

Rebellion Against Gender Disciplines: Analysing the Female Protagonist Beth's Speech in *The Queen's Gambit* Based on Politeness Principle

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Abstract:

Politeness is an important index in language and gender study. It is widely acknowledged that women tend to use politer language than men. Originating in gender imbalance, this phenomenon, in turn, upholds and improves unequal gender order. Leech's politeness principle (from now on PP) has rarely been applied to measure the politeness of women's language. Therefore, this study uses PP as a basis for collecting and interpreting the female protagonist Beth's utterances in the American TV series *The Queen's Gambit* (from now on QG). Set in the second wave of feminism, QG embodies a strong "feminist conscience." Underpinned by the data observed and collected, Beth's characterization received an in-depth interpretation through qualitative and quantitative research methods. Therefore, the role the QG plays in breaking down gender disciplines has been clarified—it directly helps to dispel societal expectations and stereotypes imposed on women's language and further contributes to conveying female empowerment.

Keywords: Politeness principle; Gender disciplines; Women's language; *The Queen's Gambit*

1. Introduction

Adapted from Walter Tevis's 1983 novel of the same name, QG focuses on the ups and downs of Beth Harmon, a talented chess player. Walter Tevis stated in an interview that his intended message was *female empowerment*.

QG is set in the United States in the 1950s and 1960s, when the second wave of feminism was in its infancy, and more women began to fight against the injustices of their gender and for equal rights. Against this background, QG portrays various women, telling from their encounters and different choices in the face of gender disciplines in that era. Among them, the main character, Beth, gets the most description. Compared with most women, she was independent, confident, calm, and stubborn. She always refuses to depend on others and dares to question and revolt against the societal disciplines or expectations of women. It has a certain positive significance to the dissolution of female stereotypes and the construction of female discourse power. Therefore, QG is a good studying material for this pragmatic research.

Gender differences in language are an important topic in sociolinguistics. Since the 1960s, many Western linguists have begun to study the relationship between politeness and gender, such as Lewis and Harry Crockett, William

Riley, Patricia Nichols, and Coates. They studied speech gender differences from different perspectives, and all of their research results verified that women are more willing to use standard and decent language than men. Also, their grammar is more correct than that of men. Consequently, their language is politer than men's. In 1975, Robin Lakoff published the book *Language and Women's Place*, considered one of the most influential books in studying women's language. Its publication greatly advanced the study of women's language and gender differences in language use. She claimed that women tend to act passive and submissive when talking to others^[1]. Additionally, Lakoff summarised ten typical features of women's speech and named it Women's Language, one of which was the use of super polite forms^[1].

It is universally believed that women's language is politer in verbal communication, and they are more likely to praise and compliment others. The words they choose are subtler and more modest, i.e., they obey PP more frequently. Conversely, men pay more attention to the instrumental and meaningful functions of language and focus on self-presentation to enhance their status and prestige. In verbal communication, they like to control the conversation, interrupt each other, and express their ideas and opinions directly, i.e., violating PP. A crucial reason for

this is the uneven distribution of power. For example, in 1980, Brown studied politeness strategies in the Tenejapan village of southern Mexico. It was found that Tenejapan women use far more politeness markers than men to avoid offense. Brown expounded that women intentionally used these verbal differences to cope with their social and physical vulnerability to men^[2]. This difference in the use of language also reinforces the unequal discipline that “women should be politer than men.”

To measure the degree of politeness in conversation, this study adopts the principle proposed by the famous British scholar Leech in 1983. Leech believes that people deliberately violate the Cooperation Principle in verbal communication and express their thoughts indirectly so as to let the listener understand their real intentions. Sometimes, it is for the sake of politeness^[3].

Generally speaking, current research includes several limitations, as follows: Firstly, so far, PP has seldom been applied to study women’s language. Secondly, although PP is a popular tool for discourse analysis in films and television, it mainly focuses on the characters’ speech to help the audience understand the work and provide implications for interpersonal interactions. No attention has been paid to analyzing women’s characterization by counting the number of PP segments. Thirdly, studying PP in QG is blank now.

Considering that characters’ speech can reflect their characterization, this study focuses on the conversation between the main character, Beth, and other characters. The author analyses whether Beth’s speech obeys or violates the maxims in PP and then compiles a table to record relevant data. Finally, some typical segments will be interpreted from the feminist dimension. This study can thoroughly evaluate the degree of the character’s verbal politeness to dig into the specific communicative purpose and pragmatic effect. The author further contributes by exploring whether Beth’s speech breaks through the stereotypes of women’s language and whether it is conducive to defying the traditional gender construct that women should be politer. The purpose is to evaluate what role the QG plays in breaking down the traditional representations of females in audio-visual media and whether it can cause the audience’s reflections on the gender imbalance in society, thus dispelling negative socialization into normative gendered behaviors.

2. Theory

This study is anchored on the PP proposed by Leech. The most widely used politeness theories are Brown and Levinson’s (1978) and its modified version (1987), Lakoff’s (1973), and Leech’s (1983, 2005) theories of

politeness^[4]. Lakoff listed three rules of politeness: 1. Don’t impose. 2. Give options. 3. Make A feel good—be polite^[1]. However, she did not explain how to understand these social rules or how the addresser and addressee will judge and use these rules in a specific context. Brown and Levinson provided a comprehensive discussion of face, dividing face-related behavior into face-saving and face-threatening acts. However, their theory has no maxims for analyzing concrete segments. Compared with the above two theories, Leech’s PP provides more specific maxims and uses “benefit” and “cost,” two complementary variables, to facilitate the judgment of politeness. The principle of politeness consists of the following basic principles: First, the tactic maxim includes (1) minimizing costs to others and (2) maximizing benefits to others. The generosity maxim includes (1) minimizing the benefit to self and (2) maximizing the cost to self. Approbation maxim, including (1) Minimise dispraise of others; (2) Maximise praise of others. Modesty maxim, including (1) Minimise praise of self; (2) Maximise dispraise of self. The agreement maxim includes (1) minimizing disagreement between self and others and (2) maximizing agreement between self and others. Sympathy maxim includes (1) Minimise antipathy between self and others; (2) Maximise sympathy between self and others^[5].

Before comparing and illustrating the research data, the criteria for measuring whether or not the segments violated some maxim should be clarified since the touchstone for observing PP maxims was explicitly expounded by Leech. So far, there has not been an authoritative or influential theory on the maxims of violating PP. However, research on the issue of violating PP in different scenarios and impoliteness can be found. In some of these researches, the researchers directly judged whether an utterance violated PP based on their understanding of PP maxims without giving definitive criteria targeted at each one. A previous paper generally stated that if people violate PP, they may not make the hearers feel good, and then specific judgments may be passed on each utterance^[6]. On the other hand, some papers presented different definitions. Take the violation of the Tact maxim as an example; one paper proposed that a speaker did not try to maximize the partner’s benefits^[7]. Another study held that the Tact maxim violation occurred if speakers did not provide lower values on both speakers’ and speech partners’ intentions^[8]. According to Wang, violating the Tact maxim meant saying things that are harmful to others^[9].

Combining the above research results and based on Leech’s definition, the author proposed the following criteria for this research: A violation of the Tact maxim is to express words that are too blunt or unkind as to hurt others; violating the Generosity maxim is to contend purely

for self-interest rather than considering others'; a violation of the Approbation maxim is to belittle or disparage others; violating the Modesty maxim means not being reluctant to praise oneself; a violation of the Agreement maxim happens when one's viewpoints and positions do not coincide with those of others in their conversation; and a violation of the Sympathy maxim happens when one expresses his or her feelings that are antagonistic to those of others.

3. Research Method

As a qualitative approach, discourse analysis is widely applied in pragmatic study. It can provide the tools to look at larger units of texts, such as conversational and textual organizational patterns that are typical of particular uses of language or genres^[10]. Discourse analysts may also look at the broader social context of language use and how this impacts what is said and how it is said in a written or spoken text^[10]. Furthermore, politeness is one of the key areas of influence in discourse analysis^[10]. This study selected segments of discourse containing PP maxims to measure the degree of politeness in Beth's speech under certain contexts. The author made a further contribution by selecting several typical segments for detailed analysis, thus digging into the characterization of Beth, which is constructed through her speech.

On the other hand, the quantitative approach can establish generalizable facts involving controlled measurement and replicable data, which enables it to reduce the risks of bias in applying the qualitative approach. Moreover, data collected from the complete TV series can be contained in a figure or table. This allows the research to circumvent the qualitative approach's limitation in that not all segments of Beth's utterances can be shown and interpreted. In this study, every segment of Beth's utterances was evaluated, among which those containing PP were collected and as-sorted according to different PP maxims. Then, the author

interpreted the data to help analyze Beth's characteristics. In a word, the qualitative approach and quantitative approach were integrated in this study. Hence, objectivity was enforced. The qualitative approach was used as the major analytical approach, and the quantitative approach was a supplement to it,

The following is the specific application of the research method.

IResearch Design

The author initially collected qualitative data because the data are the utterances of the character Beth within the TV series that take the form of words and sentences rather than numerical data. Then, the frequency and proportion of PP observed and violated were calculated, respectively. A table was compiled for analysis based on the data collected.

ISource of Data

The source of the data for this research was the QG script. The data came from the utterances by the heroine Beth, who observed or violated six kinds of PP maxims.

IData Collection

The technique to collect data for this research is as follows:

- Watch QG to understand the whole story.
- Underlining utterances that contain the PP maxims.

IData Analysis

- Classifying the listed dialogue (utterances) into two categories: observing and violating PP maxims.
- Compiling a table to record the frequency and proportion of PP maxims observed and violated in Beth's utterance
- Comparing, analyzing, and interpreting the data to answer the problem of the research based on Leech's PP.
- Draw a conclusion based on the result of the analysis.

4. Results and Discussion

Table 1. The General Statistic Result of PP Maxim Applied in QG

Numble	Kinds of PP maxims	Frequency of observing PP maxims	Proportion	Frequency of violating PP maxims	Proportion
1	Tact maxim	23	41.07%	12	17.65%
2	Generosity maxim	10	17.86%	2	2.94%
3	Approbation maxim	12	21.43%	5	7.35%
4	Modesty maxim	1	1.79%	12	17.65%
5	Agreement maxim	7	12.50%	31	45.59%
6	Sympathy maxim	3	5.36%	6	8.82%
Total		56	100.00%	68	100.00%

As shown in Table 1, 124 times of observing and violating PP maxims have been recorded for analyzing Beth's speech. Regarding observing PP, the Tact maxim dominates noticeably at over 40% among six maxims. Part of the reason is that the Tact Maxim is related to benefit and cost. Out of politeness, people prefer to use the Tact Maxim to benefit others the greatest or to cost others the least. The Tact Maxim, therefore, can bring people the most benefits and win the most popularity^[11]. The Approbation maxim ranks second, at over 20%. It can be deduced that Beth was adept at using language tactics at a minimum cost since the two maxims usually cost the speaker the least. As for violating PP, the proportion of the Agreement maxim is the highest at over 45%, which proves that Beth

always stands her ground and dares to question or resist. Although lower than half the proportion of the Agreement maxim, the Tact and Modesty maxim are the second most frequently violated. It can be assumed that Beth is sometimes blunt or unkind in her speaking, opposite to conventional notions of femininity—tenderness and humility. Also, her violation of modesty demonstrates that she is proud of her chess talent and quite open about her ambitions. It displays her impressive courage to fight against people's discrimination and doubts derived from the male dominance of chess. Overall, Beth violates PP more frequently than observes PP; thus, it is verified that the characterization of the female protagonist in QG challenges the traditional gender roles.

Table 2. The Statistic Result of PP Applied in QG in Each Episode

Episode	Frequency of observing PP maxims	Frequency of violating PP maxims
1	2	8
2	7	8
3	2	11
4	8	7
5	16	12
6	10	21
7	11	2

The frequency of observing and violating PP in each episode is collected to obtain further insight into Beth's characterization. Notably, although Beth violates PP more frequently, it can be concluded from the total number that the ratio of the two frequencies is reversed in some episodes. The ever-changing ratio can be interpreted with Beth's growth and transformation in each episode.

In Episode 1, Beth violates PP 4 times more than she observes. Episode 1 depicts her childhood in the orphanage, where she was shrouded by the trauma of losing her mother and being abandoned by her father. She did not know how to deal with people properly, which accentuated the streak of obstinateness and defensiveness in her character. The frequency of observing and violating PP is almost equal in Episode 2, which focuses on Beth's adolescence. Beth was adopted by the Wheatleys and learned to be obedient at home. This transformation was due to her passion for chess, as she did not want to be sent back to the orphanage where she was forbidden to play chess. However, at school and on the chess field, her rebellious attitude and burning ambition to win kept her from speaking politely. In Episode 3, Beth became famous because of her continuous victory in chess. Her increasing violations of PP could be attributed to two situations. First, she displayed extreme confidence when dealing with other male chess

players, thus showing no politeness on their faces. The second happened when she received doubts and stereotypes targeted at her gender. She fought against these discriminations, partially by violating PP. Beth's most conversations were with her adoptive mother, Mrs. Wheatley, in Episode 4, where she tasted defeat and conflicted with Mrs. Wheatley. The former urged her to contemplate and be less assertive, while the latter made her utter some offensive words on impulse. It is noticeable that Beth still observed PP 5 times when talking with Mrs. Wheatley. Despite conflicts, Beth loved her adoptive mother, her only reliance and companion. In Episode 5, the ratio was slightly reversed. Devastated by Mrs. Wheatley's death, Beth was in the most vulnerable condition mentally. Then her old opponent Harry gave her a helping hand, accompanying her to improve her chess skills. She was grateful for his help and held a friendly attitude. On the other hand, Beth was candid in expressing her opinion, especially in chess, so she still violated PP more than ten times. In Episode 6, Beth had an unprecedented breakdown after her failure. Isolated herself from the outside, she rejected every care and help from others and indulged in alcohol and sedatives. This terrible state was reflected in her negative speech—she violated PP approximately twice when observing PP. In Episode 7, Beth weaned off the sedatives

and got back on the right track under the company of her female friend Jolene and the care of her first chess teacher, Mr. Shiabel. Much calmer and more composed, even in the face of tremendous pressure, she can focus on herself. Finally, she defeated the strongest opponent, Borgov, and became the world champion.

Overall, the complexity of Beth's personality is evident merely by exploring PP maxims in her utterances. QG has shaped the female protagonist dynamically through Beth's journey of self-redemption. Despite perennial aggressiveness and rationalism, she also embodies vulnerability and emotionalism. Such a diverse character beyond normative femininity can better lead the audience to empathize and perceive female power and appeal.

Three typical segments of Beth's utterances were selected and interpreted in detail.

IObserving PP maxims

1. Observing the Generosity maxim

Mrs. Wheatley:It's all Greek, all of a sudden.

Beth: It's okay, I've heard enough.

Context: Beth's adoptive mother, Mrs. Wheatley, was reading a piece of news for Beth. But suddenly, the Greek, which she knew little, interrupted her reading.

Analysis: Although Beth enjoyed the news, she told Mrs. Wheatley she had heard enough. Beth's reply saved Mrs. Wheatley from the dilemma. As the speaker, Beth maximized the cost and minimized the benefit to herself.

IViolating PP maxims

1. Violating the Tact and Generosity maxim

Mr. Shaibel: You resign now.

Beth: Resign?

Mr. Shaibel: That's right, child. When you lose the queen that way...you resign.

Beth: No.

Mr. Shaibel: Yes, you have resigned the game.

Beth: You didn't tell me that in the rules.

Mr. Shaibel: It's not a rule; it's sportsmanship.

Beth: I wanna finish.

Mr. Shaibel: No.

Beth: You've got to finish.

Context: Little Beth was learning how to play chess with Mr. Shaibel, the custodian of the orphanage. She lost her queen, but she was unwilling to resign.

Analysis: Beth's words were blunt and aggressive because of her pride and stubbornness. Apparently, the utterance did not minimize the cost to Mr. Shaibel and instead exasperated him—each time, he replied more mercilessly than the last. Also, there was no hint of generosity since the

sheer goal of Beth's words was striving for her benefit.

2. Violating the Agreement maxim

Reporter: So, can you tell the readers how it feels? I mean, to be a girl among all those men?

Beth: I don't mind it.

Reporter: Isn't it intimidating? When I was a girl, I wasn't allowed to be competitive. I played with dolls.

Beth: Chess isn't always competitive.

Reporter: No, but you play to win.

Beth: Yes, but chess can also be...

Context: Beth was having an interview with a female reporter.

Analysis: Although the reporter tried to manipulate Beth's answers with suggestive questions, Beth frankly proposed her ideas disapprovingly, thus violating the Agreement maxim. Here, the reporter and Beth had distinct views. The reporter represented the expectations and stereotypes imposed on women and chess by society.

5. Conclusion

By exploring utterances containing PP, it has been found that the discursive construction of the protagonist Beth in QG effectively served the characterization of the character: a career-driven woman advocated in the second wave of feminism. Beth's qualities, such as ambition, independence, and stubbornness, which revolt against negative societal disciplines specific to women, are decisive for her success in the male-dominated chess world. Additionally, her utterances have been shown to the audiences through audio-visual media, ultimately contributing to the dissolution of societal expectations placed on women's language. Although the criteria for violating PP have been strictly ruled in the theory section, judging the sentences is subjective work. Thus, it is inevitable that the results of this study were partially affected by personal understanding. Despite this limitation, this paper provides a new idea for studying gender language from the dimension of politeness. Other politeness theories, like Brown and Levinson's four main types of politeness strategies, can be combined with Leech's PP as judging criteria for further study to enhance credibility and objectivity.

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