the hearer.

This tripartite paradigm provided the foundation for examining language as performative activity.

Jane Austen's writing has sparked extensive linguistic and literary research due to her clever use of dialogue. Scholars have consistently praised Austen's accuracy in depicting social interaction, particularly her use of sarcasm, innuendo, and conversational ambiguity. While artistic and feminist interpretations dominate Austen study, pragmatic analyses concentrating on speech acts and etiquette patterns are scarce.

Politeness Strategies and Social Hierarchy in *Emma*

The Politeness Theory, established by Penelope Brown and Stephen Levinson, provides an important framework for interpreting Emma's interpersonal communication. Their view differentiates between positive and negative politeness, bald-on-record techniques, and off-record communication. Austen's dialogue methodically employs these techniques to express class consciousness, emotional reserve, and social hierarchy.

Positive politeness is commonly employed to foster togetherness and mutual approval.

Emma frequently uses inclusive sentiments and complimenting language when engaging with Harriet. These verbal tactics give the appearance of intimacy while also sustaining Emma's social authority. Positive politeness serves as both relationship maintenance and subtle management.

Negative politeness is most noticeable in situations requiring social sensitivity or potential conflict. Characters commonly soften demands and criticism by using modal verbs, hedging devices, and indirect language. Mr. Knightley's critiques of Emma frequently demonstrate this method. His condemnation is communicated graciously, maintaining Emma's social mask while conveying moral judgment.

Conclusion

The pragmatic study of Jane Austen's *Emma* reveals that speech acts and politeness techniques are central to the novel's communicative structure. Austen uses representative, directive, commissive, expressive, and declarative acts to build interpersonal relationships and narrative advancement. Simultaneously, politeness methods reflect social hierarchy, emotional regulation, and class expectations.

The connection between speech act realization and politeness control demonstrates Austen's accurate knowledge of language as a social action. *Emma* depicts communication as a dynamic arena in which power, morality, and identity are constantly contested through verbal choice. This reinforces the importance of pragmatic theory in literary study and validates Austen's work as a notable example of discourse-based social representation.

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