

A Socio-pragmatic Study of Gossip in Jane Austen's 'Lady Susan'

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Abstract

Gossip is a communicative phenomenon which involves sharing information about others' lives. The present study examines gossip in Jane Austen's epistolary novella 'Lady Susan' by tackling six letters to be analysed in light of socio-pragmatics due to its interest in human communication and the implications it has. Adopting Lakoff's (1973) theory of politeness (also known as Lakoff's pragmatic competence) and Foster's (2004) social functions of gossip while following qualitative method, the study determines that gossip is a double-edged sword that could be utilized in a positive and negative way either to create influence or to enhance communication. Consequently, it is a powerful social communicative tool for its effective functions which are information, influence and friendship. Moreover, while gossiping there is a flouting and violation of rules of conversation in which the speaker is not clear concerning the information he/she conveys or includes unrequired information. Besides that, rules of politeness have not been followed very much except rule (3) which is frequently employed to create a sense of camaraderie between the speaker and the addressee that has to enhance gossiping in the long term. Finally, it comes across that violating rules (1) and (3) of conversation in the context of Lady Susan saves rule (3) of politeness.

Keywords: socio-pragmatics, gossip, politeness, Lakoff, Jane Austen.

دراسة اجتماعية-تداولية للنميمة في رواية جين أوستن "الليدي سوزان"

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المستخلص

النميمة ظاهرة تواصلية تتضمن تبادل معلومات عن حيوات الآخرين. تستهدف الدراسة الحالية هذه الظاهرة في رواية جين أوستن الرسائلية "الليدي سوزان" عن طريق اختيار ستة رسائل ليتم تحليلها في ضوء الاجتماعية-التداولية لما لهذا العلم من اهتمام في التواصل البشري و ما يتضمنه من دلالة. طبقت الدراسة منهجية ثنائية في التحليل قوامها نموذج "ليكوف" في التأدب (1973) و نموذج "فoster" في الوظائف الاجتماعية للنميمة (2004) و بإتباع الأسلوب النوعي في إجراء التحليل. توصلت الدراسة الى أن النميمة سلاح ذو حدين بالإمكان استخدامه بطريقة إيجابية او سلبية لخلق تأثير معين او لتعزيز التواصل.

بناءً على ذلك، النميمة اداة إجتماعية تواصلية فعّالة نتيجة للوظائف المؤثرة التي تؤديها و منها: المعلوماتية، التأثير، و الصحبة. فضلاً عن ذلك، أوجدت الدراسة بأن هنالك خرق و مخالفة لقواعد المحادثة عند النميمة؛ بحيث يكون المتكلم غير واضح حول المعلومات التي يشاركها او ينقل معلومات غير مطلوبة. الى جانب ذلك، وُجد أن قواعد التأدب لم تُتبع الى حد ما عدا القاعدة الثالثة و التي كثيراً ما وُظفت لخلق جو من المودة بين المتحدث و المتلقي و لما لها من شأن في تعزيز النميمة على المدى البعيد.

خلصت الدراسة الى أن مخالفة القاعدة الأولى و الثالثة من قواعد المحادثة تحفظ القاعدة الثالثة من قواعد التأدب في سياق "الليدي سوزان".

الكلمات المفتاحية: الاجتماعية- التداولية، النميمة، التأدب، ليكوف، جين أوستن.

Introduction

Although gossip is one of the most common forms of communication it is one of the least studied. The present study tackles in analysis the phenomenon of gossip, as it is a malicious talk about other peoples' lives, in light of socio-pragmatics as it delves into the underlying principles of communication, social interactions and what embedded in the text, speech, and any piece that involves communication. So gossip would be a good topic to be studied and how it functions as a communicative tool in social interactions and the implications it has for characters' relationships and the broader societal context.

Gossip will be studied in an epistolary novella by Jane Austen which is 'Lady Susan', therefore six letters are going to be analysed based on Lakoff's theory of politeness (1973) (also known as Lakoff's pragmatic competence) besides adopting Foster's (2004) framework of social functions of gossip. The data are analysed by following qualitative method of research analysis.

In relation to what has been mentioned above, the study tries to answer the following questions:

- 1- In what ways is gossip utilized as a means of exerting influence and manipulating social situations within the context of 'Lady Susan'?
- 2- How does gossip function as a communicative tool for establishing and maintaining relationships among characters in 'Lady Susan'?
- 3- What rules of politeness do characters when engaging in gossip employ?

What is Gossip?

Gossip is definitely a skilful human activity that occurs across time and space (Feeley and Frost, 2014: 3) and most scholars attempt to define gossip as a form of talk that focuses upon the personal and often the private matters (*ibid.*,4). Foster states that gossip is known as communicating personal information about other people in an evaluative manner and he declares that the behaviour of gossip might involves "idle talk" or "chit chat" about daily life (Foster, 2004: 80, 88).

Deborah Tannen (1990: 97) also clarifies that gossip is a form of sharing details about others' lives, thus when someone tells his/her friends some details of his/her own life; these details become gossip, since this friend to whom he/she tells might repeats these details to someone else and here gossip emerges. Consequently, there are two types of gossip; positive gossip which is about socially accepted behaviour that grants public recognition (Levin *et al.*, 1988: 514). Here, according to Turner *et al.* (2003: 131) gossip is presented as a healthy social activity that serves to unite people. On the other hand there is a negative gossip which is about socially unaccepted behaviour which may become a basis for public condemnation (Levin *et al.*, 1988: 514). And here it is viewed

as a dangerous weapon that can ruin reputations and destroy relationships (Westen, 1996).

In a nutshell, gossip is talking about others either to compliment or to humiliate them.

Social functions of gossip

It is important to mention that the social functions of gossip vary from person to person and situation to situation, however there are four main social functions of gossip as put by Foster (2004):

a) Information

As a mechanism of communicating information, gossip is generally described as an efficient and special means of gathering or passing on information.

b) Entertainment

Holding the function of entertainment, gossip is inferred by noticing people passing the time gossiping, although the gossipee might be sensitive about the information being passed, this doesn't avert the fact that gossip can exist merely for the entertainment .

c) Friendship

It can be said that gossip brings people or groups together through the sharing of norms, accordingly constructing boundaries in order to recognize outsiders from insiders. What is considered as a trusted exchange in private becomes at the group level the knowledge trust boundaries of tribes, clans, and cultures. Thus, establishing friendship at the group level is closely related to the function of influence.

d) Influence

The function of gossip which is 'influence' significantly takes part to denigration. However, gossip can also hold communities together and refresh thorough isolation for some in faraway locations. Furthermore, it is worth mentioning that one of the conditions for gossip to be influential is that people must agree on the norms for behaviour and what constitutes acceptability.

Socio-pragmatics: General Introduction

Language is used as a way of communication about things, events, and states of affairs in the world. Socio-pragmatics was created after Leech (1983) and Thomas (1983) has divided pragmatics into two components: pragma-linguistics and socio-pragmatics. Pragma-linguistics points out to the resources for delivering communicative acts and interpersonal or relational meanings (Allan and Jaszczolt, 2012: 600). Basically, these resources involve pragmatic strategies such as directness and indirectness, routines, and an enormous diversity of linguistic forms which can intensify or soften communicative acts (*ibid.*). Socio-pragmatics, on the other hand, relates pragmatic meaning to an assessment of participants' social distance, the language they use, discourse practice, and accepted behaviours (Bublitz and Norrick, 2011: 77). Besides, Pragmatics handles a sociocultural perspective on language usage, that is, investigating the way that the principles of social behaviour is identified by the social distance between speakers (Cutting, 2002: 3)

The roots of pragmatics generally lie in the work of ordinary language philosophers (Austen, Grice, and Searle) and their attempts to theorize the abstract, context-general principles by which people use language to communicate and do things in the world. This places Socio-pragmatics at the intersection of linguistics and social concerns (Haugh *et al.*, 2021: 3). They add that socio-pragmatics focuses on the role of social conditions and variables in setting the use of language to mean and do things in the world (*ibid.*4).

Holmes, cited in (Haugh *et al.*, 2021: 3), regards socio-pragmatics as emerging from integration between classical pragmatics and classical socio-pragmatics. She describes pragmatics as involving the study of the use of language in context, specifically, "how individuals use linguistic resources to produce and interpret meaning in interaction and sometimes to change relationships". Therefore, Socio-pragmatics encompasses the study of language in society and this involves descriptions of variation in speech communities, and "systematic accounts of how social variables influence linguistic choices from among those resources". She further adds that socio-pragmatics involves "identifying and analysing evidence for societal norms and how they are subscribed to and contested" (*ibid.* 4)

An Overview of Politeness

Linguistic politeness has occupied a central place in the study of language; even it has been the subject of intensive debate in sociolinguistics and pragmatics.

In pragmatics, politeness refers to the linguistic expressions that people choose to use to give others space and show a friendly attitude towards them (Cutting and Fordyce, 2021: 37). Linguistic politeness is concerned with the way the language is used

to show sensitivity or tenderness towards addressees' feelings and desires, to establish and preserve interpersonal relationships, and to comply with the rules of accepted behaviour in a given culture (*ibid.*). Consequently, this is done through the use of polite language which is 'the language a person uses to avoid being too direct', 'language which displays respect towards others', or 'language which contains respectful forms of address like *sir* or *madam*', or 'language that displays certain polite formulaic utterances like *please*, *thank you*, or even 'elegantly expressed language' (Watts, 2003: 1).

In sociolinguistics and pragmatics, politeness phenomenon is a term that portrays linguistic features mediating norms of social behaviour in relation notions like courtesy, distance and those features that indicate the use of special discourse markers or appropriate tones of voice and acceptable forms of address (Crystal, 2008: 373). Thus, politeness is viewed as a form of strategic behaviour which the speaker engages in, evaluating the potential threat to the hearer, the degree of familiarity with the hearer, and modifying the utterance accordingly (Mills, 2003: 59).

Methodology

Methods of Research Analysis

To conduct this study, the researcher will follow the qualitative approach of data analysis which is concerned with phenomena relate to or involve quality or kind, consequently, qualitative approach is concerned with subjective assessment of attitudes, opinions and behaviours (Kothari, 2009: 5, 30).

The Data

Six letters are selected from Jane Austen's 'Lady Susan' which is an epistolary novella that told entirely in the form of letters. The letters are as follows:

- Letter 1 "Lady Susan to Mr Vernon"
- Letter 2 "Mrs Vernon to Lady De Courcy"
- Letter 3 "Mr De Courcy to Mrs Vernon"
- Letter 4 "Lady Susan to Mrs Johnson"
- Letter 5 "Mrs Vernon to Mr De Courcy"
- Letter 6 "Mrs Johnson to Lady Susan"

The Model

The adopted model for the present study will be that of Lakoff's theory of politeness (1973), also known as Lakoff's pragmatic competence and Foster's (2004)

social functions of gossip. The conceptual framework is presented by figure (1) and (2) and the theoretical framework follows it.

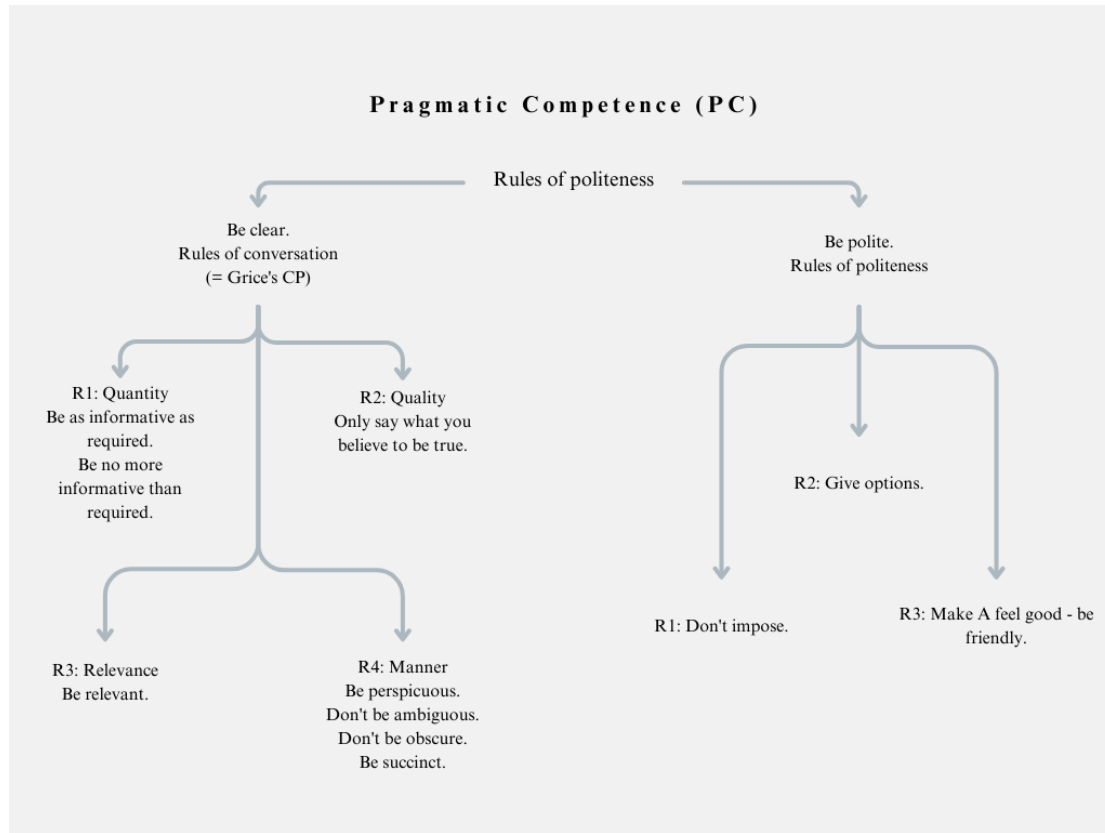


Figure (1) Lakoff's Theory of Politeness (Lakoff's Pragmatic Competence)

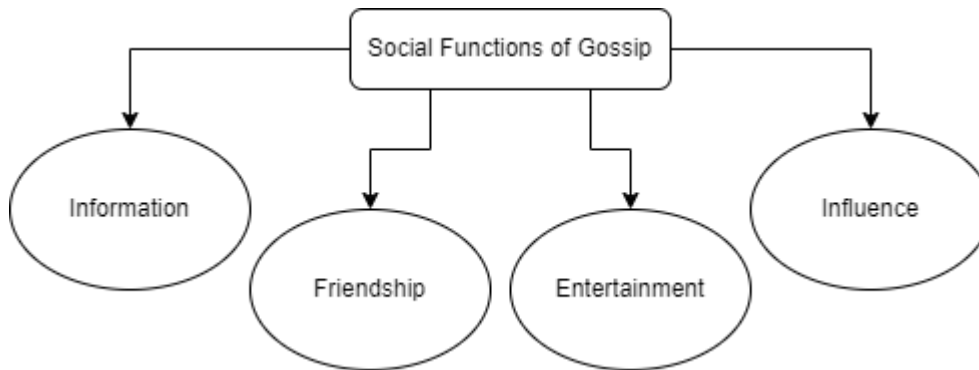


Figure (2) Foster's Social Functions of Gossip

Lakoff's Theory of Politeness

Some of the earliest contributions to the development of politeness theory come from Robin Lakoff who published two influential articles on the subject in 1970s. She was interested by Grice's theory of conversation, which he had just presented a few years earlier, in which he aimed to elucidate how words can convey more than what they mean, that is, more than their literal meaning. However, Lakoff suggested to discuss this

not only in terms of conveying information but of establishing and maintaining social relationships (Lakoff, 1972: 926).

Lakoff's argues that the formal rules of semantics and syntax of a language, though carefully explained, could never do the exact job of explaining the differences in acceptability and interpretation among different utterances. To do so, she states that it is crucial to take extra linguistic contextual factors into account, for instance, respecting status of speaker and addressee, the typical social situation in which they find themselves, the real-world knowledge or beliefs a speaker brings to a discourse, his lack of desire to commit himself to a position (*ibid.*).

She claims that if someone causes something to happen by linguistic means, he/she is using a linguistic device (1973: 293) and that the pragmatic content of a speech act should be considered in identifying its acceptability just as its syntactic and semantic material has been (*ibid.*, 293-4) . Nevertheless, Lakoff insists that the search for pragmatic "rules" would have to be grounded in a notion of 'pragmatic competence' which is similar to Chomsky's notion of grammatical competence. She further suggests that there are two basic rules of pragmatic competence and both composed of sub rules, namely rule (1) 'be clear', which is really the Gricean cooperative principle, which she renames as 'rules of conversation'. Rule (2) 'be polite', consists of a subset of three rules; rule (1) 'don't impose'; rule (2) 'give options'; and rule (3) 'make A (addressee) feel good (be friendly)' (*ibid.*).

Lakoff states that rule (1) 'don't impose' specifically means don't intrude into 'other people's business' and if someone wants to ask someone else a personal question, he/she should ask for permission in the first place (Lakoff, 1973: 298). According to her, there are also certain linguistic devices that if they are found in the sentence then the sentence considered to be polite, such devices are passive and impersonal expressions that tend to create a distance between the speaker and the addressee (*ibid.*, 299).

Concerning rule (2) 'Give options' she says 'let A make his own decisions- leave options open for him' and here hedges could be used in which it gives the addressee an option about how to react (*ibid.*, 300). Regarding rule (3) 'make A feel good' she puts that the ultimate effect of this rule is to make the addressee feel good, that is, producing a sense of camaraderie between the speaker and the addressee (*ibid.*, 301).

Chapman (2022: 133-135) further explains that 'don't impose' involves 'putting the onus on speakers not to make demands on hearers'. As for 'give options' she suggests that it requires the speaker to give the hearer at least apparent options to interpret an utterance or to avoid an interpretation that might be in some way unpleasant. Referring to 'make A feel good' Chapman denotes to produce a sense solidarity, camaraderie or friendship between speaker and hearer. She further states that this rule indicates why people often seem to use more words than are strictly necessary to get

their message across; such extra words include using the hearer's first name or alternatively a marker of camaraderie such as 'mate', 'love'. They also include expressions such as 'like', 'you know', and 'I mean', whose function is not informative but rather to involve the hearer in what is being said and that he/ she is valued (*ibid.*).

Data analysis

Analysis of letter 1 “Lady Susan to Mr Vernon”

Rules of conversation

Be clear

1) Quantity

The letter provides sufficient information for Mr Vernon to understand Lady Susan's plans and reasons for visiting or accepting his invitation. So, the level of details seems appropriate for the purpose of the letter which goes around two things; her hope to meet Mr Vernon and Mrs Vernon and their children as well as her hope to be admitted into Mr Vernon's retirement.

2) Quality

Lady Susan's letter appears to convey truthful information about her intentions to visit Churchill and her eagerness to meet her sister-in-law and her nieces/ nephews “*I shall hope within a few days to be introduced to a sister whom I have so long desired to be acquainted with, I long to be made known to your dear little children...*”. In addition to that, her hope to be admitted into Mr Vernon's retirement, thus, “*I impatiently look forward to the hour when I shall be admitted into your delightful retirement*”. There are no apparent indications of deception or falsehoods in her letter.

3) Relation

The content of the letter is relevant to the on-going familial relationship between Lady Susan and Mr Vernon. She acknowledges their familial connection and expresses her gratitude for Mr Vernon's invitation “*I can no longer refuse of profiting by your kind invitation*”, indicating a desire to maintain and strengthen their relationship throughout her visit.

4) Manner

Lady Susan's language is clear and straightforward throughout the letter. She expresses her hope that her visit is convenient for Mr Vernon and Mrs Vernon “*I shall hope within a few days to be introduced to a sister whom I have so long desired to be acquainted with*”. And her wish to be known to their children “*I long to be made known to your dear little children...*”

Rules of politeness

Be polite

a) Don't impose

"If quite convenient to you and Mrs. Vernon to receive me at present, I shall hope within a few days to be introduced to a sister whom I have so long desired to be acquainted with."

The above excerpt shows that Lady Susan chooses her words politely and expresses her hope in an elegant way- especially when she introduces her saying with the conditional 'if'(which at certain points like a polite request)- to visit Mr and Mrs Vernon and stay in their house.

b) Give options

There is nothing in this letter that needs option to be made about.

c) Make A feel good/ be friendly

- Lady Susan begins the letter with an endearing salutation "*my dear brother*", which conveys warmth and respect, making Mr Vernon feel valuable and appreciated as a family member.
- Lady Susan mentions her eagerness to meet Mr Vernon's children "*I long to be made known to your dear little children...*" emphasising her desire to establish a strong bond with them and this not only makes Mr Vernon feel good about Lady Susan's interest in his family but also reassures him of her positive intentions during her visit.
- Despite her own personal challenges, such as the separation from her daughter, Lady Susan maintains a positive and optimistic tone throughout the letter which indicates how much Mr Vernon is a valuable person for her and she does not want to affect him badly.

Analysis of letter 2 "Mrs Vernon to Lady De Courcy"

Rules of conversation

Be clear

1) Quantity

The letter provides abundant information for Lady De Courcy to understand the situation regarding Lady Susan's visit and Mrs Vernon's concern about her behaviour and the unnecessary visit. "*you may guess, my dear madam, with what feelings I look forward to her arrival*", "*I cannot help thinking his {Mr Vernon} pressing invitation to her to visit us*". Accordingly, there is a flouting in some points as in this excerpt: "*She expresses a most eager desire of being acquainted with me, and makes very gracious mention of my children but I am not quite weak enough to suppose a woman who has*

behaved with inattention, if not with unkindness, to her own child, should be attached to any of mine”. What Mrs Vernon here wants to convey? What is the relationship between leaving her {Lady Susan} daughter and trying to be closer to Mrs Vernon’s children?

2) Quality

Mrs Vernon’s letter appears to convey truthful information about Lady Susan’s coming and her concern about it. She expresses genuine regret over the circumstances preventing her to visit her mother on Christmas “*I am very sorry to tell you that it will not be in our power to keep our promise of spending our Christmas with you*” and candidly she discusses her doubts and suspicious regarding Lady Susan’s visit and behaviour “*I cannot make up my mind till I better understand her real meaning in coming to us*”. Though the last line can be said to be a flouting of the rule of quality in which Mrs Vernon is not sure what a woman Lady Susan would be.

3) Relation

The content of the letter is relevant to the relationship between Mrs Vernon and Lady De Courcy (mother-daughter relationship). Mrs Vernon shares personal concerns and family news, maintaining a connection with Lady De Courcy and engaging her in family’s affairs.

4) Manner

Mrs Vernon’s language is clear and ordered throughout the letter, despite the point when she mentions Lady Susan’s daughter, there is a flouting and violation in this part as the excerpt shows “*Miss Vernon is to be placed at a school in London before her mother comes to us which I am glad of, for her sake and my own. It must be to her advantage to be separated from her mother, and a girl of sixteen who has received so wretched an education, could not be a very desirable companion here.*” Mrs Vernon’s words are being ambiguous; they do not convey full meaning.

Rules of politeness

Be polite

a) Don’t impose

“I am very sorry to tell you that it will not be in our power to keep our promise of spending our Christmas with you”

The above excerpt states that Mrs Vernon starts her letter with an apology to her mother for not coming to spend the Christmas with her, so instead of saying “*I cannot spend Christmas with you*” she presents her apology first by saying “*I am sorry*” then she continues to clarify the reason behind her rejection of coming. This is a polite way that shows her respect, love and sorry for her mother.

The second excerpt -“*You may guess, therefore, my dear madam, with what feelings I look forward to her arrival.*”- shows that Mrs Vernon has an insistent desire to keep staying at her home and do not leave it for spending Christmas with her mother just because she is curious to see and meet Lady Susan, to figure out what a woman might she be. In her letter, Mrs Vernon presents sufficient information for not leaving the house and at the end of this series of information she tells her mother “*you may guess*” which is also a polite way to express anxious feeling besides persuading the addressee of her point without saying directly “*I look forward to her arrival*” which would be impolite and gives the impression of not liking to go out for Christmas.

b) Give options

There is nothing in this letter that needs option to be made about.

c) Make A feel good/ be friendly

- Despite discussing potentially sensitive topics, such as her doubts about Lady Susan’s intentions, Mrs Vernon maintains a polite and considerate tone throughout the letter. She addresses Lady De Courcy affectionately as “*my dear mother*” and “*my dear madam*”, which conveys warmth and respect, making Lady De Courcy feel valuable and appreciated.
- By confiding in Lady De Courcy and seeking her advice or validation, Mrs Vernon indirectly acknowledges Lady De Courcy’s wisdom and judgment, making her feel trusted and respected.
- Mrs Vernon ends the letter by mentioning her father, she expresses her gratitude for his well- being besides she sends her best love “*I am glad to hear that my father continues so well; and am, with best love*” which foster the family relationship and make them feel good.

Analysis of letter 3 “Mr De Courcy to Mrs Vernon”

Rules of conversation

Be clear

1) Quantity

The letter includes general and sensitive information for Mrs Vernon to understand Mr De Courcy’s perspective on Lady Susan’s character and behaviour. He provides specific examples of Lady Susan’s actions at Langford, “*As a very distinguished flirt I have always been taught to consider her, but it has lately fallen in my way to hear some particulars of her conduct at Langford... By her behaviour to Mr. Mainwaring she gave jealousy and wretchedness to his wife, and by her attentions to a young man previously attached to Mr. Mainwaring’s sister deprived an amiable girl of her lover.*”

2) Quality

Mr De Courcy's letter provides information about Lady Susan's behaviour and its perceived impact on others. While he presents his opinion strongly, some of the information he provides are inaccurate, not aligning with the rule of quality which indicates a violation for this rule as the excerpt shows "*but it has lately fallen in my way to hear some particulars of her conduct at Langford: which prove that she does not confine herself to that sort of honest flirtation which satisfies most people, but aspires to the more delicious gratification of making a whole family miserable..*" in the first line, what Mr De Courcy means by 'it has lately fallen' his words lack an adequate evidence.

3) Relation

The subject of Lady Susan's behaviour and its consequences is relevant to Mrs Vernon, as it directly concerns her family and household. Mr De Courcy's discussion of Lady Susan's conduct at Langford and its potential implications for the upcoming visit to Mrs Vernon's home establishes a connection between the presented information and Mrs Vernon's immediate concerns.

4) Manner

Mr De Courcy is clear and straightforward in what he writes in his letter, though in the first part he is not quite clear concerning the information he provides about Lady Susan as he does not mention the source of his information firstly; rather he just says "*it has lately fallen in my way to hear some particulars of her conduct at Langford*" which violates this rule.

Rules of politeness

Be polite

a) Don't impose

When Mr De Courcy talks about what he had heard about Lady Susan concerning her love relationships as the following excerpt states "*it has lately fallen in my way to hear some particulars of her conduct at Langford: which prove that she does not confine herself to that sort of honest flirtation which satisfies most people, but aspires to the more delicious gratification of making a whole family miserable.*" he uses hedges (that sort of) as a way of avoiding imposing and not to be direct about the information he provides.

b) Give options

Mr De Courcy is very clear concerning the information he conveys to his sister there is no way to give her the choice concerning what he has mentioned as his language is straightforward and he is certain of his sayings.

b) Make A feel good/be friendly

- Mr De Courcy begins the letter with a warm salutation, addressing Mrs Vernon as “*my dear sister,*” which establishes an affectionate tone, making Mrs Vernon feel valued and respected.
- Despite his criticisms of Lady Susan, Mr De Courcy expresses eagerness to visit Mrs Vernon, indicating a desire to maintain a positive relationship with his sister.

Analysis of letter 4 “Lady Susan to Mrs Johnson”

Rules of conversation

Be clear

1) Quantity

The letter contains sufficient information for Mrs Johnson to understand Lady Susan’s thoughts and feelings regarding her interactions with Mrs Vernon. Lady Susan says: “*I wanted her to be delight at seeing me. I was as amiable as possible on the occasion, but all in vein. She does not like me*” then she shifts on to talk about her refusal (Lady Susan) of Mr Vernon’s marriage to Mrs Vernon, and her observations of the household and indeed how Charles {Mr Vernon} is a rich man. mentioning such information can be considered to be a violation of this rule as she provides unnecessary information as the excerpts indicate “*I did take some pains to prevent my brother in law’s marrying her*”, “*the house is a good one, the furniture fashionable, and everything announces plenty and elegance. Charles is very rich*”.

2) Quality

Lady Susan provides information about her arrival at Churchill and her observations of Mrs Vernon’s behaviour “*I confess myself not equally satisfied with the behaviour of has {Mr Vernon} lady...her manners are not such as can persuade me of her being prepossessed in my favour*”, while her perspective may be subjective, she presents her observations honestly, adhering to the rule of quality in communication except that how did she know that Mrs Vernon is not interested in her and how she reaches that she does not like her and here emerges a violation of this rule.

3) Relation

The content of the letter is relevant to most topics that Lady Susan talks about with her friend Mrs Johnson. But, by confiding in Mrs Johnson and sharing her

concerns, Lady Susan being too cooperative which implies a violation of the rule of relation by talking about (to be called) ‘side matters’ like her remorse of not letting her husband to buy Mr Vernon castle and then she presents a brief description of the house. As the excerpt refers to “*I am sometimes disposed to repent that I did not let Charles buy Vernon Castle, The house is a good one, the furniture fashionable, and everything announces plenty and elegance*”

4) Manner

There are some aspects of the letter unclear; hence, how Lady Susan reaches the conclusion that Mrs Vernon does not like her “*she does not like me*”. Besides, how she states that Mr and Mrs Vernon don’t know what to do with money “*when a man has once got his name in a banking-house he rolls in money; but they do not know what to do with it, keep very little company and never go to London but on business*”

In addition to that, Lady Susan is not orderly in her letter, since she mentions Mrs Vernon’s children and her relationship with her young boy ‘Fredric’ almost at the end of the letter and it was better to mention them in the first part when she talks about Mrs Vernon dissatisfaction to her. All the mentioned points suggest a violation of this rule.

Rules of politeness

Be polite

a) Don’t impose

It can be said that the letter consists of imposing concerning the information Lady Susan conveys to Mrs Johnson.

b) Give options

Lady Susan is very clear and direct in what she mentions concerning Mrs Vernon, her family situation, their house and on the top of that is her behaviour when she meets her, thereby, no options to be raised.

c) Make A feel good/be friendly

- Despite discussing sensitive topics, such as her dissatisfaction with Mrs Vernon’s behaviour, Lady Susan addresses Mrs Johnson affectionately as “*my dear Alicia*” by mentioning her first name, which establishes a warm and good friendship.
- In her letter, Lady Susan mentions that she has received a letter from Mainwaring as his wife is the sender and she replies to him under cover to Mrs Johnson which might give the feeling that Mrs Johnson is trusted. “*I passed off the letter as his wife’s, to the Vernons, and when I write to him it must be under cover to you*”

Analysis of letter 5 “Mrs Vernon to Mr De Courcy”

Rules of conversation

Be clear

1) Quantity

It can be said that this letter contains more than it is required of information. That is to say, Mrs Vernon provides Mr De Courcy with detailed information and offers him specific examples and explanation to support her opinions. She talks about the relationship between Lady Susan and her daughter “*She has already almost persuaded me of her being warmly attached to her daughter, though I have been so long convinced to the contrary. She speaks of her with so much tenderness*” and then she talks about the expected effect of losing Charles (Lady Susan’s husband) on Lady Susan “*I might have believed that concern for the loss of such a husband as Mr. Vernon, to whom her own behaviour was far from unexceptionable, might for a time make her wish for retirement*”

Being too cooperative in this letter, Mrs Vernon violates the rule of quantity.

2) Quality

Mrs Vernon provides detailed descriptions of Lady Susan’s appearance, behaviour, and interactions, offering Mr De Courcy an honest and accurate portrayal of her as a person, allowing Mr De Courcy to form his own judgment based on the information she has provided. “*I have seen this dangerous creature, and must give you some description of her, though I hope you will soon be able to form your own judgment she is really excessively pretty; however you may choose to question the allurements of a lady no longer young, I must, for my own part, declare that I have seldom seen so lovely a woman as Lady Susan. She is delicately fair, with fine grey eyes and dark eyelashes; and from her appearance one would not suppose her more than five and twenty...*” in addition to that, Mrs Vernon does not clarify from where or who tells her that Lady Susan does not like her to be Mr Vernon’s wife which presents a violation of this rule “*if I had not known how much she has always disliked me for marrying Mr. Vernon, and that we had never met before, I should have imagined her an attached friend*”

3) Relation

The content of the letter is relevant to Mrs Vernon’s relationship with Mr De Courcy (sibling relationship) and her observations of Lady Susan besides her concerns about the influence Lady Susan might play on the family.

4) Manner

In the first line of the letter, Mrs Vernon mentions Lady Susan as a ‘creature’ and this denotes different meanings one might interpret whether this word stands for a good

or a bad thing? “Well, my dear Reginald, I have seen this dangerous creature” yet she further describes Lady Susan in a good way “She is delicately fair, with fine grey eyes and dark eyelashes”; one can interpret that the word ‘creature’ stands for a good thing. She chooses this word because she is amazed with Lady Susan’s beauty. As well as, Mrs Vernon does not clarify from where or who tells her that Lady Susan does not like her to be Mr Vernon’s wife “if I had not known how much she has always disliked me for marrying Mr. Vernon, and that we had never met before, I should have imagined her an attached friend”. Talking of such things can get to a violation of this rule.

Rules of politeness

Be polite

a) Don’t impose

“but her countenance is absolutely sweet, and her voice and manner winningly mild. I am sorry it is so, for what is this but deceit? Unfortunately, one knows her too well.”

As it is clear from the excerpt above, Mrs Vernon states that Lady Susan’s behaviour and appearance are deceiving and she is sorry for saying so as she knows her well, Lady Susan is not that woman who is happy in meeting a woman whom she refused to be a wife for her brother-in-law, therefore, all what she does or appears to be is misleading.

b) Give options

“Your friend Mr. Smith’s story, however, cannot be quite correct, as she corresponds regularly with Mrs. Mainwaring. At any rate it must be exaggerated. It is scarcely possible that two men should be so grossly deceived by her at once. I hope you will soon be able to form your own judgment she is really excessively pretty; however you may choose to question the allurements of a lady no longer young”

Though it is not a direct option but it could be when Mrs Vernon replies in her letter to the proposition that Mr De Courcy has posited in his letter when he had learnt about Lady Susan from Mr Smith and how a manipulative woman she is! In this excerpt she provides an option to Mr De Courcy to change his mind concerning Lady Susan.

c) Make A feel good/be friendly

- Mrs Vernon begins the letter with a warm and affectionate salutation, addressing Mr De Courcy as “my dear Reginald”, which establishes a strong familial relationship.
- Mrs Vernon seeks validation for her opinions and observations about Lady Susan from Mr De Courcy, implying trust in his judgment and expertise and this fosters their relationship.

Analysis of letter 6 “Mrs Johnson to Lady Susan”

Rules of conversation

Be clear

1) Quantity

The letter contains sufficient information for Lady Susan to understand Mrs Johnson’s perspective and recommendations regarding her romantic prospects. Mrs Johnson offers specific examples and explanations to support her opinions, as the excerpt demonstrates “*Sir Reginald is very infirm, and not likely to stand in your way long. I hear the young man well spoken of; and though no one can really deserve you, my dearest Susan, Mr. De Courcy may be worth having. Mainwaring will storm of course, but you easily pacify him. I have seen Sir James; he came to town for a few days last week, and called several times in Edward Street. I talked to him about you and your daughter, and he is so far from having forgotten you*”.

2) Quality

Mrs Johnson provides information about Mr De Courcy’s suitability as a husband “*I advise you by all means to marry him; his father’s estate is, we know, considerable, and I believe certainly entailed. Sir Reginald is very infirm, and not likely to stand in your way long.*” As well as she mentions sir James’s continued interest in Lady Susan and her daughter “*I have seen Sir James; he came to town for a few days last week. I talked to him about you and your daughter, and he is so far from having forgotten you, that I am sure he would marry either of you with pleasure.*” While her perspective may be subjective, she presents her observation, honesty, allowing Lady Susan to consider her advice and make informed decisions.

3) Relation

The content of the letter is relevant to Mrs Johnson’s relationship with Lady Susan and her concerns about Lady Susan marital aspects. By offering certain pieces of advice and support, Mrs Johnson seeks to strengthen their friendship and assist Lady Susan in navigating her romantic relationships.

4) Manner

In her letter, Mrs Johnson is so clear concerning the points she has raised. She offers clear suggestions and recommendations, allowing Lady Susan to understand her perspectives and consider her options.

Rules of politeness

Be polite

a) Don't impose

Again, this letter consists of imposing concerning the information Mrs Johnson conveys to Lady Susan and the way she persuades her in what she says.

b) Give options

There is nothing in this letter that needs option to be made about.

c) Make A feel good/ be friendly

Mrs Johnson addresses Lady Susan affectionately as “*my dearest friend*” and “*my dearest Susan*”. These expressions show her strong relationship with Lady Susan and how she wants her good things to happen -as the excerpt shows- “*though no one can really deserve you, my dearest Susan, Mr. De Courcy may be worth having*” and this establishes a warm and supportive tone from the outset.

The Social Functions of Gossip in ‘Lady Susan’

The function of gossip in the first letter is ‘information’. Gossip in this letter occurs in a way that shows its informative function due to the information Lady Susan has passed concerning herself and her daughter; and communicating such information is fostering the relationship between Mr Vernon and Lady Susan. Here gossip is positive.

Regarding the second letter, the function of gossip is also ‘information’. Hence, Mrs Vernon communicates information concerning the reason that prevents her from spending the Christmas with her mother which is the visit of Lady Susan to their house {Mr and Mrs Vernon’s house}. Then her talk goes on to explain her concerns from Lady Susan; what kind of woman is she and what things she might hide. Here gossip is negative.

In the third letter there are two functions which are ‘influence’ and ‘information’. As for influence, Mr De Courcy tries to convey or to create a picture of Lady Susan to his sister (as she hasn’t met her during the time of this letter). He passes the information he has heard to his sister concerning Lady Susan and what a woman is she. In addition to that, it could be noticed, that through the notes he hears and passes about Lady Susan, that the type of gossip is negative.

Concerning the fourth letter there are also two functions of gossip which are ‘information’ and ‘friendship’ and they can be interpreted through the content of the letter, thus Lady Susan passes information to her friend Mrs Johnson {Alicia} about her arrival to Mr Vernon house and her meeting with his wife and her notes and observation about Mrs Vernon and her house. Communicating such information holds within them

the relationship between Lady Susan and Mrs Johnson which is a friendship relationship. Here positive and negative gossip can be noticed.

As for the fifth letter the functions of 'Information' and 'influence' play a significant part, thus Mrs Vernon conveys important information about Lady Susan to her brother Mr De Courcy such information involve describing the appearance of Lady Susan, what she looks like, how she appears, her way of talking, her way in holding conversations. By conveying such information the function of influence emerge as Mrs Vernon tries to change Mr De Courcy's ideas about Lady Susan as it clearly appears in her words "*your friend Mr Smith's story ,however, cannot be quite correct as she corresponds regularly with Mrs Mainwaring*" here gossip could be positive once and negative once again.

Lastly, the sixth letter holds quite three functions of gossip namely; 'friendship', 'information', and 'entertainment'. Here Mrs Johnson conveys information to Lady Susan about what kind of men Mr De Courcy is and informs her to marry him and here the influence function can be obvious by influencing Lady Susan's view of Mr De Courcy. Besides that, she tells her about Mainwaring and how he is going to be if she marries Mr De Courcy and Sir James whom she also has a romantic affair to; by passing such information the function of entertainment can be noticed as talking about love affairs among friends could be a way of entertainment. Here gossip is also positive in one way and negative in another.

Results

The current paper is concerned with a socio-pragmatic study of gossip in Jane Austen's 'Lady Susan'. It has found that gossip is a powerful social communicative tool for passing information, creating influence, and manipulating social situations through the rules of conversation and the rules of politeness that the characters employ while gossiping and through the functions gossip plays within the letters. Thus, it has identified that the characters violate, flout, and save the rules of conversation (quantity, quality, relation, and manner) in some parts of most letters in which the characters are being too cooperative in the information they present; expecting the reader to understand what they mean or they are not sure from their information or the source of the information he/ she gets or feels.

Concerning the rules of conversation and with reference to letter (1), the characters have saved all the rules. Regarding letter (2), there is a flouting of the rules of quantity, quality, and manner which is also violated in this rule. On the other hand, they have saved the rule of relation. In relation to letter (3), there is a violation of the rules of

quality and manner while the rules of quantity and relation are saved. As for letter (4), all the rules are violated. In view of letter (5), also all the rules are violated except the rule of relation. In respect to letter (6), all the rules are saved.

Concerning the rules of politeness, the study has found that the characters follow the third rule 'make A feel good/ be friendly' in all the letters for its important impact in bringing about comfort among characters and create a strong social bond among them along with making the conversation or the communication goes easily and this is apparent through salutation, mentioning the personal name and ending the letter with warm and kind expressions. Rule (1) 'don't impose' has been followed to some extent. Characters impose in their letters and what is found concerning this rule is only one example in some parts of these letters (1, 2, 3, and 5). As for Letters (4) and (6) are full of imposing and this might be taken as an indication to the strong relationship between characters and how they want to be direct in what they say. Rule (2) 'give options' has not followed in most letters except in letter (5) which suggest that the speaker again wants to be direct and straightforward about what she is talking about.

Generally, it has found that the rules of conversation conflict with the rules of politeness within the context of 'Lady Susan', thus, violating the rules of quantity and relation in letter (4) and (5) save rule (3) 'make A feel good' of politeness. This violation results by providing more details and unrequired and irrelevant information just for ease of communication and to enhance the relationship among characters.

Furthermore, it has appeared that gossip has certain functions throughout the analysis of the letters in which it has the function of 'information' almost in all the letters, hence, characters share information about every aspect of their and others' life. There is also the function of 'friendship' as the letters between Lady Susan and Mrs Johnson clarify (gossip makes them more close and foster their friendship). Gossip has the function of 'influence' as well in which the character try to influence the other character in what they say as it is clear in the letters between Mr De Courcy and Mrs Vernon and also the letter between Mrs Johnson and Lady Susan. The function of entertainment has found only in the last letter which is the one between Mrs Johnson and Lady Susan as it is obvious that Mrs Johnson is entertaining concerning gossiping about others with Lady Susan.

It is important to mention that throughout the analysis of the letters gossip tends to be in the first place negative as it involves creating wrong or misleading ideas and pictures about the characters and their personal life and in the second place it is positive which is rare in the letters.

Conclusion

The study has concluded that:

- 1- Gossip is utilized as a powerful communicative social tool both in positive and negative way which would bring about change concerning the characters and their lives either in a good or bad way by sharing information and providing details of certain events and including extra topics that in some letters has no relation to the raised topic but only to enhance and foster the communication.
- 2- Rules of conversation that is to say, the rules of quantity, quality, relation, and manner are flouted and violated in some letters and saved some other letters, hence, characters often present detailed or ambiguous information and tell things that they are not sure of, besides including extra information that do not relate to the central topic of the letter just to enhance communication and build cohesion.
- 3- Concerning rules of politeness, rule (1) 'don't impose' has been followed to some extent in specific parts in some letters (1, 2, 3, and 5) and this might be taken as an indication to the strong relationship between characters and they want to be direct in what they say. Rule (2) 'give options' has not been followed in most letters except in letter (5) which suggests that the speaker again wants to be direct and straightforward about what she is talking about without overwhelming the addressee with given options. The use of rule (3) 'make A feel good' is prevalent in all letters as it is a sign of fostering relationships and creating a sense of camaraderie between the speaker and the addressee along with communication. Besides that, introducing or ending the letters with warm expressions make the letters influential and inform the addressee that he/she is a valuable person to be gossiped with.
- 4- While gossiping, in the context of 'Lady Susan', if someone violates the rules of conversation then he/she will save the rules of politeness. Thus violating rules (1) and (3) of conversation in letter (4) saves rule (3) of politeness.
- 5- Within the context of 'Lady Susan' gossip brings characters together due to the functions it performs in the letters. Accordingly it has the function of information in all letters and the function of influence in letters (3) and (5) and the function of friendship in letters (4) and (6).

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