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THE REALIZATION OF THE MODESTY MAXIM IN JANE AUSTEN'S EMMA. A PRAGMATIC ANALYSIS

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Abstract: The Modesty Maxim, proposed by Geoffrey Leech (1983) as one of the six maxims of the Politeness Principle, plays a significant role in maintaining harmonious interpersonal communication. It encourages speakers to minimize self-praise and maximize self-dispraise, thereby preserving social balance and reducing face-threatening acts. Jane Austen's Emma provides an excellent corpus for examining how modesty is linguistically realized through the speech of characters belonging to different genders and social classes. This article explores the realization of the Modesty Maxim in Emma using pragmatic and sociolinguistic perspectives. The study focuses on the speech patterns of Emma Woodhouse, Jane Fairfax, Mr. Knightley, and Mrs. Weston to identify how modesty strategies contribute to characterization and interpersonal relationships. The findings reveal that female characters employ self-deprecating expressions, hedges, and indirectness more frequently than male characters, while male speakers demonstrate modesty through restrained self-evaluation and acknowledgment of others' contributions. Austen uses these pragmatic devices not only to reflect nineteenth-century English social norms but also to reveal individual personalities and moral development. The study contributes to politeness theory by illustrating how literary discourse mirrors authentic conversational behavior and demonstrates the interaction between language, gender, and culture.

Keywords: Modesty Maxim, Pragmatics, Politeness Principle, Jane Austen, Emma, Sociolinguistics, Gender, Literary Discourse.

Introduction

Pragmatics investigates how language functions within social interaction and how meaning is constructed beyond the literal interpretation of words. Among the major contributions to pragmatic theory is Geoffrey Leech's (1983) Politeness Principle, which consists of six conversational maxims designed to maintain interpersonal harmony. One of these principles, the Modesty Maxim, encourages speakers to avoid excessive self-praise and instead emphasize humility and self-restraint.

Literary works provide valuable materials for pragmatic analysis because fictional dialogues often imitate authentic communication while simultaneously reflecting cultural values and social expectations. Jane Austen's Emma is particularly suitable for such an investigation. Throughout the novel, Austen portrays members of the English upper-middle class whose conversations are governed by strict conventions of politeness, etiquette, and social hierarchy. Characters frequently negotiate relationships through compliments, apologies, self-evaluations, and indirect speech acts, making the novel an important source for studying the Modesty Maxim.

Furthermore, Emma offers an opportunity to investigate how gender influences the realization of modesty. Female and male characters employ different communicative strategies to maintain social relationships, reflecting nineteenth-century expectations concerning femininity, masculinity, education, and class. Therefore, this article aims to examine how modesty is pragmatically realized

in Emma and how these linguistic strategies contribute to the development of characterization and interpersonal communication.

According to Leech (1983), the Modesty Maxim requires speakers to "minimize praise of self and maximize dispraise of self." This strategy enables individuals to maintain politeness by avoiding arrogance and preserving the positive face of their interlocutors. Throughout Emma, Austen demonstrates this principle in numerous conversational exchanges.

One of the most significant representatives of modest speech is Jane Fairfax. Unlike Emma Woodhouse, Jane consistently underestimates her own abilities and avoids accepting compliments directly. When praised for her musical performance, she frequently redirects attention away from herself or attributes her success to external factors. Expressions such as "I have very little merit" or "I have been particularly fortunate" illustrate classic examples of self-deprecation. Rather than accepting praise openly, Jane minimizes her accomplishments to preserve modesty and social harmony. From a pragmatic perspective, these utterances reduce potential face-threatening effects and strengthen interpersonal solidarity.

Emma Woodhouse presents a more complex example. At the beginning of the novel, Emma often displays confidence bordering on self-importance. She believes herself capable of arranging other people's lives and frequently overestimates her own judgment. However, as the narrative progresses, particularly after Mr. Knightley's criticism of her behavior at Box Hill, Emma's speech changes considerably. She begins to acknowledge her mistakes with statements such as "I have been very foolish" and "I was mistaken." These expressions represent genuine self-criticism and illustrate her moral development. Austen uses pragmatic changes in Emma's speech to symbolize personal growth, demonstrating that true modesty emerges through self-awareness rather than social obligation alone.

Mrs. Weston also exemplifies modest communicative behavior. Throughout the novel, she avoids claiming credit for successful events and frequently emphasizes the contributions of others. Her polite expressions illustrate what Brown and Levinson (1987) describe as positive politeness strategies, intended to reinforce social relationships by highlighting the value of interlocutors rather than oneself. Such conversational behavior reflects the expectations placed upon respectable women during the Regency period.

Male characters realize modesty differently. Mr. Knightley rarely engages in explicit self-deprecation; instead, his modesty is conveyed through measured confidence and objective self-assessment. Rather than denying his achievements, he refrains from unnecessary self-praise and acknowledges the merits of others. His communicative style reflects social authority balanced by moral responsibility. Unlike female characters, whose modesty frequently appears through linguistic hedging and indirectness, Mr. Knightley's modesty is expressed through restraint, sincerity, and fairness.

These differences correspond with sociolinguistic observations made by Deborah Tannen (1990) and Janet Holmes (1995), who argue that women often employ language to establish solidarity and interpersonal closeness, whereas men tend to use language to negotiate status while maintaining credibility. Austen's dialogues remarkably anticipate these modern sociolinguistic findings despite being written nearly two centuries earlier.

Another notable pragmatic feature is the extensive use of hedging devices. Characters frequently employ expressions such as perhaps, I believe, I think, I suppose, and it seems. These lexical items reduce certainty, soften assertions, and signal respect for alternative viewpoints. Jane Fairfax uses hedges particularly often, reinforcing her image as reserved, educated, and socially

considerate. Emma gradually adopts similar linguistic behavior after recognizing the limitations of her own judgment.

Compliment responses also demonstrate the operation of the Modesty Maxim. Instead of accepting praise directly, many characters either reject compliments politely or redirect credit toward circumstances or other individuals. Such responses minimize self-enhancement and preserve social equilibrium. Pragmatically, these interactions reduce the risk of appearing boastful while simultaneously protecting the positive face of the compliment giver.

Austen further associates modest speech with moral virtue. Characters who consistently demonstrate humility, empathy, and respectful communication—such as Jane Fairfax and Mr. Knightley—are ultimately portrayed as morally superior. Conversely, individuals like Mrs. Elton frequently violate the Modesty Maxim by exaggerating their accomplishments, boasting about social status, and drawing excessive attention to themselves. These pragmatic violations contribute to readers' negative evaluations of such characters, illustrating Austen's belief that language reflects ethical character.

From a broader sociolinguistic perspective, the novel reflects the communicative norms of Regency England, where politeness was closely connected with social class, education, and gender expectations. Modesty functioned not merely as an individual personality trait but as a socially prescribed communicative behavior that maintained harmony within hierarchical society.

Conclusion

The analysis demonstrates that Jane Austen's Emma provides rich evidence for the realization of Leech's Modesty Maxim in literary discourse. Through carefully constructed dialogues, Austen illustrates how speakers minimize self-praise, employ self-deprecating expressions, utilize hedges, and respond modestly to compliments in order to maintain harmonious interpersonal relationships.

The findings indicate that female characters rely more heavily on indirectness, hedging, and explicit self-deprecation, whereas male characters express modesty through restraint, balanced self-evaluation, and acknowledgment of others' contributions. These differences correspond with modern sociolinguistic theories concerning gendered communication while simultaneously reflecting the cultural values of nineteenth-century English society.

Ultimately, Austen employs pragmatic strategies not only to imitate authentic conversation but also to construct character identity, reveal moral development, and critique social behavior. Consequently, Emma remains an important literary resource for studying politeness, gender, and sociolinguistic interaction within the framework of contemporary pragmatic theory.

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