

Maxim of Approbation in Pride and Prejudice: A Pragmatic Study of Praise Strategies

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Article Info	Abstract
Article History Received: May 27, 2025 Revised: June 12, 2025 Published: June 15, 2025	<i>This study investigates the use of the Approbation Maxim in Jane Austen's Pride and Prejudice through a pragmatic lens, focusing on how compliments function within character interactions. Drawing on Leech's (1983) Politeness Principle, particularly the maxim of Approbation, the research explores praise as a linguistic strategy for managing face, expressing transformation, and navigating social hierarchies. Using a qualitative descriptive method and discourse analysis, 27 utterances were identified and categorized by topic—appearance, ability, and personality. The findings reveal that praise in the novel is shaped by gender roles, social class, and interpersonal motives, functioning not merely as politeness but also as a tool for emotional and relational negotiation. Characters such as Mr. Darcy and Elizabeth Bennet exhibit varying degrees of sincerity and strategic politeness, reflecting broader cultural values embedded in 19th-century English society. The study affirms the relevance of pragmatic theory in literary analysis and offers insights for further interdisciplinary exploration.</i>
Keywords Politeness; Approbation; Pragmatics; Jane Austen; Praise Strategies	

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INTRODUCTION

Politeness plays a vital role in maintaining social harmony and fostering strong interpersonal relationships among humans in various cultural contexts. Politeness has been analyzed in depth through various principles and maxims that govern language usage and demonstrate consideration for others. Geoffrey Leech's influential Politeness Principle, introduced in 1983, outlines several maxims, including the Approbation Maxim. This particular maxim emphasizes the need to maximize praise and minimize dispraise toward others in various communicative acts. It serves as a foundation for understanding how speakers use compliments to navigate social interactions with varying degrees of subtlety and intention.

Compliments are among the most direct forms of positive politeness strategies, manifesting overtly pleasant interactional dynamics in diverse settings. They often express admiration or solidarity and are shaped by cultural norms and interpersonal relationships. Although compliments have been widely studied in real-life contexts such as classroom discourse or casual conversation, far less attention has been paid to how compliments function within literary texts—particularly those set in historical periods where social norms diverged significantly from modern expectations. *Pride and Prejudice* by Jane Austen offers fertile ground for examining politeness strategies and the subtle nuances of social compliments. The novel's dialogue is rich with garrulous characters and deeply embedded in the structured social hierarchies and etiquette of early 19th-century England. Characters often reveal their intentions

and the intricacies of their relationships through exchanges filled with nuanced linguistic maneuvers and gestures. While the novel has been extensively analyzed from literary, feminist, and historical perspectives, it remains relatively unexplored from the viewpoint of literary pragmatics, especially concerning Leech's Approbation Maxim.

Studying *Pride and Prejudice* reveals the many ways in which characters' compliment strategies reflect or subvert the Approbation Maxim. Compliments in this novel serve not only as politeness strategies but also as tools for negotiating social position, manipulating others, or expressing resistance. Categorizing the types of compliments used and analyzing their pragmatic impact on character dynamics can uncover deeper layers of interpersonal power, gender expectations, and cultural norms embedded in Austen's prose.

This study contributes to the field of literary pragmatics by illustrating how canonical literature provides a rich resource for analyzing pragmatic phenomena. It highlights how fictional characters' linguistic strategies mirror or critique real-world politeness norms, offering valuable insights into both language and literary traditions. In addition, this study emphasizes the cultural specificity and social functionality of compliment strategies within the context of English aristocratic society. By focusing on the Approbation Maxim, it becomes possible to dissect how characters seek to maintain social harmony, gain approval, or assert superiority without direct confrontation. Complimenting, therefore, becomes a powerful pragmatic act—not merely a linguistic ornament. Moreover, understanding how compliments are constructed and function in *Pride and Prejudice* contributes to our comprehension of politeness as a dynamic and context-sensitive phenomenon. Compliments are not only acts of praise but also acts of positioning—establishing social hierarchies, signaling alliances, and at times masking hostility. Through an analysis of selected dialogues, this research investigates the complexity and sophistication with which Jane Austen weaves politeness strategies into her character development and narrative structure.

While prior research in pragmatics has often focused on contemporary spoken interaction, incorporating literary texts into pragmatic analysis offers unique advantages. Literary dialogues are often carefully crafted to reflect cultural and social undercurrents, making them ideal data for identifying patterns, deviations, and critiques of politeness conventions. By applying pragmatic theory to literature, especially to a text as socially rich as *Pride and Prejudice*, scholars can bridge linguistic and literary analysis in meaningful ways. This research is therefore significant in expanding the scope of pragmatic analysis and contributing to interdisciplinary scholarship between linguistics and literature. It opens space for future studies on other maxims in literary discourse and sets a precedent for deeper exploration of politeness in classic narratives. Ultimately, it seeks to show that behind every line of praise in Austen's work lies a world of implication, intent, and social negotiation.

RESEARCH METHOD

Language in literary discourse serves not only as a medium of expression but also as a tool of negotiation within social structures. Jane Austen's novels, particularly *Pride and Prejudice*, are celebrated for their intricate dialogues and subtle use of language that reflect societal expectations and interpersonal dynamics. Within the field of pragmatics, Geoffrey Leech's (1983) Politeness Principle offers a valuable framework for analyzing such dialogues, especially through the Maxim of Approbation, which encourages speakers to maximize praise and minimize dispraise of others.

This study employed a qualitative descriptive design to analyze the use of the Approbation Maxim in *Pride and Prejudice*. A qualitative approach was chosen as it allows for rich, in-depth exploration of language use within its natural context, particularly within the constructed dialogue of literary works. This design is especially suited to interpret and describe how politeness is manifested through compliments in literary fiction, where every utterance is

a product of stylistic and thematic intent. By focusing on meaning rather than measurement, this approach provides nuanced insights into the pragmatic strategies used by Austen's characters. The data source for this study was the full text of Jane Austen's *Pride and Prejudice*, originally published in 1813. The primary data consisted of utterances or sentences within the novel that reflected praise or positive evaluation, which were interpreted as compliments. A purposive sampling technique was applied to identify only those dialogues that clearly demonstrated acts of praising others. Close reading was conducted systematically, focusing on interactions that revealed subtle or overt compliment strategies. These instances were documented manually in a structured data sheet.

The instrument used for data collection was a researcher-developed data sheet that included categories such as speaker, recipient, context of conversation, form of compliment, and its pragmatic function. Compliments were further classified by type (explicit/implicit), topic (e.g., appearance, skill, character), and strategy using Holmes' (1988) compliment categorization. This classification enabled a deeper understanding of how the maxim was applied in different social contexts within the narrative.

To ensure validity and reliability, the researcher applied triangulation techniques, including peer debriefing, re-reading of texts, and theoretical triangulation by applying both Leech's politeness maxims and Holmes' compliment theory. Feedback was obtained from peers and an expert in linguistics to confirm that the categorization and interpretation of compliments aligned with established frameworks. Additionally, contextual verification was emphasized—each utterance was analyzed not only in isolation but also within its narrative and character development context, ensuring a more holistic interpretation.

The analysis procedure followed several systematic steps: (1) Identifying and selecting relevant dialogue, (2) classifying compliments based on type and topic, (3) analyzing their function according to the Approbation Maxim, and (4) interpreting the implications of each compliment in terms of politeness, power, gender, and social norms. This process allowed for uncovering the deeper pragmatic significance of compliment strategies within the social dynamics of the novel. No statistical tools were employed, as the study was inherently interpretive and textual. However, careful documentation and categorization supported the analytical rigor. The goal was not to quantify usage but to reveal how Austen's characters utilize politeness strategies to navigate relationships, challenge norms, or assert power subtly through compliments.

In summary, this methodology was designed to explore how linguistic politeness is embedded in literary form, particularly through praise acts governed by the Approbation Maxim. It enables a pragmatic-literary analysis that respects both the formal linguistic structure and the literary richness of the source text.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Research Findings

Through a close reading of *Pride and Prejudice*, 27 utterances were identified that explicitly or implicitly function as compliments. These compliments were categorized based on their topical focus and linguistic realization. The results are summarized as follows:

Table 1. Compliment Categories in *Pride and Prejudice*

No	Compliment Topic	Frequency	Percentage
1.	Appearance	12	44.4%

2.	Ability	7	25.9%
3.	Personality/Character	8	29.6%
Total		27	100%

Compliments on appearance were the most common, particularly directed at female characters such as Jane Bennet and Elizabeth Bennet. Compliments on ability typically referred to accomplishments like piano playing or conversational skill. Compliments on character often involved moral evaluations, such as integrity, humility, or kindness.

Examples of Compliment Strategies Found:

1. Explicit Compliment Example:

“You are too generous to trifle with me. If your feelings are still what they were last April, tell me so at once.”

Though not a direct compliment, this statement by Mr. Darcy reflects a high regard for Elizabeth’s integrity and emotional honesty, highlighting his respectful admiration.

2. Implicit Compliment Example:

“You are dancing with the only handsome girl in the room.”

This line from Mr. Darcy contains irony and praise simultaneously, indicating conflicted admiration. It aligns with the Approbation Maxim by avoiding criticism and indirectly expressing approval.

3. Indirect Compliment through Third Party:

Mr. Bingley speaking about Jane: “She is the most beautiful creature I ever beheld.”

This is a clear and direct compliment, praising Jane’s beauty and reinforcing her high status in the social context.

Discussion

The findings demonstrate that the characters in *Pride and Prejudice* often use compliments as a manifestation of positive politeness, closely aligned with Leech’s Approbation Maxim. The maxim “Minimize dispraise of others; maximize praise of others” is realized in Austen’s narrative primarily through interpersonal dialogues that occur in moments of courtship, familial interaction, or public decorum. Compliments are not randomly placed; they reflect intentionality and social purpose. Through these utterances, characters manage face, show admiration, or strategically navigate social tensions. The compliment becomes a powerful linguistic tool rather than a casual expression. As such, Austen’s novel provides a rich field for examining how politeness is constructed, challenged, and interpreted. The pragmatic analysis confirms the complex role praise plays in interpersonal communication and character dynamics.

Compliment strategies in the novel are deeply rooted in the characters’ social goals and personal transformations. Mr. Darcy, for instance, exemplifies a character whose politeness

strategy evolves significantly. Initially reserved and seemingly arrogant, his compliments are few and delivered with restraint. As the story progresses and his affection for Elizabeth grows, his speech becomes more emotionally transparent and his praise more sincere. This evolution reflects not only romantic development but also a deeper moral maturity. Darcy's compliments begin to align more with authentic admiration than with social obligation. Thus, his transformation highlights the interplay between linguistic behavior and internal character change.

In contrast, Mr. Collins serves as a caricature of politeness gone awry. His excessive and formulaic compliments, particularly toward Lady Catherine de Bourgh, are delivered with performative exaggeration. Rather than reflecting genuine respect, they function as tools for social advancement and approval-seeking. His speech lacks emotional authenticity and is steeped in hierarchical flattery. The exaggerated nature of his compliments reveals the superficiality of his character. Austen uses this portrayal to critique the misuse of politeness for self-serving motives. Mr. Collins' language exemplifies how excessive praise can undermine sincerity and create comedic absurdity.

Elizabeth Bennet, known for her wit and critical perspective, employs compliments in a more restrained and strategic manner. She rarely offers praise unless it aligns with her true feelings, making her compliments more impactful when they occur. This selective use of politeness reflects her authenticity and discerning nature. Her reluctance to engage in superficial flattery distinguishes her from more performative characters. Elizabeth's verbal style allows her to challenge social norms while maintaining conversational grace. Through her, Austen presents a model of principled politeness that values honesty over conformity. Her dialogue reveals the balance between sincerity and social expectation.

Furthermore, the data show a gendered dimension in the distribution and reception of compliments. Male characters are more frequently the initiators of praise, particularly concerning women's physical appearance. Meanwhile, female characters like Jane and Elizabeth are more often recipients of such compliments, reinforcing traditional gender roles. This asymmetry mirrors 19th-century societal norms, where women's value was often linked to beauty, virtue, and modesty. Austen subtly critiques these expectations through characters who defy or subvert them. The portrayal of praise dynamics thus reflects both societal constraints and individual agency. Compliments become a lens through which gender ideologies are performed and negotiated. From a pragmatic standpoint, compliments in Austen's narrative serve multiple communicative functions. They express affection or admiration, as seen in Darcy's statements to Elizabeth. They also help navigate social hierarchies, exemplified by Mr. Collins' praise of Lady Catherine. Some compliments carry moral judgment, such as Jane's praise of Elizabeth's kindness. Others resist social norms through irony or sarcasm, particularly in Elizabeth's witty remarks. These varied functions demonstrate the flexibility of praise as a politeness strategy. Each compliment carries social weight and narrative significance. Austen's use of this strategy reveals her keen awareness of language as a tool of interaction and subtle resistance.

The use of indirect compliments and irony also reflects Austen's narrative style, where much meaning is implied rather than directly stated. Irony becomes a vehicle for critique, allowing characters like Elizabeth to convey skepticism while maintaining politeness. For example, Darcy's early comment about Elizabeth being "tolerable" but not "handsome enough to tempt me" begins as an insult but evolves into sincere admiration. This shift underscores changes in both character perception and speech act intent. Austen's layered use of irony enriches the interpretive possibilities of dialogue. It also exemplifies how politeness can be manipulated to veil or reveal true feelings. This complexity enhances the reader's engagement with the text. Additionally, class and social rank influence how compliments are framed and understood. Characters of lower social status, such as Mrs. Bennet, receive fewer compliments

or those tinged with condescension. In contrast, upper-class characters often receive praise that reinforces their elevated position. This distinction highlights the role of language in maintaining or challenging social boundaries. Compliments serve to affirm or question one's place within a rigid hierarchy. Austen uses these interactions to expose the performative nature of civility in a class-conscious society. The interplay between praise and status reveals the subtle tensions within seemingly polite exchanges.

Moreover, the use of compliments in *Pride and Prejudice* reflects the broader moral and ideological landscape of the period. In Austen's social world, compliments were expected to be both sincere and socially appropriate. Characters who use praise recklessly, like Mr. Collins, are often ridiculed, while those who evolve toward genuine expression, like Darcy, are rewarded. This dichotomy emphasizes the ethical dimension of linguistic choices. Compliments become indicators of moral insight and emotional growth. Austen embeds these values in her dialogue, using language to reflect inner character. Thus, praise functions as a window into both societal expectations and individual integrity.

The deployment of compliments also challenges patriarchal structures embedded in Regency-era England. Praise directed at women often reinforces traditional ideals—beauty, submissiveness, and grace. However, Austen's heroines like Elizabeth and Jane respond to or reinterpret these compliments in ways that affirm their autonomy. By questioning or redirecting praise, they assert control over their identities. This resistance, though subtle, reveals the power of pragmatic strategies to negotiate social roles. Complimenting thus becomes a site of agency and self-definition. Austen's female characters redefine politeness to reflect both compliance and resistance. From a literary perspective, Austen's use of compliments in *Pride and Prejudice* can be compared with other works like *Emma* and *Sense and Sensibility*. In *Emma*, praise often intersects with class biases and personal misjudgments. Emma's compliments toward others are sometimes misdirected or insincere, reflecting her flawed perceptions. In *Sense and Sensibility*, contrasting characters like Elinor and Marianne use praise to express emotional restraint or openness. These examples demonstrate Austen's broader engagement with politeness and social dynamics across her novels. Compliments serve not only interpersonal purposes but also thematic development. They function as stylistic and structural elements within Austen's literary design.

Austen's mastery of pragmatic layering allows her to imbue each compliment with multiple functions. A single utterance may simultaneously convey affection, critique, irony, and social positioning. This complexity reflects the intricacies of human interaction and the richness of literary language. The subtle interplay between what is said and what is meant creates interpretive depth. Readers are invited to look beyond surface meanings and consider the cultural and relational implications of language. Through this, Austen demonstrates that politeness is not simply about manners, but about meaning. Compliments thus become a form of narrative power and character construction.

In sum, the findings suggest that the Approbation Maxim is not only realized through linguistic strategies but also embedded in the ethical and ideological fabric of the novel. Austen employs praise not merely to ornament dialogue, but to interrogate values such as sincerity, civility, and social legitimacy. Her manipulation of compliments illustrates how language can both reflect and challenge dominant norms. This reinforces the idea that politeness is a dynamic and context-sensitive practice. Through pragmatic analysis, the deeper purposes behind Austen's use of praise are revealed. Compliments, therefore, are shown to be integral to the novel's thematic and interpersonal architecture.

CONCLUSION

The findings of this study indicate that the Approbation Maxim is actively employed in *Pride and Prejudice* not only as a marker of politeness but also as a strategic tool for managing

social relationships, expressing personal transformation, and navigating hierarchical dynamics. Characters such as Mr. Darcy, Elizabeth Bennet, and Jane Bennet use praise to build or repair relationships, express sincerity, or fulfill social expectations. In contrast, characters like Mr. Collins and Lady Catherine illustrate the limitations or absence of sincere approbation, highlighting the importance of context and intent behind praise.

These findings demonstrate that Jane Austen skillfully integrates pragmatic politeness strategies into her narrative, using them not only to reflect character traits but also to shape the progression of interpersonal interactions. The Approbation Maxim becomes an essential part of the character development and thematic structure of the novel. Compliments are not random or ornamental but are deeply intertwined with issues of class, gender, power, and social performance. Their use helps to map out the characters' emotional evolution, conflicts, and reconciliations.

From a theoretical perspective, this study confirms that the principles of pragmatics—traditionally applied to spoken, real-world discourse—are highly applicable to literary texts. It supports the growing field of literary pragmatics by showing how fictional dialogue mirrors authentic language use, especially in its nuanced adherence to and deviation from politeness strategies. In particular, the Approbation Maxim is revealed to be a flexible and context-sensitive device that can carry multiple layers of meaning, depending on the speaker's intention, relationship dynamics, and cultural norms. Practically, this research also underscores the pedagogical value of literature in teaching linguistic and pragmatic concepts. Through analyzing character interactions, students and scholars alike can better understand how politeness strategies function across time, culture, and genre. It also opens the door for future research exploring other maxims in Leech's framework, or comparative studies with contemporary literature and media.

In sum, *Pride and Prejudice* serves as a rich site for examining the interplay between language, society, and individual agency. The use of the Approbation Maxim within the novel illustrates that politeness is not merely about civility, but a complex and dynamic tool for character expression, narrative progression, and cultural reflection.

RECOMMENDATION

Future research may expand the scope of this study by comparing the use of the Approbation Maxim across different literary works, authors, or historical periods to understand the evolution of politeness strategies in literature. Researchers may also explore how gender, class, and power influence compliment strategies in literary discourse using more comprehensive corpora or digital text analysis tools. These comparative studies could provide broader insights into how cultural expectations and linguistic norms surrounding praise vary across time and place.

In addition, future studies might investigate the intersection between politeness maxims and other pragmatic phenomena such as face-threatening acts, hedging, speech act theory, or irony in literature. By analyzing how different politeness strategies interact, scholars can gain a more holistic view of character behavior and narrative construction. Such an approach would be particularly useful when analyzing characters with conflicting motivations or those who operate across shifting social boundaries, as is often the case in classic and modern literary works. A promising direction for further Inquiry is the application of this analysis to digital or contemporary forms of narrative, such as social media storytelling, digital fan fiction, or adaptations of classic novels into web series and online platforms. These formats often reshape or reinterpret politeness strategies to align with modern sensibilities and changing social values. By studying how the Approbation Maxim operates in such contexts, researchers can investigate the continuity and change of pragmatic norms across media and cultural transitions.

Moreover, quantitative and mixed-method approaches could be employed to complement the qualitative analysis conducted in this study. For example, corpus-based studies of large datasets from 19th-century fiction or contemporary romance novels could be used to identify broader trends in the use of praise-related language. This would allow for greater generalizability and support data-driven insights into how politeness functions across literary genres. Another avenue worth exploring is the pedagogical application of pragmatic-literary studies in language and literature classrooms. The integration of pragmatic theory with literary analysis can help students develop critical reading skills, linguistic awareness, and cultural sensitivity. Teachers can use excerpts from novels such as *Pride and Prejudice* to discuss how characters use language strategically, encouraging students to reflect on the social meanings behind everyday expressions of praise, politeness, and interpersonal negotiation.

Finally, given the subjective nature of pragmatic interpretation in literary texts, future research would benefit from interdisciplinary collaboration between linguists, literary scholars, and sociologists. This collaboration could yield richer, more nuanced interpretations and foster a deeper understanding of how language operates as a social and artistic instrument in literature.

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