International Journal of Education and Humanities
ISSN: 2770-6702 | Vol. 21, No. 3, 2025

Politeness Principle and Power Dynamics: A Pragmatic Study of Euphemisms in *Downton Abbey*

Jiayuan Zhang

Guangdong University of Science and Technology, Dongguan, China

Abstract: This paper conducts a pragmatic analysis of euphemistic expressions in the television series *Downton Abbey* through the theoretical lens of Geoffrey Leech's Politeness Principle (PP) and its associated maxims. Set against the backdrop of early 20th-century British aristocracy, the series presents a rich tapestry of social interactions governed by stringent, yet often unspoken, codes of conduct. Euphemisms, as strategic linguistic tools, are ubiquitously employed by characters to navigate the complex web of power relations, social hierarchy, and emotional restraint inherent to their world. Moving beyond a simple descriptive account, this study argues that euphemisms in *Downton Abbey* function as primary instruments for adhering to the Politeness Principle, particularly the Tact Maxim and Approbation Maxim, while simultaneously revealing and reinforcing underlying power asymmetries. The analysis demonstrates that the choice and function of a euphemism are intrinsically linked to the speaker's and hearer's social positions (upward, downward, or lateral discourse) and the specific contextual face-threat. This research concludes that euphemisms are not merely decorative or evasive language but are central to the performative maintenance of social order, character relationships, and the dramatic tension of the series. It contributes to the field of media pragmatics by providing a systematic, principle-driven analysis of politeness strategies in a period drama.

Keywords: Politeness Principle, Euphemisms, *Downton Abbey*, Pragmatics, Power Dynamics, Face-threat, Sociolinguistics.

1. Introduction

The meticulous portrayal of social nuance in Julian Fellowes' *Downton Abbey* extends beyond its visual grandeur into the very fabric of its dialogue. In the cloistered, hierarchical world of the Crawley household and its attendant servants, directness is often a liability, and implication becomes the currency of conversation. Euphemisms-those "sweet-speaking" linguistic substitutions-proliferate, serving as essential buffers against social friction and explicit breaches of decorum.[1] While euphemisms have been widely studied from sociolinguistic and discursive perspectives, their operation within the specific, rule-bound universe of period drama merits closer pragmatic examination. This paper posits that Geoffrey Leech's Politeness Principle (1983) provides a powerful and nuanced framework for deciphering the strategic use of euphemisms in *Downton Abbey*. Leech's model, with its focus on maximizing polite behavior through specific conversational maxims (Tact, Generosity, Approbation, Modesty, Agreement, Sympathy), offers a granular toolset for analyzing how characters negotiate their utterances to minimize cost or maximize benefit to others, a constant imperative in their society. This study will interrogate how euphemisms function as the practical application of these maxims, particularly in managing the face-threatening acts (FTAs) that are endemic to interactions across and within the strict class divide. The central argument is that euphemistic language in the series is a direct manifestation of the Politeness Principle at work, and its analysis reveals the intricate mechanics of power, vulnerability, and social survival in Edwardian England as dramatized in *Downton Abbey*.[2]

2. Theoretical Framework: Leech's Politeness Principle

Leech's Politeness Principle (PP) was formulated as a complement to Grice's Cooperative Principle. While Grice explained how conversation works logically, Leech sought to explain why it often works indirectly and politely. The PP is broadly stated: "Minimize (other things being equal) the expression of impolite beliefs" and "Maximize (other things being equal) the expression of polite beliefs" (Leech, 1983, p. 81). This is operationalized through a series of maxims, the most relevant for this analysis being.

In the context of *Downton Abbey*, social survival hinges on the meticulous observance of these maxims, especially by those lower in the hierarchy. Euphemisms become the key linguistic mechanism for their enactment.[3] For example, a blunt criticism (violating the Approbation Maxim) is euphemized into a concerned suggestion. A direct order from an aristocrat to a servant (a high-cost FTA to the servant's negative face) is often softened via euphemistic phrasing to pay lip service to the Tact Maxim, even as the power to command remains absolute. Thus, analyzing euphemisms through this framework allows us to see politeness not merely as courtesy, but as a socially mandated system of verbal conduct that maintains the status quo.

2.1. Methodology and Data Selection

This study employs a qualitative discourse analysis methodology. The primary data consists of dialogue transcripts from key episodes across all six seasons of *Downton Abbey*. Scenes were selected based on their relevance to core, face-threatening thematic domains where euphemisms are predictably dense.[4] In Downward Discourse (Aristocracy to Servants): When the family gives orders, they frequently use euphemistic structures that grammatically mitigate the cost. Instead of a direct imperative, Lady Grantham might say, "I wonder if you might see to the flowers in the drawing room, Anna." The phrase "I wonder if you might" transforms a command into a hypothetical inquiry, superficially adhering to the Tact Maxim by acknowledging the servant's autonomy (negative face), even though the

expectation of compliance is absolute. This polite veneer maintains the fiction of a benevolent hierarchy. In Upward Discourse (Servants to Aristocracy): Servants' adherence to the Tact Maxim is a matter of professional necessity. A request or necessary correction is heavily embedded. The butler, Mr. Carson, informing Lord Grantham of an issue, would never say, "You're wrong." Instead, he opts for, "If I may, my lord, might I suggest there is another perspective on the matter?" This euphemistic formulation minimizes the colossal cost of contradicting the patriarch, encoding deference and subordination into the syntax itself.[5] Discussing Moral Failings: A character who has had an affair is rarely labeled as such. They are said to have "behaved unwisely," "been indiscreet," or "fallen from grace." These Approbation Maxim-driven euphemisms shift the focus from a moral absolute to a lapse in judgment, allowing the family to discuss the scandal while minimally dispraising one of their own, thus preserving collective face. In Season 1, the crisis surrounding Lady Mary and the deceased Mr. Pamuk is perpetually discussed in this coded language.

Expressing Disagreement Among Equals: Even within the family, direct contradiction is often softened. When Lady Violet (the Dowager) disagrees with her cousin Isobel, she might say, "My dear, you are a picture of modern thinking. I, however, am perhaps more accustomed to the traditional view." This euphemistic framing uses apparent praise ("picture of modern thinking") to cushion the subsequent disagreement, upholding the Agreement Maxim in form, even as substantive conflict is articulated.

2.2. The Modesty Maxim and Self-Effacement

The Modesty Maxim requires minimizing self-praise.[6] This is notably observed among the serving class, for whom boasting is a grave breach of etiquette. A servant responsible for a great success will attribute it to luck or the guidance of their superiors. For instance, a cook who has perfected a difficult dish might say, "I just followed the recipe, my lady. I'm glad it wasn't a complete disaster," euphemizing her skill and effort into a matter of mere adherence and expressing relief rather than pride. This linguistic self-effacement is a performative adaptation to their social role. The aristocracy's greatest anxiety-loss of wealth and status-generates a rich lexicon of euphemisms that serve the Approbation Maxim (minimizing dispraise of one's own family) and a form of self-directed Tact Maxim (minimizing the psychological cost to oneself). Direct terms like "bankrupt," "poor," or "losing status" are taboo. The analysis reveals that the Politeness Principle is not a democratically applied rule in *Downton Abbey*; it is a weaponized system, asymmetrically enforced and performed. The obligation to be polite weighs most heavily on the subordinate.[7] A servant's violation of the Tact or Approbation Maxims (e.g., through directness) is a punishable social infraction. In contrast, an aristocrat's adherence to these maxims, while expected, is often a performance of graciousness that reinforces their power-they can afford to be polite. The euphemism is the script for this performance.

Furthermore, euphemisms often create a layer of strategic ambiguity. When Lady Mary says a suitor is "not entirely suitable," the euphemism (serving the Approbation Maxim) allows her to convey a definitive rejection while leaving the precise reasons (wealth, class, personal dislike) open to interpretation, thus retaining control over the narrative. This ambiguity is a key source of dramatic irony, as the audience decodes the true meaning behind the polite facade. [8]

The series also tracks a subtle evolution in euphemistic usage, mirroring social change post-WWI. The younger generation, particularly the more modern characters like Lady Sybil or Tom Branson, use fewer and less ornate euphemisms, signaling a shift towards a society where the old PP, tied to a rigid hierarchy, holds less absolute sway. Their more direct speech acts as a marker of character and ideological positioning.

3. Conclusion

This study has demonstrated that Geoffrey Leech's Politeness Principle provides a robust and illuminating framework for analyzing the pervasive use of euphemisms in *Downton Abbey*. Far from being mere linguistic decoration, euphemisms are revealed as the essential, pragmatic instruments through which characters navigate, uphold, and occasionally subvert the intricate social hierarchy of their world. They are the tangible enactment of the Tact, Approbation, Modesty, and Agreement Maxims, strategically deployed to manage the constant potential for face-threatening acts across domains of class, finance, morality, and mortality.

The analysis underscores that politeness, as realized through euphemistic language, is deeply intertwined with power. It is a compulsory code for the weak and a curated performance for the powerful. By examining this interface, the paper contributes to a deeper understanding of how dialogue in period drama constructs social reality, builds character psychology, and drives narrative tension. It suggests that future research could productively apply the PP framework to other genres of television drama to compare politeness strategies across different fictional social structures, or trace the diachronic evolution of televised euphemisms in line with changing real-world social norms. This study has undertaken a detailed pragmatic analysis of euphemisms in *Downton Abbey* through the lens of Leech's Politeness Principle, supplemented by insights from Adaptation Theory. It has demonstrated that euphemistic language is a fundamental mechanism through which the fictional society of *Downton Abbey* operates, serving to uphold its hierarchy, manage its crises, and define its characters. The analysis moved beyond simple identification to explore the strategic application of specific maxims (Tact, Approbation, Modesty, Agreement) in vertical and lateral discourse, the evolution of euphemistic use across a period of social trauma, and the development of distinct character-specific linguistic profiles.

The implications of this research extend beyond literary or television analysis. It contributes to the field of media pragmatics by providing a methodological blueprint for how established linguistic theories can be rigorously applied to the analysis of scripted dialogue. Fictional narratives like *Downton Abbey* offer controlled yet complex social laboratories where pragmatic principles are amplified and dramatized, making them excellent tools for both illustrating and testing theoretical concepts.

Future research could build on this work in several directions: a comparative study of euphemistic strategies in different period dramas (e.g., Bridgerton vs. *Downton Abbey*) to examine how politeness norms are constructed for different audiences; a corpus-assisted analysis to quantify shifts in euphemism density across seasons; or a reception study investigating how modern audiences from different cultures decode these historically situated politeness strategies.

Ultimately, this paper affirms that the study of politeness in fiction is not a niche pursuit but a vital avenue for understanding the intricate relationship between language, power, and social performance-a relationship as relevant in our world as it is in the world of *Downton Abbey.*

Acknowledgments

Supported by Social Sciences Project of Guangdong University of Science and Technology (GKY-2022KYQNW-29).

References

[1] Leech, G. N. (1983). Principles of Pragmatics. Longman.

[2] Brown, P., & Levinson, S. C. (1987). Politeness: Some Universals in Language Usage. Cambridge University Press.

[3] Allan, K., & Burridge, K. (2006). Forbidden Words: Taboo and the Censoring of Language. Cambridge University Press.

[4] Culpeper, J. (2011). Impoliteness: Using Language to Cause Offence. Cambridge University Press.

[5] Goffman, E. (1967). Interaction Ritual: Essays on Face-to-Face Behavior. Doubleday.

[6] Fellowes, J. (Creator). (2010-2015). Downton Abbey [Television series]. Carnival Films & Masterpiece Theatre.

[7] Watts, R. J. (2003). Politeness. Cambridge University Press.

[8] Grice, H. P. (1975). Logic and Conversation. In P. Cole & J. L. Morgan (Eds.), Syntax and Semantics 3: Speech Acts (pp. 41-58). Academic Press.