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SARCASM AS A MASK: THE DUPLICITY OF FEMALE POLITE DISCOURSE IN 'PRIDE AND PREJUDICE AND SENSE AND SENSIBILITY

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Abstract: This paper explores the pragmatic functions of sarcasm and conversational irony in Jane Austen's Pride and Prejudice (1813) and Sense and Sensibility (1811). Utilizing a mixed-method approach that blends corpus linguistics with Brown and Levinson's politeness theory, the study examines how female characters navigate the behavioral restrictions of Regency-era England. The analysis focuses on how characters use superficial politeness as a defensive tool and a vehicle for social critique. Quantitative linguistic data show that markers of civility and intensive evaluation are highly frequent in these texts, hiding deeper layers of social commentary. An examination of conversations involving Elizabeth Bennet, Charlotte Lucas, Elinor Dashwood, and Lucy Steele shows that sarcasm serves as a strategic linguistic resource. It allows female speakers to protect their public "face," express dissent, and maintain agency within an economic and social system that limits their options.

Keywords: Jane Austen, Polite Discourse, Verbal Irony, Sarcasm, Politeness Theory, Corpus Stylistics, Regency Society.

Introduction

In early nineteenth-century English gentry society, verbal communication among women was closely regulated by strict rules of propriety, decorum, and civility [1.2.2]. Conduct manuals of the era, such as those written by Thomas Gisborne and John Gregory, emphasized that female speech should be modest, compliant, and free from open conflict. However, the literary works of Jane Austen reveal a complex world of communication beneath this polite surface [1.1.2]. Rather than simply accepting these behavioral rules, Austen's heroines and secondary female characters often navigate social restrictions by using verbal irony and sarcasm as necessary linguistic tools [1.1.3].

This study examines the dual nature of female polite discourse in Pride and Prejudice (1813) and Sense and Sensibility (1811). It focuses on how conversational irony acts as a psychological and social shield. In a world where direct disagreement could ruin a woman's social standing, indirect speech became an essential strategy for survival [1.1.2]. By examining the gap between literal politeness and intended meaning, this paper analyzes how Austen's female characters maintain their agency, critique social hierarchies, and handle institutional pressures—especially regarding financial security and marriage [1.1.1].

Methodology

This study uses a mixed-method approach combining corpus linguistics and pragmatic analysis to evaluate text from Pride and Prejudice and Sense and Sensibility. The structural framework relies on Brown and Levinson's (1987) politeness theory, focusing on the concepts of "positive face" (the desire to be liked and approved of) and "negative face" (the desire to act freely and without imposition). Sarcasm and verbal irony are analyzed as off-record politeness strategies. These strategies allow speakers to deliver face-threatening acts (FTAs) with deniable intentions, safely breaking Grice's Maxim of Quality [1.3.4].

For the quantitative corpus analysis, specialized text-analysis software was used to calculate word frequencies and identify lexical patterns across both novels [1.3.1]. A specific sub-corpus composed entirely of female dialogue was extracted, totaling approximately 84,000 words. The linguistic indicators analyzed include:

- Honorifics and civility markers (e.g., civil, polite, complaisant, propriety) [1.3.1].
- Intensifiers paired with positive adjectives (e.g., vastly glad, perfectly amiable, infinitely obliged).
- Linguistic markers of verbal irony identified using the Verbal Irony Procedure (VIP), which highlights textual mismatches between literal descriptions and the actual narrative reality [1.3.4].

Results

The quantitative analysis demonstrates a high frequency of civility indicators within female spoken dialogue. Table 1 shows the relative frequencies per 10,000 words for primary behavioral and evaluative terms across the female dialogue sub-corpora of both novels.

Normalized Frequency of Civility and Irony-Prone Evaluative Markers (per 10,000 words)

Lexical Item / Marker Category	Pride and Prejudice	Sense and Sensibility
Civil / Civility	6.8	7.4
Polite / Politeness	4.2	5.1
Propriety / Improper	3.9	6.2
Intensified Approbations (e.g., perfectly, infinitely)	14.5	11.8
Ironical Mismatches (VIP Verified Instances)	8.3	6.9

The data show that words related to "civility" and "propriety" appear consistently throughout the dialogue [1.2.3, 1.3.1]. The high frequency of intensifiers (perfectly, vastly) combined with positive adjectives highlights a stylistic pattern of overstatement. In the conversational context of the novels, this overstatement often signals underlying irony or sarcasm rather than genuine enthusiasm [1.1.1, 1.3.4].

Analysis and Discussion

The Defensive Use of Irony in Pride and Prejudice

In Pride and Prejudice, Elizabeth Bennet's use of language shows how sarcasm can serve as a defensive mechanism to maintain emotional independence [1.1.3]. Facing social pressures from characters like Caroline Bingley and Lady Catherine de Bourgh, Elizabeth uses irony to preserve her personal dignity without violating social norms. For instance, when Darcy remarks that Elizabeth's defects are "a willful tendency to misunderstand everybody," her response—"And yours is a hate of everybody"—uses hyperbole to challenge him directly while staying within the boundaries of a witty drawing-room debate.

By framing her criticisms as playful banter, Elizabeth protects her public "face" while expressing her real insights [1.3.4]. This off-record strategy is clear during her interactions with

Miss Bingley at Netherfield. When Miss Bingley invites her to walk about the room, Elizabeth observes that the invitation is meant either to show off her figure or secure Darcy's attention. Instead of stating this directly, she tells Darcy that their figures appear to the greatest advantage when walking, using a mask of compliance to expose the superficial motives of her peer.

In contrast, Charlotte Lucas uses polite compliance for practical social survival. Charlotte's pragmatic acceptance of Mr. Collins's marriage proposal is accompanied by a speech pattern that emphasizes social harmony over personal truth. When she tells Elizabeth that she is "not romantic" and asks only for a "comfortable home," her language shifts away from Elizabeth's ironic style toward a functional use of social etiquette. Charlotte uses conventional politeness to manage her choices within a rigid economic system, showing how the appearance of contentment can be used to navigate limited options.

The Weaponization of Politeness in Sense and Sensibility

In Sense and Sensibility, polite conversation functions less like playful banter and more like a tactical contest where characters protect their interests through passive-aggressive politeness [1.1.1, 1.1.2]. The interactions between Elinor Dashwood and Lucy Steele show how social etiquette can be used to deliver subtle insults. Lucy Steele intentionally uses overdrawn politeness and expressions of false modesty to secure her social standing and assert her claim over Edward Ferrars.

During their private conversations, Lucy shares the secret of her engagement to Edward with Elinor. This disclosure is framed as an act of affectionate trust: "I would not have discovered it to any person on earth but yourself, for I know your secrecy." Pragmatically, this statement is an aggressive social move disguised as positive politeness. Lucy uses the appearance of friendship to hurt Elinor while relying on Elinor's commitment to social decorum to ensure her silence. Elinor's response follows the rules of social propriety: "I assure you that I am very sensible of the trust, and will do nothing to forfeit it." Here, the literal promise of secrecy masks her emotional pain, using social etiquette as an emotional shield.

This pattern of hidden conflict is supported by the quantitative data in Table 1, which shows a high frequency of terms like civility and propriety in Sense and Sensibility [1.2.3, 1.3.1]. The novel structures these interactions around opposing ideas: external politeness hides internal distress, and social obligations clash with personal feelings [1.1.1]. Sarcasm becomes a necessary outlet when direct expression is impossible. When Elinor observes that John Dashwood and Fanny are "entirely generous" in their treatment of the family, the narrative context reveals that "generous" actually means parsimonious, illustrating a complete reversal of the word's literal definition [1.1.1, 1.3.4].

Comparative Pragmatic Assessment

While both novels use sarcasm to navigate social restrictions, they apply these linguistic strategies differently. In Pride and Prejudice, verbal irony is often used as an active intellectual tool, allowing the heroine to critique social absurdities with confidence [1.1.3]. Elizabeth Bennet uses sarcasm to challenge social hierarchies, relying on her wit to maintain her independence [1.1.3].

In Sense and Sensibility, polite discourse functions primarily as a defensive shield against economic vulnerability and social isolation. Sarcasm is used more cautiously, serving to process disappointment and protect a character's internal thoughts. The binary opposition between Elinor's restraint and Marianne's unmediated emotional expression highlights the social cost of ignoring conversational norms [1.1.1]. Elinor's reliance on polite decorum shows that while civility can restrict true feeling, it also provides a safe, predictable framework for handling social hostility and protecting one's personal life [1.2.2].

Conclusion

An analysis of female polite discourse in Jane Austen's Pride and Prejudice and Sense and Sensibility challenges the idea that Regency etiquette was merely a system of passive compliance [1.1.2]. Quantitative and qualitative evidence shows that superficial politeness often served as a sophisticated linguistic mask [1.1.1]. Within the conversational constraints of their society, female characters frequently used sarcasm, understatement, and overstatement to critique social hierarchies and maintain personal agency [1.1.1, 1.1.3].

By manipulating conventional politeness strategies, characters like Elizabeth Bennet and Elinor Dashwood managed face-threatening interactions without violating social expectations. Sarcasm allowed these women to navigate the challenges of their environment, transforming standard rules of civility into a versatile tool for social survival, personal expression, and critique [1.1.2, 1.1.3].

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