



ISSN: 2957-3874 (Print)

Journal of Al-Farabi for Humanity Sciences (JFHS)

<https://iasj.rdd.edu.iq/journals/journal/view/95>

مجلة الفارابي للعلوم الإنسانية تصدرها جامعة الفارابي



A Pragmatic Study of Authority and Power in House of the Dragon

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دراسة تداولية للسلطة والقوة في مسلسل "بيت التنين"

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Abstract

The present study examines how authority and power are pragmatically constructed and communicated in the television series House of the Dragon. Austin's Theory of Speech Acts (1962) and Brown & Levinson's Politeness Theory (1987) are combined as a tool for analysis, since the essence of expressions like these usually conveys more than their literal meaning. Three audio-visual speeches from the series were chosen for analysis on the locutionary, illocutionary, and perlocutionary levels, focusing on felicity conditions, face-threatening acts, and politeness strategies. The findings suggest that the speaker's power and authority are mediated through the speaker's social position, the hearer's response, and the general communicative context. Generally, speakers use bald-on-record strategies to exercise direct power, whereas they use off-the-record strategies to imply authority indirectly. The strategy is chosen depending on the character's personality and the communicative intention, for example, domination, persuasion, or manipulation. Keywords: pragmatics, speech act theory, politeness theory, face-threatening acts, authority, power, House of the Dragon

الاستخلص

تتناول هذه الدراسة كيفية بناء السلطة والقوة والتعبير عنهما تداولياً في المسلسل التلفزيوني "بيت التنين" وقد جرى توظيف نظرية أفعال الكلام لجين اوستن ١٩٦٢ ونظرية التأدب لبروان وليفنسون ١٩٨٧ كأداتين للتحليل، وذلك لأن جوهر مثل هذه التعبيرات غالباً ما يتجاوز معناها الحرفي. وتم اختيار ثلاث خطابات سمعية - بصرية من المسلسل للتحليل على المستويات القولية والانجازية والتأثيرية مع التركيز على شروط الملائمة والافعال المهددة وجهاً لوجه واستراتيجيات التأدب. تشير النتائج الى أن قوة المتكلم وسلطته تتوسطهما مكانته الاجتماعية واستجابة المخاطب والسياق التواصل العام لممارسة السلطة بصورة مباشرة في التواصل المباشر الصريح دون المحاولة الى تخفيف وقع الكلام. كما يلجأ المتكلمون الى استراتيجيات التصريح المباشر دون موارد او الإيحاء بالسلطة بطريقة ضمنية. ويتعمد اختيار الاستراتيجية المعروفة (خارج السجل الرسمي) حين يستخدمون استراتيجيات اللميح غير المباشر على شخصية المتحدث والغاية التواصلية المنشودة مثل الهيمنة والاقناع والتلاعب. الكلمات المفتاحية: التداولية، نظرية أفعال الكلام، نظرية التأدب، الأفعال المهددة وجهاً لوجه، السلطة، القوة، بيت التنين

1. Introduction

Communication is not all about the dictionary meaning of words. Speech depends on context, intention, and interpretation. Most significantly, it is in the discourse that enacts power and authority that complexity is evident. There is often a large discrepancy between what is said and what is meant. There is a need for tools that can understand meanings that are embedded deeper than their literal meaning. Although some research engages in discussion of media, research that uses both Speech Act Theory and Politeness Theory simultaneously in fantasy, with succession, loyal subjects, and betrayal is rare. The gap in these assumptions is significant, because fictive contexts involving royal power often provide rich, bounded examples of power ascription, claims, challenges, and manipulations. This study analyzes speeches from the fantasy drama House of the Dragon which covers hierarchical struggle, conflict on succession, and political maneuvering pragmatically to answer the above

question. The complex power dynamics among the episodes provide a particularly fruitful site for exploring the language of social control.

2. Theoretical Framework

2.1 Pragmatics

Pragmatics focuses on the meaning of the concrete social context rather than the structural context. According to Levinson, "The study of language use" (1983, p. 5), it is not the abstract design, but the utterance in the actual situation that counts. The aforementioned orientation serves to distinguish pragmatics from syntax and semantics, although the three are mutually informing (Levinson 1983; Leech 1980). Pragmatics refers to the study of meaning in context; the study of invisible meaning; and the study of relative distance. According to Yule (2010), the matter under discussion has been raised before and one common feature among them is that communication relies on unspoken, shared assumptions and background knowledge. According to Huang (2014), "the systematic study of meaning by virtue of, or dependent on, the use of language" (p. 2) encompasses that branch of linguistics that we call pragmatics. He mentions domains such as implicature, presupposition, speech acts, deixis, and reference.

2.2 Speech Act Theory

Speech Act Theory originates with Austin (1962), who argued that producing an utterance is not merely a matter of saying words but of performing an action. This insight gave rise to the distinction between the locutionary act (the utterance itself and its literal meaning), the illocutionary act (the communicative intention behind the utterance, such as warning, promising, or commanding), and the perlocutionary act (the effect the utterance produces in the hearer). Austin (1975) classified illocutionary acts into five types: verdictives (assessments and judgments), exercitives (acts of authority such as ordering and appointing), commissives (commitments to future action, including promises and threats), behabitives (expressions of social attitude, such as apologising or congratulating), and expositives (acts of explanation or clarification). For a speech act to be successful, Austin (1962) argues that certain felicity conditions must be satisfied. These include a propositional content condition (the utterance must accurately describe or commit to an appropriate state of affairs), a preparatory condition (the speaker must have the relevant authority, ability, or basis), a sincerity condition (the speaker must genuinely intend the act), and an essential condition (both parties must recognise the act as the type of act it purports to be). Failure to meet any of these conditions may render the speech act infelicitous or ineffective. Another division relevant to power discourse is between direct and indirect speech acts. Direct speech acts are those that exhibit a one-to-one relation between the form of the utterance and what the speaker intends to do with the utterance. The same goes for imperative forms: the speaker is intent on giving an order. Indirect speech acts refer to a type of speech act where one form is utilized to execute another function. For example, a declarative or interrogative form may be used to convey a request or a warning (Yule, 2010). Considering contextual cues, indirect acts may often be more polite. But maybe just as forceful or more forceful.

2.3 Politeness Theory and Face

Brown and Levinson (1987) developed Politeness Theory around the concept of face, understood as the public self-image that speakers claim and that interlocutors are expected to maintain. Face comprises two dimensions: positive face, the desire to be approved of and accepted, and negative face, the desire for autonomy and freedom from imposition. Speech acts that threaten either dimension are termed face-threatening acts (FTAs). Commands and orders, for example, intrude on the hearer's negative face; criticism and accusation threaten positive face. Because expressions of authority and power routinely involve such impositions, FTA analysis is particularly pertinent to the present study. Brown and Levinson (1987) identify several strategies for managing FTAs. A bald-on-record strategy delivers the act directly and without mitigation, maximising efficiency and clarity but intensifying face threat. Positive politeness strategies reduce threat by emphasising solidarity and shared identity. Negative politeness strategies soften imposition through deference, hedging, or indirectness. Finally, off-the-record strategies imply the intended meaning without stating it explicitly, allowing the speaker to maintain deniability while still communicating the act.

2.4 Context

Context is necessary for utterances. Yule (2010) makes a distinction between the linguistic context, the surrounding discourse that makes the meaning clear, and the physical context, which is the context of the situation. Physical context refers to time, place, and people, among other things. Audiovisual discourse is given an additional contextual layer by tone, gesture, and facial expression. The manner in which a warning, threat, or reassurance is understood (rather than intended) and the way this manipulation is carried out vary across contexts.

The context affects whether the utterance is interpreted as a reassurance, a warning, or a threat in the analysis of authority and power, and whether its illocutionary force can be successfully realized.

2.5 Authority and Power in Pragmatics

In pragmatics, authority refers to an institutionally or socially sanctioned right of making decisions and giving orders; power is the capacity of affecting the behaviour or attitude of others, whether this capacity is institutionally sanctioned or not. Power and authority are closely related terms. Authority is often associated with power, but it may also be enacted through discourse, even when no formal authority is present (Van Dijk, 1977). To achieve authority, speakers may employ commands, requests, and assertions, which can include indirect implicature. However, the effectiveness of a particular strategy relies on the hearer's acceptance of the speaker's authority.

3. Data and Methodology

3.1 Research Design

The design of the study is qualitative and utilizes pragmatic discourse analysis. Qualitative methods would be appropriate here, as the aim is not interpretation frequency but rather interpretive depth, which means the goal is to understand how meaning is negotiated in communicative events as opposed to quantifying linguistic features in the corpus.

3.2 Data Collection

The audio-visual information is sourced from Seasons 1 and 2 of House of the Dragon (HBO, 2022). The show is set roughly 200 years before the events of Game of Thrones, and is a prequel to that show. The Targaryen civil war will take the central stage of the show 'House of the Dragon'. The core conflict of Game of Thrones is the competing claims to the Iron Throne, which makes it a rich site for investigating how speech brings authority into being. The scenes were intentionally chosen based on two criteria: (a) clear relevance of events to authority and power, and (b) sufficient contextual embeddedness to allow for analysis of different levels. Each selected clip was shown three to four times with subtitles to capture their linguistic, paralinguistic and contextual information.

3.3 Analytical Model

The study draws from an eclectic framework of Austin's Speech Act Theory (1962) and Brown & Levinson's Theory of Politeness (1987). The examination of speeches is divided into three stages in which the first stage deals with the categorization of locutionary, illocutionary and perlocutionary acts; the second stage is to analyse the felicity conditions to find out whether the act has been taken successfully or not; and the last stage is to analyse the face implications and politeness strategies to show the social management of power.

4. Analysis

4.1 Speech 1: "I am your King, your laws, and your shield" — King Viserys I (Season 1, Episode 1)

4.1.1 Context

Following the death of King Jaehaerys Targaryen, Viserys I assumes the throne of the Seven Kingdoms. Despite relative political stability, the Small Council is riven by personal ambition and concern over succession. When council members begin to question the king's governance indirectly, Viserys intervenes to reassert his dominance: Viserys: "The realm has known peace under my rule. I will not have it undone by whispers and ambition." Otto: "Your Grace, the council only seeks what is best for the Crown." Daemon: "The Crown is weak when men forget who wears it." Viserys: "I wear it. I am your King." Otto: "The laws of the realm must be upheld." Viserys: "I am your King, your laws, and your shield." [The council falls silent]

4.1.2 Speech Act Analysis

The locutionary act is the uttering of the words "I am your King, your laws and your shield." At the illocutionary level, the act is an assertion of final authority. Viserys' claim to the title King suggests that he is the source of law and protection who allows the people to form such institutions in the first place. Through the repeated associations "King, laws, shield", B is suggested as an agent of activity which makes a broadening of scope. The metaphor of the shield is particularly significant. It evokes protection without invoking violence directly, yet its implicit corollary is clear: those who withdraw loyalty lose the shield. The utterance thus functions simultaneously as a reassurance and as a covert warning. The perlocutionary effect, the council's silence, indicates that both dimensions of the act have been successfully received.

4.1.3 Felicity Conditions

The condition for propositional content is satisfied. The utterance makes a claim about something: the fact that Viserys is the source of law and protection. His formal position as king satisfies the preparatory condition by

bestowing on him the legal and social right to enforce law and protection. The speech has the sincerity condition since it clearly aims to create obedience and silence. To conclude, the most essential condition is met, the council acknowledges his authority and responds. Thus, that assertion is correct.

4.1.4 Politeness and Face

The utterance negatively affects the council members' face because it reminds them that their safety and status depend on their loyalty to the Crown. The strategy used is mainly bald-on-record: there is no hedging, no deference and no softening of the claim. Through the one qualification that exists – the use of “your” (your laws, your shield) – kingship is portrayed as working for the council's own good. This is perhaps a fleeting instance of positive politeness. Nonetheless, the prevalent pattern is straightforward exercise of authority.

4.2 Speech 2: "You will have a dragon one day" — Queen Alicent (Season 1, Episode 6)

4.2.1 Context

Young Prince Aemond has been humiliated when other children present him with a pig dressed as a dragon. Queen Alicent seeks to reassure him, and Princess Helaena adds a humorous comment: Aemond: "They said they found a dragon for me." Servant: "But it was just a pig." Aemond: "They made wings and even a tail for it." Other Child: "He shouldn't have been so credulous." Queen Alicent: "You will have a dragon one day... even if it costs you an eye." Princess Helaena: "He'll have to close an eye." Queen Alicent: "I know it." [They all laugh softly]

4.2.2 Speech Act Analysis

The locutionary act is 'You will have a dragon one day... even if it costs you an eye'. At the level of surface illocutionary force the utterance is a representative act: a sincere assertion of a future state of affairs. But the embedded clause “even if it costs you an eye” has a different meaning. The statement is a commission and direction. It commissions Aemond to behave (to wait, to bear, to pay a price). While warning him that the road to power will not be without peril or cost. Here the dragon represents power and royal privilege, and offers a subtle lesson in the responsibilities that go with it. It gives voice to a kind of lesson. The perlocutionary effect is left incomplete. Aemond and Helaena laugh, and one thinks that the reassurance has taken, but the weight of the warning is surely lost on the child still. It is noteworthy that the phrase “even if it costs you an eye” is proleptic; within the plot of the series, Aemond does lose an eye, such foreshadowing making this remark retrospectively weighted well beyond the immediate context.

4.2.3 Felicity Conditions

The statement has propositional content, that is, the utterance describes a future event (possessing a dragon) and is in principle possible (the family has a history of dragon riding). Alicent's appeal to her authority and her position as queen and mother satisfies the preparatory condition for the promise to be made. If she really wants to calm Aemond's mind and prepare him to wield power, the condition of sincerity is fulfilled. The key condition is met, since Aemond interprets her words as something. The speech act is felicitous and successful.

4.2.4 Politeness and Face

The statement slightly threatens Aemond's negative-face as it implies that power comes at a cost. The off-the-record dominant strategy combines the warning about costs with reassurance, but softens the message by framing eventual success positively. This ambiguity allows Alicent to tell her to do so, and to warn her along the way, without directly telling her to do so. This light exchange, with laughter, defuses any potential threat to face from the outset.

4.3 Speech 3: "You created me, Daemon. Yet you are now set on destroying me" — Rhaenyra Targaryen (Season 2, Episode 4)

4.3.1 Context

In a vision-like confrontation, Rhaenyra accuses Daemon of a sustained pattern of exploitation and betrayal that began in her youth and now threatens to culminate in her destruction: Rhaenyra: "It's been said that Targaryens are closer to gods than to men... In my eyes, you were a god. Daemon Targaryen. The Prince of the City. The Lord of Flea Bottom. I was an innocent. You exploited me and abandoned me. You sullied my name at court. You empowered my rivals. You tried to make my ruin. You put me on that throne. And you love me and you hate me for it. You created me, Daemon. Yet you are now set on destroying me. All because your brother loved me more than he did you. This is what you always wanted, is it not?" [She glares at him, voice trembling with anger]

4.3.2 Speech Act Analysis

The key statement in the present utterance “You created me, Daemon. Yet you are now set on destroying me” is the culmination of a speech that accumulates accusation at a variety of illocutionary levels. The opening list of the speech (“You exploited me... You sullied my name... You empowered my rivals”) consists of a long series of verdictive and behabitive acts which pass retrospective judgment on Daemon’s behaviour. The last sentence serves to warn and charge alike. It highlights the contradiction at the core of their bond (of killing and creating). Further, it shows a threat to get back at the killing process. Rhaenyra’s utterance also has a commissive dimension: Rhaenyra is committing to respond should Daemon persist. The closing rhetorical question of the speech: “This is what you always wanted, is it not?” shifts the perlocutionary weight to Daemon to recognize and take into account his own reasons. The demonstration of the perlocutionary effect is significant in this scene, as Daemon is visibly affected and does not respond.

4.3.3 Felicity Conditions

The condition of propositional content is fulfilled because the threat refers to future retaliatory behaviour that will not happen if Daemon stops doing it. Rhaenyra, as a princess and claimant to the throne, satisfies the preparatory condition by enabling her to act, with authority and means, on her implicit threat. The anger and trembling voice of the speech signal that the speaker is not faking his intent. Essential condition is satisfied because Daemon understands the weight of the speech and displays discomfort. The threat is beneficial. The threat is felicitous.

4.3.4 Politeness and Face

The speech attacks Daemon’s positive face in a systematic way. It suggests Daemon does not possess agency. Rather, he is a man whose actions are motivated by jealousy and resentment of his brother. At the same time, the implied threat of retaliation also threatens his negative face because it limits his future actions. The primary strategy is off the record: the warning is never presented as an order or a threat, but is somehow implied and laden with emotion. The reference to the speaker’s creation of the addressee employs a positive politeness strategy. This “you created me” reference as we see, subtly enhances their intimate, friend, shared history connection.

5. Discussion

There are several common findings across the three analyses. First, the illocutionary efficacy of the speaker does not exist automatically but exists dependent on the hearer’s recognition and acceptance of the speaker’s position conveyed via the utterance. The legitimacy of Viserys’s claim works because the council already accepts his kingship. The threat of Rhaenyra works because Daemon knows she has both the power and inclination to act. In both instances, the preparatory and essential conditions of the felicity conditions are important to accomplish the illocutionary act. Second, context imparts meaning on several levels. Interpretation relies on the physical context of the council chamber, the vision-like essence of the confrontation, and the social level (rank and relational history), and the narrative level (events preceding and following the utterance). The narrative arc of the show that first-time viewers do not have access to, but is necessary for a complete reading, is where the proleptic weight of Alicent’s utterance originates. Third, the choice of politeness strategy is connected systematically with speaker personality and communicative intention. Viserys is a character who doesn’t play when he demands immediate submission. He employs a bald-on-record strategy. Alicent employs an off-the-record strategy. She employs an off-the-record strategy that cushions instruction within reassurance. Rhaenyra must face Daemon but it requires not giving him any emotional ground. She combines the off-the-record warning with some traces of positive politeness, playing on shared history to give her accusation greater moral weight. The findings indicate that the pragmatics of power in fictional discourse is not just a reflection of social class but also a negotiation of social class.

6. Conclusion

This research investigated the pragmatic construction and interpretation of authority and power through an eclectic analytical model, examining three speeches from House of the Dragon. The eclectic analytical model is a combination of Austin’s (Speech Act Theory) and Brown and Levinson’s Politeness Theory. The examination shows that authority and power are not only declared, but also constructed on a variety of pragmatic levels, including illocutionary intent, perlocutionary effect, felicity conditions, and face effects.

Meaning is constructed through contextual factors such as linguistic, physical, social and narrative construction, and is not simply supplementary. A speech act related to power is successful depending on the social position of the speaker, the listener’s recognition of that position, and the wider communicative and narrative situation. The

speaker with the stronger claim to authority is more likely to use a more direct strategy. In contested situations where the speaker has to negotiate or assert authority there will be a tendency toward more indirectness and implication.

The framework creates opportunities for future research on other media discourses, cross-cultural comparisons of the expression of power and the role of non-verbal cues in reinforcing or contradicting spoken authority.

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