Understanding Speech Acts in Victorian Society: the flouting of the relation maxim in Oscar Wilde’s the Importance of Being Earnest

Awatef Boubakri
University of Gabes, Tunisia

Abstract

This article is based on the assumption that the analysis of literary discourse from pragmatic perspectives takes into consideration the specificity of the literary work. The literary work under focus is Oscar Wilde’s The Importance of Being Earnest. The present research applies two pragmatic theories, namely speech act theory and implicature to the play and raises the question of how Wilde’s purpose is pragmatically achieved. It argues that the play is characterized by the frequent violation of the Maxim of Relation. It also shows that the violation of this maxim results in four recurrent pragmatic strategies and that these strategies interrelate with four main themes of the play. Both qualitative and quantitative methods are used: The utterances marked by the violation of the relation maxim are analyzed in relation to their context and then they are classified into strategies and themes. Consequently, it is shown that whenever one of the four strategies is used, its use aims to deal with a specific theme. This research has found that, not only does the interrelationship strategy/theme contribute to Wilde’s purpose behind writing The Importance of Being Earnest but it also accounts for the specificity of this play. It accounts for its unity because the unifying interrelationship is between irrelevance as the main strategy and seriousness as the main theme.

Key words: speech act, relation maxim, irrelevance, seriousness
1. Introduction

1.1. Statement of the problem

Critics of *The Importance of Being Earnest* have long been interested in the genre, the style and the philosophy of the play (Evans 1948, Raby 1988, Worth 1992, Pollard 1993, Alexander 2000). They argue that the play is a comedy of manners which relies on verbal wit and opposes the trivial to the serious as a main theme. They also maintain that Wilde’s purpose is to question the social values of Victorian society and to laugh at its mores. What is missing in their studies of *The Importance of Being Earnest* is the study of this play from a pragmatic perspective.

1.2. Research objectives

The significance of studying *The Importance of Being Earnest* from a pragmatic perspective stems from the role of speech acts in the play because the way they are used also contributes to expressing Wilde’s purpose behind writing this play. This article examines the marked use of speech acts manifested in the violation of the Maxim of Relation. It aims to identify the pragmatic strategies resulting from the violation of this maxim and to show how these strategies interrelate with the themes of the play. It also aims to interpret the interrelationship strategy/theme in relation to the global meaning of the play.

2. Literature review

2.1. Background

The question of how to approach literature from a pragmatic perspective has been subject of interest not only because it has become possible to study literary works in relation to the contexts in which they are written, but also because the literary discourse needs an analysis which accounts for its specificity. The specificity of literary utterances makes it difficult to neglect the fact that the text under focus is literature. “Literature does perform in a special manner” (Triki 1998: 20). Consequently, an application of a pragmatic theory to literature raises the question of what is special in literature. The specificity of the literary discourse stems from four basic characteristics: The literary text is self referential, it establishes its own fictional world, the fictional world represents an alternative to the real world and communication in the alternative world is targeted to characters as well as audience (Herman 1995: 3-13). Within the context of speech act theory and implicature, these characteristics should be taken into consideration when the illocutionary force of a speech act is identified because unlike non-literary utterances, literary utterances are more complex in terms of the writer’s intention, in terms of the receiver to whom they are targeted and in terms of the context in which they are said.

A great deal of research has been focusing on speech act theory and its application to literary works, especially drama (Bollobás 1981, Leech 1992, Toolan 2000). The application of speech act theory to literary discourse analysis clears the way for examining how speech acts are used and for what purposes. In fact, the way pragmatic tools are used results in recurrent patterns in the literary work and the purpose for which these patterns recur contributes to the global intention of the writer (Herman 1995: 228). In this respect, it is argued that plays like Albee’s *Who is Afraid of Virginia Woolf* and Shaw’s *You Never Can*
Tell, convey the message of their playwrights through pragmatic patterns (Bollobás 1981, Leech 1992). The present study proposes that Oscar Wilde’s *The Importance of Being Earnest* is also worth studying from this perspective.

2.2. Issues in speech act theory

In this section, it is important to go through the development of speech act theory, in order to understand three main aspects of a speech act, namely convention, intention and interaction (Marmaridou 2000: 186) and to understand the identification of its meaning. The identification of the meaning changes from relying on a predetermined classification of the conditions and types of speech acts (Austin 1962, Searle 1969, 1979) to relating their meaning to implicature (Grice 1975) and even to other conversational principles (Leech 1983).

2.2.1. Problems with classical speech act theory

Marmaridou (2000) explains that Austin’s (1962) and Searle’s (1969, 1979) theories are grouped into what is called classical speech act theory. She criticizes classical speech act theory which, in each time, tries to account for the meaning of speech acts from a single angle, performative, conventional or intentional (Marmaridou 2000: 186) and she argues that it is necessary to relate speech act theory to implicature (Grice 1975) and politeness (Leech 1983).

2.2.2. Speech acts and conversational maxims

With Austin (1962) and Searle (1969, 1979), a taxonomy of speech acts is imposed on the identification of meaning; however, it has become necessary to determine the degree of indirectness of a speech act before identifying its meaning (Leech 1983, Stubbs 1983). As a result, the meaning of speech acts is identified by drawing an implicature in relation to conversational maxims (Stubbs 1983, Leech 1983). The violation of conversational maxims in the use of speech acts results in ironic speech acts (Bollobas 1981) and results in social speech acts (Triki & Sellami Baklouti 2002).

Instead of imposing a predetermined set of speech acts on the meaning of an utterance, it is necessary to determine the degree of indirectness of that utterance first. The degree of indirectness varies from a direct speech act, to a conventional speech act, to a routinized speech act and to an indirect speech act. This variation of indirectness influences the way the meaning of each type of speech acts is identified. Utterances which have Illocutionary Force Indicating Devices (IFIDs), are direct because these IFIDs explain how the illocutionary force is understood and they take the form of performative verbs, stress, intonation contour or punctuation (Searle 1969: 30). Stubbs (1983) suggests that speech acts whose context is highly conventional are easy to identify. For instance, “I pronounce you guilty” as said by a judge is a social act of sentencing. He adds that, apart from such a highly conventionalized context, there are acts which are “routinized” in such a way as to become easily identified; for example, in a bar, we can easily understand this utterance: “Have this one on me”.

Apart from direct, conventional and routinized speech acts, it is necessary to account for indirectness and non-literalness to identify the meaning of indirect speech acts (Stubbs 1983: 154). It has become difficult to agree with Searle’s account of indirectness; for this reason, it
is necessary to resort to Grice’s (1975) conversational maxims which help to infer the meaning of indirect speech acts. Stubbs (1983) explains that Searle (1969: 68) makes explicit the implicit meaning of an utterance by adding an IFID; for instance, “I will come tomorrow” can be replaced by “I promise that I will come tomorrow”. Stubbs disagrees with Searle when the former says that “speakers do not use extra words without reason” and that the two utterances above do not necessarily have the same illocutionary force. Stubbs adds that Grice’s (1975) maxims can account for such a difference (Stubbs 1983: 156). In fact, while the first utterance can have different illocutionary forces, the second utterance violates the maxim ‘be brief’ because the speaker wants to convey the meaning of promise (Stubbs 1983: 158).

Although Grice’s (1975) maxims are conversational rules, they are usually violated, which reveals the notion of indirectness and necessitates a long path of inference on the part of the hearer (Leech 1983: 43). Grice (1975) explains that, when the speaker does not tell the truth or he does not express just the needed information or he offers ambiguous utterances, in this case, he means more than what he says. He concludes that conversational maxims provide a basis for the listener to infer what is implicated (Grice 1975: 76).

Grice’s (1975) theory of implicature argues that our talk exchanges are conversationally cooperative efforts between speakers. Grice’s Cooperative Principle invites ‘you’ as an interactant to “make your conversational contribution such is required, at the stage at which it occurs, by the accepted purpose or direction of the talk exchange in which you are engaged” (Grice 1975: 78). Grice issues four conversational maxims and their sub-maxims, all conforming to the Cooperative Principle. They are summarized as follows:

(1) The QUANTITY MAXIM: (i) Make your contribution as informative as is required.
   (ii) Do not make your contribution more informative than is required.

(2) The QUALITY MAXIM: (i) try to make your contribution one that is true
   (ii) Do not say what you believe to be false.
   (iii) Do not say that for which you lack adequate evidence.

(3) The RELATION MAXIM: “be relevant”.

(4) The MANNER MAXIM: (i) “Be perspicuous”.
   (ii) Avoid obscurity of expression.
   (iii) Avoid ambiguity.
   (iv) Be brief.
   (v) Be orderly (Grice 1975: 78-79).

Whenever a maxim is violated, the hearer must determine what the speaker intends to convey. The problem of how the illocutionary force of an utterance is determined is at the heart of speech act theory and the role of implicature is necessary here (Grundy 1995: 99).

2.3. Speech act theory and literary discourse

Different attempts have been made to analyze literary discourses from the point of view of speech act theory (Leech 1992, Coulthard 1985, Buck 1997, Herman 1995, Rozik 2000, Triki 1998). The results have been rewarding since it has become possible to approach the
meanings of a number of plays, poems and novels from a new perspective; however, an important question has been raised concerning the specificity of the literary discourse and the specificity of the literary work under focus. While some studies (Leech 1992, Pratt 1977, Coulthard 1985, Buck 1997) stress the legitimacy of applying pragmatic principles to literary discourses the way they are applied to non-literary discourses, other studies (Cook 1994, Herman 1995, Rozik 2000, Triki 1998, Harker 1999, Oltean 1999) stress the fact that the interpersonal dialogue of the characters in the literary text is different from everyday conversation.

Herman’s (1995) framework is explained in detail as she focuses on the dramatic discourse which is the concern of the present study. Herman’s (1995) title is self explanatory: *Dramatic Discourse is Dialogue as Interaction in Plays*. The purpose behind distinguishing dramatic discourse from conversation is to take into account the nature of the literary text. First, it is necessary to realize that conversation, or in Herman’s terms “spontaneous speech exchange”, is just a resource for dramatic discourse. In fact, norms, conventions and rules of speaking are manipulated by playwrights to make their speech differently. The subject matters of conversation themselves are dealt with in a different manner. In fact, dramatic discourse is not a reflection of real life but a new view of its matters. Furthermore, the new views of real life with its social norms, conduct, convention and behavior are expressed subjectively either in support or in opposition to the “dominant culture” (Herman 1995: 6-7).

Consequently, a fictional world is created in the dramatic discourse. Herman argues that this created world is usually an alternative to the real world as a result of protest against, dissatisfaction with or violation of the norms outside. She adds that this permanent reference to the real world is the key to the “intelligibility” of this fictional world. However, the dramatic text should be self-referential. In other words, it is through the speech exchange between the characters that we should know about the context in which the characters are operating (Herman 1995: 8-9). Therefore, speech exchange gives way to assumptions or to a process of inference done by the characters as well as the audience. In fact, the role of the audience in inferring the message of utterances is as prominent as the role of the characters, if not more (Herman 1995: 10).

Herman’s work gives prominence to the social dimension of dramatic discourse. She advocates an application of socio-linguistic theories to language in use in drama or simply the socio-pragmatics of drama. However, this application is accompanied with a keen account of the nature of the literary text. In fact, fictionality, self-reference and audience are always present when she deals with dramatic speech from a pragmatic view. She even gives solutions to the apparent mismatch between literature and pragmatics. It is necessary to look in details at the way Herman deals with speech act theory in dramatic discourse since the present study chooses Herman’s (1995) work as its framework.

As far as the illocutionary force is concerned, Herman argues that it is determined through relevant assumptions and references to the context of the utterance and the whole process is motivated by an ideological self. Drama stems from tension between a social subject and the demands of social others (Herman 1995: 201). However, Herman warns against such a simplified understanding arguing that the self is a complex phenomenon in dramatic discourse. The source of complexity is the fact that the dramatic self is usually ambiguous in such a way as to expect more than one illocutionary force inferred from a single utterance. Herman adds that it is only by making the character liable to his speech that we understand
what is meant. In other words, characters act in their own fictional world which is intelligible through making relevant assumptions (Herman 1995: 200-203).

Concerning conventional acts, Herman argues that drama defamiliarizes the conventional institutional events and they are no longer taken for granted. She takes as an example Shakespeare’s Coriolanus. She argues that Coriolanus is killed by his people because he violates the felicity conditions of acts like promise and request and he refuses to perform acts of greeting (Herman 1995: 208). In dramatic discourse, routinized speech acts are also reversed which reflects the fact that norms of speaking and norms of behavior are no longer taken for granted.

The question now is how the audience (or the reader) knows about these norms and conventions in a fictional world where everything related to real life is manipulated and conventional acts themselves are defamiliarized. In dramatic discourse, the role of the outside recipient is as prominent as that of the characters inside the text and, knowing that the former does not necessarily belong to the socio-cultural context in which the play is written, he should make assumptions on the basis of what is said by the characters (Herman 1995: 215). It is here that the role of the audience materializes. The audience should get knowledge from the text itself relying on the utterances of the characters. He proceeds with a chain of assumptions which develops each time another utterance is said by a character. Consequently, the audience succeeds in inferring the meaning of literary utterances and the global message of the literary work. As a conclusion, the process of assumption formation on the part of the audience indicates that the literary text is self-referential.

These insights from the application of pragmatic theories to the dramatic discourse taking into account its specificities is expected to be significant to the study of The Importance of Being Earnest.

3. Methodology

This section describes the framework, the instruments and the type of study.

3.1. Framework

This research is based on Herman’s (1995) application of speech act theory to dramatic discourse because Herman succeeds in solving the difficulties of applying a pragmatic approach to literature. She defends the relevance of applying a linguistic pragmatic approach to drama without neglecting the specificity of dramatic discourse. Herman argues that the way speech acts are used in dramatic discourse is actional in itself (Herman 1995: 229). In other words, the intention of the speaker, the interpretation of the illocutionary force by the hearer, assumption formation on the part of the audience and the dramatization of conventional speech acts are significant in dramatic discourse.

Herman argues that the intentional self is more complex in dramatic discourse in comparison with the intentional self in non-literary discourse; consequently, his utterance can have more than one illocutionary force. This complexity does not indicate that it is impossible to infer the meaning of speech acts in literary discourse. On the contrary, this complexity reflects the specificity of the speaker’s intention in literary discourse. It is due to the tension between the ‘ideological self’ and the ‘dominant culture’ that the intentional self is difficult to
be understood. His desires and intentions are in conflict with or different from those of the other and those of society (Herman 1995: 201).

The way the hearer interprets the speaker’s utterance is also significant. Herman argues that in modern drama, miscommunication and non-communication replace communication; consequently, the response of the hearer to the speaker’s utterance is not necessarily the expected response. As a result, comic and tragic effects are created depending on the genre of the play. Herman says that “the excesses that could result from unilateral exploitation of code and inferential possibilities in the utterances can be material for comic episodes” (Herman 1995: 204). Moreover, the hearer’s response to the speaker’s illocutionary force becomes a discourse strategy which is actional in dramatic discourse.

Besides the hearer’s response, the audience assumption formation is significant in dramatic discourse. Herman says that “the audience is actively involved from the beginning in creating the necessary information and the off-stage context of the play” (Herman 1995: 204). Besides the axis of communication character-character, dramatic discourse includes another axis which is stage-audience. The audience is another addressee in addition to the character. As a result, the role of the audience is as prominent as that of the character, especially that the playwright intends to convey a message to the audience.

In addition to the speaker’s intention, the hearer’s interpretation and the role of the audience, the dramatization of conventional and institutional speech acts is also significant in dramatic discourse. Herman argues that these acts are defamiliarized (Herman 1995: 208) which refers to the fictional world which is an alternative to the real world in dramatic discourse. Herman adds that infelicitous performance exceeds conventional speech acts to other norms of speaking and behavior (Herman 1995: 197). When deviation in the use of speech acts recurs in the play, it results in patterns or discourse strategies which are actional.

3.2. Research instruments

- **Searle’s classification of speech acts**
  Searle (1979) classifies speech acts into:
  - Assertives (using language to tell people how things are, as in concluding, asserting, hypothesizing).
  - Directives (using language to try to get them to do things, as in requesting, advising, pleading).
  - Commissives (using language to commit oneself to doing things, as in promising, undertaking).
  - Expressives (using language to express our feeling and attitudes, as in apologizing, thanking, welcoming).
  - Declarations (using language to bring about changes into the world through utterances, as in declaring wars, nominating a candidate) (Searle 1979: 30).

Searle’s categorization of speech acts facilitates the inference process; for instance, it is necessary to know whether a speech act is assertive or expressive.

- **Grice’s Cooperative Principle**

  Grice (1975) issues four main maxims which are summarized as follows:
The QUANTITY MAXIM: (i) Make your contribution as informative as is required. (ii) Do not make your contribution more informative than is required.

The QUALITY MAXIM: (i) Try to make your contribution one that is true (ii) Do not say what you believe to be false. (iii) Do not say that for which you lack adequate evidence.

The RELATION MAXIM: “be relevant”.


Grice’s maxims constitute the way an ideal conversation should be. Any violation of these norms implicates an intention on the part of the speaker. The present study focuses on the violation of the Maxim of Relation ‘Be relevant’, because utterances which are irrelevant to their speech situations are frequent in the play.

- Peer review

The present study identifies a list of utterances in which the Maxim of Relation is violated. In order to prove that the list is exhaustive and no other utterance is marked by the flouting of the Relation Maxim, the play is presented to two teachers of English literature. In terms of availability, only one teacher is a native speaker.

3.3. Type of study

This study is qualitative and quantitative. It is qualitative because it starts with a primary analysis of the utterances where the Maxim of relation is violated. The purpose is to identify the illocutionary force of each speech act in relation to the context in which it occurs in the play. This research is also quantitative because it makes use of a statistical analysis: It assigns quantities to pragmatic strategies and themes. It also presents percentages of the occurrence of these strategies and themes looking for an interrelationship between them.

3.4. Corpus description

This section introduces the play and describes its plot, its characters and its themes. The Importance of Being Earnest (1854) is a comedy of three acts. It consists of 61 pages in the Oxford edition (1989). The male characters are the two gentlemen, Algernon Moncrief and Jack Worthing. The three women are Gwendolen Fairfax, Cecily and Lady Bracknell. Gwendolen, Algernon's cousin, adores the name Earnest and she is in love with Jack. Lady Bracknell, Gwendolen's mother, stands for the social conventions of Victorian society (Raby 1988: 130). Cecily is Mr. Worthing's ward. Algernon pretends to have a sick friend whose invented name is Bunbury, in order to avoid going to social events he dislikes, such as Lady Bracknell's dinner. Jack, who lives in the country, also claims to have a wicked brother called Earnest to be able to go to town. In town, Jack pretends to be Earnest. The play opens with proposal scenes. The contractual aspect of marriage in upper class society is the only aspect in
which Lady Bracknell is interested. She needs to know everything of importance about Jack Worthing before accepting his engagement to her daughter. In order to meet Cecily, Algernon goes to the country pretending to be Earnest, the imaginary brother of Jack. Now confusion takes place and the first meeting between Gwendolen and Cecily is characterized by quarrel since they find out that both of them are engaged to Earnest. One of the key comic moments of the play is the discovery of Jack’s identity. Just after his birth, Jack is found in a handbag in Victoria Station. Lady Bracknell and Miss Prism, Cecily’s tutor, are involved in the loss of the baby but they have just discovered that the baby is Jack because that very bag is still with him. It turns out that Jack is not Jack but Earnest Moncrief, Algernon’s old brother and Lady Bracknell’s nephew. The discovery pleased everyone, especially Gwendolen, who has always wanted to marry a man named Earnest.

The main theme of the play is seriousness as it is opposed to triviality (Worth 1992: 157). Wilde tackles this issue in relation to sub-themes namely culture, marriage, good manners and hospitality.

3.5. Procedure

This research proceeds with a qualitative analysis followed by a quantitative analysis and closes with a qualitative analysis that serves the unity and specificity of the play.

The first qualitative analysis consists in listing the utterances marked by the violation of the Maxim of Relation. These utterances are analyzed for interpretation and assigned numbers from U1 to U125 to facilitate the quantitative analysis. The quantitative analysis aims to identify recurrent patterns in the play. It classifies the numbered utterances into strategies that the present study names pragmatic strategies. These pragmatic strategies result from the violation of the Maxim of Relation. The numbered utterances are also classified into themes dealt with in the play. The purpose is to look for a possible relationship between the two classifications of the same utterances according to pragmatic strategies and themes. In order to do so, all the possible relations between four strategies and four themes are calculated in terms of percentages. These percentages help to identify which relations are noticeable. The noticeable percentages refer to the patterns which represent the interrelationship strategy/theme. The final stage is to illustrate the patterns identified with extracts from the play focusing on how these patterns contribute to the central theme.

4. Findings and discussion

There are 125 utterances in which speech acts are marked by the violation of the Maxim of Relation. The peer review has supported the validity of the list of utterances Identified. Their analysis results in the following findings.

4.1. Findings

The utterances under focus are classified into pragmatic strategies and into themes in order to see whether there is an interrelationship between them.

4.1.1. Pragmatic strategies resulting from the flouting of the Maxim of Relation

The 125 utterances violate the Maxim of Relation in four different ways resulting in four recurrent strategies in the play. With reference to Herman (1995), when interpersonal acts result in recurrent strategies in dramatic discourse, these strategies are actional in themselves and they are called discourse strategies (Herman 1995: 225-226). Since the strategies under
focus in the present study are motivated by a pragmatic feature which is the violation of the Maxim of Relation, it is possible to consider them as pragmatic strategies. The four pragmatic strategies are:

- Strategy # 1: Indifference to the illocutionary force of the speech act previously uttered by another character. The character either shifts to another topic or utters a speech act whose illocutionary force is against the expectation of the other character and of the audience.

- strategy # 2: The stage direction which describes what the character does is irrelevant to the speech act he utters at the same moment. The contradiction is between what the characters want to do with their bodies and what they want to do with their words.

-Strategy # 3: Two words, two expressions or two meanings which are irrelevant to one another, are combined in the same utterance or in the same speech situation in such a way as to say the opposite of what is normally said or to reverse conventional and routinized speech acts.

- Strategy # 4: Crucial issues are suddenly dealt with, which is irrelevant to the initial subject dealt with in the immediate situation of the discourse.

4.1.2. The thematic classification of utterances

The play deals with the theme of seriousness about different issues in Victorian society. These issues constitute sub-themes into which the 125 utterances violating the Maxim of Relation are classified. The themes are the following:

- Theme # A: Norms of politeness, sincerity, civilities, morality, duty and responsibility known as good manners and related to gentlemen and respectable ladies in Victorian society.

- Theme # B: Hospitality and eating as an occupation manifested in the eating habits of upper class society.

- Theme # C: The institution of marriage and other related issues such as divorce, ideal husband, love, engagement, proposal, adultery, eligible man and faithfulness.

- Theme # D: Cultural features of Victorian society such as culture, education, literature, music, literary criticism, politics, religion, science, art and philosophy.

This classification of the same utterances already classified into four pragmatic strategies aims to observe whether there is an interrelationship between pragmatic strategies and themes.
4.1.3 The interrelationship between strategies and themes

Since the utterances are classified into four pragmatic strategies and four themes, it is necessary to study the following possible relations between them:

```
Strategy # 1                Theme # A                 Theme # A               Strategy # 1
  Theme # B                                                   Strategy # 2
  Theme # C                                                   Strategy # 3
  Theme # D                                                   Strategy # 4

Strategy # 2                Theme # A                 Theme # B                Strategy # 1
  Theme # B                                                   Strategy # 2
  Theme # C                                                   Strategy # 3
  Theme # D                                                   Strategy # 4

Strategy # 3                Theme # A                 Theme # C                Strategy # 1
  Theme # B                                                   Strategy # 2
  Theme # C                                                   Strategy # 3
  Theme # D                                                   Strategy # 4

Strategy # 4                Theme # A                 Theme # D               Strategy # 1
  Theme # B                                                   Strategy # 2
  Theme # C                                                   Strategy # 3
  Theme # D                                                   Strategy # 4
```

Table 1: Total of utterances under each possible relation

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Theme</th>
<th>Strategy # 1</th>
<th>Strategy # 2</th>
<th>Strategy # 3</th>
<th>Strategy # 4</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Theme # A</td>
<td>40</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Theme # B</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Theme # C</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>41</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Theme # D</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>19</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 1 presents the number of utterances under each possible relation; for instance, 40 utterances use Strategy #1 and deal with Theme # A.

In order to identify which theme is more likely to be dealt with, with each strategy and which strategy is more likely to be used with each theme, it is necessary to calculate the percentages of all the possible relations presented above.
4.1.3.1. The relationship strategy/theme

This section aims to answer the question which theme is more likely to be dealt with, with each strategy. Table 2 presents the needed percentages in order to answer this question:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Theme</th>
<th>Strategy # 1</th>
<th>Strategy # 2</th>
<th>Strategy # 3</th>
<th>Strategy # 4</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td># A</td>
<td>95.23 %</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>12.5 %</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td># B</td>
<td>2.38 %</td>
<td>100 %</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td># C</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>73.21 %</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td># D</td>
<td>2.38 %</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>14.28 %</td>
<td>100 %</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>42</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>56</td>
<td>19</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 2: Percentages of utterances under each relation strategy/theme

In table 2, the percentages are calculated; for instance, the percentage of utterances under the possible relation Strategy # 1 / Theme # A is calculated in the following way:

\[
\frac{40 \times 100}{42} \approx 95.23 \%.
\]

In other words, 95.23 % of the utterances which use Strategy # 1 deal with Theme # A. Table 2 shows that the relationship strategy/theme is understood in the following way:
- When Strategy # 1 is used, most of the utterances deal with Theme # A (95.23 %).
- When Strategy # 2 is used, all the utterances deal with Theme # B (100 %).
- When Strategy # 3 is used, most of the utterances deal with Theme # C (73.21 %).
- When Strategy # 4 is used, all the utterances deal with Theme # D (100 %).

4.1.3.2. The relationship theme.strategy

This section aims to answer the question of which strategy is more likely to be used with each theme. Table 3 presents the needed percentages in order to answer this question:
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Theme</th>
<th>Strategy # 1</th>
<th>Strategy # 2</th>
<th>Strategy # 3</th>
<th>Strategy # 4</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Theme # A</td>
<td>85.1 %</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>14.89 %</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>47</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Theme # B</td>
<td>11.11 %</td>
<td>88.88 %</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Theme # C</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>100 %</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>41</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Theme # D</td>
<td>3.57 %</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>28.57 %</td>
<td>67.85 %</td>
<td>28</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 3: Percentages of utterances under each relation theme/strategy

Table 3 shows that the relationship theme/strategy is understood in the following way:
- When Theme # A is dealt with, Strategy # 1 is used in most of the utterances (85.1 %).
- When Theme # B is dealt with, Strategy # 2 is used in most of the utterances (88.88 %).
- When Theme # C is dealt with, Strategy # 3 is used in all the utterances (100 %).
- When Theme # D is dealt with, Strategy # 4 is used in most of the utterances (67.85 %).

4.1.3.3. The interrelationship strategy/theme

On the basis of the results presented in table 2 and table 3, it is observed that there is an interrelationship between the four pragmatic strategies and the four themes. Whenever a pragmatic strategy is used, its use aims to deal with a specific theme. As a result, four patterns recur in the play, namely:

- Strategy # 1 is interrelated with Theme # A.
- Strategy # 2 is interrelated with Theme # B.
- Strategy # 3 is interrelated with Theme # C.
- Strategy # 4 is interrelated with Theme # D.

As a conclusion, there is a high predictability concerning the interrelationship between pragmatic strategies and themes in *The Importance of Being Earnest*.

4.2. Interpretation and discussion

It has been proved that four pragmatic strategies resulting from the violation of the Maxim of Relation recur in *The Importance of Being Earnest* and they interrelate with four main themes. The question now is why these pragmatic strategies are used when those themes are dealt with. Each pattern is illustrated with extracts from the play and in each extract, the irrelevant utterance is underlined.

4.2.1 Strategy # 1/ Theme # A

Whenever the theme of social norms of politeness, sincerity, responsibility and civilities is dealt with by one of the speaking characters, the hearer responds indifferently to the illocutionary force of the speaker’s speech act. As a result, the hearer responds with a speech
act which either shifts the topic or contradicts the expectation of the speaker and that of the audience. The following three examples illustrate this pattern.

U3:
Algernon: …oh! …by the way, Lane, I see from your book that on Thursday night, when Lord Shoreman and Mr. Worthing were dining with me, eight bottles of champagne are entered as having been consumed.
Lane: Yes, sir; eight bottles and a pint (480).

Lane’s utterance is irrelevant to Algernon’s. Algernon’s indirect speech act has the intention of accusing the servants and Lane is involved. Instead of denying, apologizing or being quiet, Lane is assertive of the accusation giving more details to his master. Lane appears to be indifferent to the illocutionary force of the speech act uttered by Algernon. His response is against the expectation of both Algernon and the audience. Lane intends to escape from responsibility by challenging his master’s accusation.

U27:
Lady Bracknell: Good afternoon, dear Algy, I hope you are behaving very well.
Algernon: I’m feeling very well, Aunt Augusta (487).

Algernon’s assertive speech act is irrelevant to Lady Bracknell’s directive speech act. Lady Bracknell’s intention is to remind Algernon that he should behave in good manners; however, Algernon is indifferent to the illocutionary force of her speech act and shifts the interest from behavior to feelings.

U107:
Gwendolen [After a pause]: They don’t seem to notice us at all. Couldn’t you cough?
Cecily: But I haven’t got a cough (525).

Cecily’s utterance is irrelevant to Gwendolen’s. Gwendolen’s directive speech act is a request to cough in order to attract the attention of the two gentlemen. Cecily, however, responds to the propositional content rather than to the illocutionary force of Gwendolen’s speech act. Cecily’s response is against the expectation of her interlocutor and against that of the audience. It shows her spontaneous character which is far from being aware of the artificial civilities of her society.

In such examples, the character is indifferent to the illocutionary force of the speech act uttered by his interlocutor. The character pretends not to understand the intention of his interlocutor and he responds with an irrelevant utterance creating a comic effect which goes with the genre of the play as a comedy of manners.

The fictional world is established the moment the characters tend to look for an alternative world which deviates from the real one. This idea is expressed by Herman (1995) when she says that “discourse strategies may serve to construct very different kinds of
subjectivities and inter-personal possibilities. The use of speech can either stabilize some set of beliefs about the state of the world or radically undermine such an eventuality” (Herman 1995: 237). With reference to strategy # 1, the character undermines the set of norms specific to the real world, when he tends to shift the topic or to respond with the unexpected whenever an obligation is imposed on him. His response reflects an alternative view of how the person should behave. The character is keen to imply that he is not obliged to follow good manners, to be sincere, to be responsible for his duties and to participate in social events.

Relating these obligations to their socio-cultural context, these obligations or set of norms constitute the characteristics of a gentlemen and a respectable lady in the Victorian society; however, some characters like Algernon, Jack and Cecily in The Importance of Being Earnest, tend to escape from these norms. As a conclusion, Strategy # 1 is used to express the character’s deviation from the norms and conventions of Victorian society. Characters who do belong to upper class society, ironically participate in criticizing it by being ‘impolite’, ‘insincere’ and ‘irresponsible’.

4.2.2. Strategy # 2 / Theme # B

Whenever the characters are occupied with eating and whenever they deal with the theme of hospitality, they contradict what they say with what they do and the latter is indicated through the stage direction. The following three examples illustrate this pattern:

U2:
Algernon: And, speaking of the science of life, have you got the cucumber
Sandwiches cut for Lady Bracknell?
Lane : Yes, sir. [Hands them on a salver.]
Algernon : [Inspects them, takes two, and sits down on the sofa.] (480).

What is described in the stage direction is irrelevant to Algernon’s utterance. His utterance is a directive speech act of asking. He asks whether the sandwiches are prepared for Lady Bracknell; however, he takes two in order to eat them.

U10:
Algernon: Oh! There is no use speculating on that subject. Divorces are made in heaven – [Jack puts out his hand to take a sandwich. Algernon interferes at once.] Please don’t touch the cucumber sandwiches. They are ordered specially for Aunt Augusta. [Takes one and eats it.] (482).

What is described in the stage direction is irrelevant to Algernon’s utterance. On the one hand, his directive speech act orders Jack not to take the sandwiches. On the other hand, Algernon takes one. There is a contradiction between what he wants to do with his words and what he wants to do with his body.
U101:
Cecily [Sweetly]: Sugar?
Gwendolen [Superciliously]: No, thank you. Sugar is not fashionable any more.
[Cecily looks angrily at her, takes up the tongs and puts four lumps of sugar in the cup] (591).

What is described in the stage direction is irrelevant to Gwendolen’s utterance. Gwendolen’s utterance is an assertive speech act of declining an offer followed by an assertive speech act of comment. She intends to despise Cecily. The stage direction which describes Cecily’s response is irrelevant to Gwendolen’s decline of sugar, although Gwendolen is her guest. At the same moment, a contradiction appears between the intention behind the words and the action behind what is physically done.

In these examples, the characters create a mismatch between physical acts and speech acts, which is another source of comic effect. The mismatch between the stage direction and the utterance of the character in moments when sandwiches are prepared for the guest and in moments when the tea is offered by the host is a challenge to the rules of hospitality. The norms of hospitality mark the specificity of every culture but they are of great importance to the upper class society; however, they are ironically spoiled by characters that belong to that class. It is absurd to forbid one’s guest from taking sandwiches while the host is eating them all the time. It is unacceptable to make negative comments on the tea offered by the host and it is completely rude to deliberately serve the host with the thing he declines.

However, Wilde provides excuses for his characters that are playful with the norms of hospitality. Cecily serves Gwendolen with sugar and cake that the latter declines because of Gwendolen’s despising justification: Sugar and cake are no longer seen in respectable houses. Therefore, another irrelevance emerges in order to express the character’s revolt against the ridiculous formalities the upper class society is keen to preserve as indicators of social respectability and status. Furthermore, occupation with eating and reversing the norms of hospitality occurs at moments when serious problems need to be solved. Therefore, a third irrelevance emerges when the characters resort to eating or to commenting on the norms of hospitality when an important subject is dealt with or when a serious problem is faced. In fact, they escape from the pressure of social obligations.

4.2.3. Strategy # 3/ Theme # C

Whenever the characters speak about subjects related to the institution of marriage such as marriage proposal, divorce, ideal husband, eligible husband, love, faithfulness and adultery, they tend to match contradictory terms, expressions and meanings. As a result, the characters say something different from and even opposite to what is normally said. The following three examples illustrate this pattern:

U5:
Algernon: Good heavens! Is marriage so demoralizing as that?
Lane : I believe it is a very pleasant state, sir. I have had very little experience of it myself up to the present. I have only been married once. That was in consequence of a misunderstanding between myself and a young person (480).
The underlined utterance is irrelevant to what is just said before by the same character in the same speech turn. Lane utters an assertive speech act giving his opinion about marriage. The character matches two meanings which do not go together: His marriage was the result of a misunderstanding between him and another person which is nonsense.

U28:

Lady Bracknell: I’m sorry if we are a little late, Algernon, but I was obliged to call on dear Lady Harbury. I hadn’t been there since her poor husband’s death. I never saw a woman so altered; she looks quite twenty years younger (488).

The underlined utterance is irrelevant to what is said before by the same character about Lady Harbury. Two contradictory meanings are joined together in such a way as to say the unexpected about a woman whose husband has recently died.

U22:

Jack : That is nonsense. If I marry a charming girl like Gwendolen, and she is the only girl I ever saw in my life that I would marry, I certainly won’t want to know Bunbury.

Algernon : Then your wife will. You don’t seem to realize that in married life three is company and two is none (487).

Algernon’s utterance combines contradictory words in such a way as to reverse a routinized speech act which is “two is company and three is none”. The routinized speech act is reversed to reflect the reality of husbands and wives in the English house.

In the examples above, the combination of words, expressions and meanings which do not go together, “challenges our day-today, automatized realities and modes of meaning” (Herman 1995: 238). For instance, women look younger after their husbands’ death, women’s flirting with their husbands is scandalous, husbands usually forget about the fact that they are married and the natural place of the father is in the house. In Herman’s terms, “when institutional events and conventional acts enter a play and their workings are dramatized, the taken-for-granted is defamiliarized” (Herman 1995: 208). For instance, when Jack blames Algernon for his opinion about faithfulness, affirming ironically that Divorce Courts are made specifically for people like Algernon, Algernon responds with the following utterance: “Divorces are made in heaven” (U9). The original conventional speech act is “marriages are made in heaven” as stated in the Bible. He is the same character who reverses the routinized speech act “two is company and three is none”. In fact, the characters seem unaware of and playful with the laws which govern the institution of marriage.

However, the violation of the Maxim of Relation in the speech acts they use implies the intention of denouncing the state of marriage in Victorian society. Some characters like Algernon are not serious about the question and they have a cynical view of the situation of marriage. Even the representative of conventional and traditional marriage who is Lady Bracknell, is trapped into an absurd view about the subject when she says: “to speak frankly, I’m not in favour of long engagements. They give people the opportunity of finding out each other’s character before marriage, which is never advisable” (U120). Her underlined utterance is irrelevant to what is said before by the same character because long engagements normally
contribute to building a marriage on a strong basis. This strategy is used by Wilde in order to show the inability of the characters to distinguish between what is true and what is false. Moreover, since the characters are acting in a socio-cultural context, they are made to consider the question of marriage in this way as a strategy to denounce the situation of marriage in Victorian society.

4.2.4. Strategy # 4 / Theme # D

Whenever the characters deal with important issues related to culture such as literature, literary criticism, education, history, politics, art, music, philosophy, religion and modern culture, they do this suddenly and these issues are irrelevant to their initial subject which is more immediate to their speech situation. The following three examples illustrate this pattern:

U14:

Jack: Of course it’s mine. [Moving to him], You have seen me with it a hundred times, and you have no right whatsoever to read what is written inside. It is a very ungentlemanly thing to read a private cigarette case.

Algernon: Oh! It is absurd to have a hard and fast rule about what one should read and what one shouldn’t. More than half of modern culture depends on what one shouldn’t read (483).

Jack utters an assertive speech act of blame. Algernon responds with an assertive speech of protest. In fact, he goes beyond the protest against Jack’s reproach to the protest against the fact that half of the books which deal with modern culture are not published. The character hints at censorship which is a crucial issue and it is dealt with suddenly and in irrelevance to the subject of the cigarette case which is far less important and more immediate to their speech situation.

U44:

Lady Bracknell: [In a severe, judicial voice.] Prism! [Miss Prism bows her head in shame.] Come here, Prism! [Miss Prism approaches in a

Lady Bracknell deals with the subject of modern education suddenly which is irrelevant to the initial subject which is testing the gentlemanly character of Jack. She wants to know the amount of his knowledge but she goes beyond that to the criticism of the whole system of modern education in England.

U124:

Lady Bracknell: [In a severe, judicial voice.] Prism! [Miss Prism bows her head in shame.] Come here, Prism! [Miss Prism approaches in a
humble manner.] Prism Where is that baby? [General consternation. The Canon starts back in horror.
Algernon and Jack pretend to be anxious to shield Cecily and Gwendolen from hearing the details of a terrible public scandal.]
Twenty-eight years ago, Prism, you left Lord Bracknell’s house, Number 104, Upper Grosvenor Street, in charge of a perambulator that contained a baby of a male sex. You never returned. A few weeks later, through the elaborate investigation of the metropolitan police, the perambulator was discovered at midnight, standing by itself in a remote written in bold corner of Bayswater. It contained the manuscript of a three volume novel of more than usually revolting sentimentality. [Miss Prism starts in involuntary indignation.] But the baby was not there! [Everyone looks at Miss Prism.] Prism! Where is that baby? (534).

Lady Bracknell’s utterance is irrelevant to the initial subject she deals with in the same speech turn. In a moment of anger and indignation, Lady Bracknell suddenly shifts to speaking about the theme of the novel. It is an implicit, and as if an accidental, criticism of the novels written in that period.

In these examples, the characters deviate suddenly from their subject matter to a more important issue in such a way that the axis of communication changes from character-character to stage-audience. Consequently, Strategy # 4 exemplifies an important characteristic of dramatic discourse which is the existence of two axes of communication namely, the fictional axis and the theatrical one. Rozik (2000) argues that the axis of communication changes from character-character to stage-audience when the playwright intends to convey a message to the audience which is usually belief change (Rozik 2000: 124). It is exactly what happens when strategy # 4 occurs and reoccurs in the play. What motivates the use of this strategy when these issues are dealt with?

It is typical of Wilde to deal with important cultural issues in a sudden way In the Importance of Being Earnest. In fact, being irrelevant to what is said before and being dealt with suddenly, these issues seem to be treated accidentally rather than deliberately, which is a pragmatic strategy for an implicit criticism. It is very clever of Wilde to undertake a double criticism through this strategy. First, he questions the validity of what is allowed to be read and the validity of modern education, of literary criticism, of history, of some literary genre like middle class novels and all the cultural features of Victorian society. Second, he criticizes the fact that people are forbidden from dealing with these issues in public or in a direct way, which explains the resort of his characters to strategy # 4. In fact, strategy # 4 is the resort of the playwright himself and not just of Algernon and Jack.

4.3. Conclusion: Irrelevance/seriousness

The four patterns described, interpreted and evaluated above constitute macro speech acts which deal with norms of behavior, hospitality, marriage and culture. Each macro speech act is marked by the violation of the Maxim of Relation which generates implicature. According
to Strategy # 1/ Theme # A, it is implied that the characters want to escape from the norms of behavior because these norms are frustrating. With reference to Strategy # 2/ Theme # B, it is implied that the characters prefer to be preoccupied with the trivial act of eating, enjoying the playfulness with the norms of hospitality rather than bothering with the burden of social problems. According to Strategy # 3/ Theme # C, it is implied that the characters have a cynical view of the institution of marriage because people are no longer serious about it. According to Strategy # 4/ Theme # D, it is implied that the characters aim to question the validity of cultural features in Victorian society.

As a conclusion, irrelevance stems from the permanent inability of the characters to distinguish between the serious and the trivial or rather from the inability to be either serious or not serious. They escape from taking a final choice between the two and enjoy being playful with all the norms, conventions, rules and values of their society. U104 reflects this tendency:

**U104:**

**Algernon:** Well, one must be serious about something, if one wants to have any amusement in life. I happen to be serious about Bunburying. What on earth you are serious about I haven’t got the remotest idea. About everything, I should fancy. You have such an absolutely trivial nature.

(522).

Just in one utterance, the character violates the Maxim of Relation three times: Someone should be serious for amusement; Algernon is serious about Bunburying; Jack has a trivial character because he is serious about everything.

This conclusion is significant to the literary text as a whole because it establishes its unity: There is a unifying strategy which is irrelevance and a unifying theme which is seriousness.

5. Conclusion

It has been proved that speech act theory is relevant to the study of *The Importance of Being Earnest*. The marked use of speech acts manifested in the violation of the Maxim of Relation is characterized by four pragmatic strategies. Whenever one of these strategies is used, it is more likely to deal with a specific theme which explains the interrelationship strategy/theme supported by this study.

The significance of this pragmatic study is that it relates the play to its socio-cultural context. In order to question the social values of Victorian society, the characters show lack of seriousness about the different social features of that society, especially when they utter irrelevant speech acts to their immediate discourse situation.

Besides relating the play to its socio-cultural context, this pragmatic study maintains the specificity of the dramatic discourse. The violation of the Maxim of Relation results in ironic speech acts and in comic situations which reflect the genre of the play as a comedy of manners.

As a result of this pragmatic study, the play is characterized by a high predictability concerning which strategy is used with which theme leading to think about a mechanical
structure. In fact, this mechanical structure is behind Bernard Shaw’s description of Wilde’s play as having a banal structure (Raby 1988: 120). Within this respect, the contribution of the present study is to show that behind this mechanical structure lay implied meanings that the most complex structures may not be able to convey. In fact, *The Importance of Being Earnest* does things with its words rather than with its plot or structure.

This study chooses to focus on the violation of the Maxim of Relation; however, this does not indicate that the only pragmatic tool which contributes to the global meaning of the play is the violation of the Maxim of Relation. The play is still open for other pragmatic studies from other perspectives. Moreover, the interrelationship strategy/theme that the present study argues for should be interpreted as a marked recurrent pattern in the play rather than as a strategy which governs the whole of it. In fact, literature is always open for more than one interpretation; therefore, the same conclusion should apply to pragmatic interpretation of literature.
References


