

PRAGMATIC MARKERS OF CONFLICT AND HARMONY IN DRAMATIC DISCOURSE

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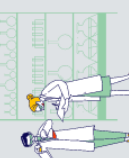
Abstract

Dramatic discourse is a stylised form of communication in which conflict and harmony are central engines of plot development and characterisation. Because plays are built almost entirely out of talk, pragmatic markers—such as address terms, discourse markers, interjections, vocatives, repetitions, and formulaic expressions—become key resources for signalling tension, solidarity, aggression or reconciliation on stage. Unlike narrative prose, where description mediates interaction, dramatic dialogue foregrounds the immediacy of speech as social action. Every utterance performs relational work. In this sense, drama represents what Goffman (1967) conceptualised as “interaction ritual,” where face is continuously negotiated through verbal exchange. Recent work on dramatic pragmatics stresses that the language of plays, while scripted, is designed to imitate interactional reality and to exploit pragmatic mechanisms like speech acts, implicature and deixis in order to shape audience interpretation (Khursanov, 2025; Rasulova, 2024). The scripted nature of drama does not diminish its pragmatic authenticity; rather, it intensifies and stylises naturally occurring communicative processes to make relational dynamics theatrically visible.

Introduction

From a pragmatic perspective, conflict in drama can be understood as a sequence of face-threatening acts (FTAs), while harmony is typically constructed through face-enhancing or face-saving moves. Brown and Levinson’s (1987) politeness theory provides a foundational framework here, distinguishing between positive face (the desire to be approved of) and negative face (the desire for freedom of action). Conflictive dramatic exchanges frequently attack one or both dimensions. Culpeper’s theory of impoliteness catalogues conventionalised impoliteness formulae—insults, threats, dismissals, sarcastic questions—that directly attack the interlocutor’s positive or negative face (Culpeper, 2011). In dramatic dialogue, such formulae are not accidental but carefully placed to externalise antagonism, highlight character traits, and push the narrative toward crisis. Conflictive turns often cluster sequentially, creating escalating interactional trajectories that mirror what Tannen (1998) describes as agonistic discourse, where opposition itself becomes a communicative norm.

Conversely, pragmatic markers of harmony, such as terms of endearment, mitigating adverbs, gratitude expressions, inclusive pronouns, and honorific forms, are used to display alignment, restore rapport, or symbolically repair damaged relationships. These markers correspond to Leech’s (2014) politeness principles, particularly the tact and approbation maxims, which

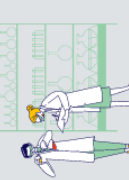


regulate the mitigation of cost and the enhancement of approval in interaction. In drama, such face-saving strategies frequently follow episodes of verbal aggression, thereby structuring oscillation between disruption and restoration. This dynamic interplay creates emotional rhythm and sustains audience engagement.

Recent analyses of dramatic discourse confirm that conflict is often staged through patterned clusters of impoliteness strategies. Khursanov's (2025) review of pragmatic features in dramatic discourse shows how playwrights orchestrate sequences of direct disagreement, personal attacks and ironic evaluations to create escalating verbal confrontations which both entertain and reveal power asymmetries between characters. Similarly, Rasulova (2024) argues that dramatic language systematically intensifies everyday conflict talk through exaggerated vocatives, interruptions and overlapped turns, making conflict legible to the audience even when the propositional content is ostensibly polite. These findings align with broader impoliteness research demonstrating that conflictive talk is marked not only by what is said, but also by how it is packaged through discourse markers ("look", "listen"), imperative forms, prosodic cues, and strategic silences (Parvaresh, 2018).

Conversation-analytic perspectives further illuminate how turn-taking organisation contributes to dramatic tension. Interruptions, delayed responses, repair sequences, and dispreferred second pair parts signal relational strain. Although scripted, these interactional patterns simulate the contingencies of real conversation. Grice's (1975) Cooperative Principle is frequently manipulated in drama: characters deliberately flout maxims of quantity, quality, relation, or manner to generate implicatures that intensify suspicion, irony, or hostility. Thus, conflict is often encoded inferentially rather than explicitly.

A key set of pragmatic markers of conflict in dramatic dialogue includes negative vocatives ("you fool"), personalised negative assertions ("you are useless"), bald-on-record directives ("shut up"), and challenging questions that presuppose blame or incompetence (Culpeper, 2011). Afzaal, Khan and Qureshi (2020) show that such impoliteness strategies, when used in public argumentative contexts, also function as "rapport-challenge" moves: they attack face but simultaneously claim the right to speak strongly, contest authority, or expose wrongdoing. When these moves are transferred to dramatic discourse, they become powerful devices for constructing antagonists, staging ideological clashes, or foregrounding social hierarchies. Spencer-Oatey's (2008) rapport management framework further clarifies how these exchanges involve negotiation not only of face but also of sociality rights and interactional goals. In Shakespearean drama, Macías-Borrego's (2025) pragmatic analysis of *Richard III* illustrates how the protagonist's manipulative use of power-laden questions, flouted Gricean maxims and veiled threats allows him to dominate conversations and control others' perceptions, with conflict encoded at the level of subtle pragmatic cues rather than explicit insults alone. Here, dominance operates inferentially; conversational control becomes a tool of political strategy. However, impoliteness and conflict markers cannot be analysed in isolation from markers of harmony and rapport. Dramatic discourse frequently juxtaposes aggressive turns with moves that seek to maintain or restore social bonds. Positive politeness strategies—such as using nicknames, inclusive "we", compliments, or affiliative back-channeling—create temporary



islands of harmony, even in otherwise antagonistic relationships. In some cases, the same linguistic forms can function as both conflictive and harmonious markers depending on context. Research on mock impoliteness and banter shows that apparently rude expressions may actually signal intimacy and in-group solidarity when participants share expectations about playfulness and non-seriousness (Parvaresh, 2018). In drama, such banter allows playwrights to show close relationships, especially between friends or family members, by scripting playful insults that mark familiarity rather than genuine hostility.

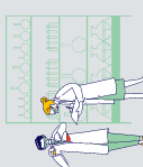
The patterns described above indicate that pragmatic markers of conflict and harmony are not merely stylistic embellishments in dramatic dialogue but fundamental communicative mechanisms through which playwrights construct social dynamics and guide audience perception. Conflictive markers such as insults, directives, and blame-presupposing questions foreground antagonism, expose ideological divisions, and propel narrative tension, while affiliative markers such as honorifics, inclusive pronouns, and formulaic expressions of respect serve to preserve relational order and stage reconciliation. Importantly, these two clusters are not mutually exclusive; rather, they often operate sequentially within the same interaction, with moments of verbal aggression followed by mitigation, apology, or alignment. This interactional oscillation reinforces the dramatic effect by highlighting the fragility of social relationships and the emotional volatility of characters.

Cross-cultural patterns further demonstrate that the distribution and intensity of these pragmatic resources reflect culturally specific communicative norms. Xushmamatova's (2025) study of English and Uzbek dramatic discourse demonstrates that in English plays, conflict is often enacted through direct confrontation, verbal dueling and explicit refusals, whereas Uzbek plays tend to rely more on indirect criticism, mitigated disagreement and morally framed narratives. Such differences resonate with broader cross-cultural pragmatic research on indirectness and collectivist communicative styles. In Uzbek dramatic discourse, extended greetings, honorific address forms and formulaic blessings function as pragmatic buffers that foreground harmony and social cohesion even amid disagreement. Thus, markers of harmony—such as honorifics, kinship-based address terms and ritualised thanks—actively construct social roles and expectations, softening or reframing conflictive content.

Ultimately, dramatic discourse functions as a microcosm of social interaction in which pragmatic choices become dramaturgical tools. Through patterned sequences of face-threat and face-repair, playwrights transform everyday communicative practices into aesthetic structures that organise characterisation, ideology, and audience engagement. Conflict and harmony are not opposites but interdependent forces negotiated moment by moment through language.

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