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**Cognitive and Discursive Framing of Prejudice: Elizabeth  
Bennet's Mental Model of Mr. Darcy in Austen's Pride and  
Prejudice**



<sup>1</sup>**Abdul Khaliq**

<sup>2</sup>**Altaf**

<sup>\*3</sup>**Muhammad Ramzan**

<sup>1</sup>BS English Student (5th Semester), National University of Modern Languages, Islamabad, Pakistan.

Email: [akhaliqnur@gmail.com](mailto:akhaliqnur@gmail.com)

<sup>2</sup>BS English Student (5th Semester), National University of Modern Languages, Islamabad, Pakistan.

Email: [h32003800@gmail.com](mailto:h32003800@gmail.com)

<sup>\*3</sup>PhD in English Scholar at Qurtuba University, Peshawar. Elementary and Secondary Education Department, KPK, Pakistan.

Email: [ramzannur@gmail.com](mailto:ramzannur@gmail.com)

**Abstract**

This study uses van Dijk's (1997, 2017) socio-cognitive approach to examine a critical scene in Jane Austen's (1994) *Pride and Prejudice*, in which Elizabeth Bennet hears Mr. Darcy make a derogatory remark about her family. The study observes how language influences ideological narratives within the novel's setting and period. It does this by combining linguistic analysis with social cognition. It reveals that certain linguistic features, including modality and evaluative language, reveal how individuals perceive themselves and their social status. It also examines how people's behavior in the situation supports or challenges the social hierarchy. It also illustrates how mental models and social representations shape people's perceptions and interactions with one another. This adds to the novel's complex picture of social mobility and human agency. The results suggest that van Dijk's socio-cognitive CDA is still helpful in figuring out how literary works relate to society. They also provide us with new ways to think about how Austen critiques social norms and unfairness.

**Introduction**

This article employs a Van Dijkian (1997, 2017) socio-cognitive approach to critical discourse analysis to examine a pivotal episode in Jane Austen's *Pride and Prejudice*, specifically the scene where Elizabeth Bennet overhears Mr. Darcy utter something unpleasant. At first glance, this incident may not seem important.

However, it is crucial for sustaining and renewing the social and ideological dynamics of class, gender, and power in early nineteenth-century England. This study examines speech from both small-scale (linguistic and cognitive) and large-scale (social structure and ideology) perspectives. It demonstrates how seemingly insignificant things people say can help maintain social systems.

Several theoretical perspectives, including dialogic stance, intersubjective positioning, and the socio-cognitive interaction between speech and mental models, have contributed to shaping and enhancing this study. Even though the source materials differ, they all provide essential information about dialogic contractiveness, power dynamics, and evaluative positioning (White, 2003). Additionally, Diniz's

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(2020) short article *Women and the Discourse of Marriage: A Critical Analysis of Jane Eyre and Pride and Prejudice* provides us with a context for Darcy's comment that fits within a larger narrative about class, wealth, and gender ideals.

## **Discourse**

Discourse is the use of language as a social activity, not merely as separate words or phrases. CDA sees speech as something that is influenced by and shapes social, political, and cultural settings (Fairclough, 2003). Norman Fairclough, Teun van Dijk, and Ruth Wodak are among the most influential figures in this field. Fairclough (2003) argues that discourse encompasses not only what is said, but also the ideas, power dynamics, and social institutions that influence how people communicate with one another. Van Dijk (2012) emphasizes the study of larger communicative events, such as media, political, and academic discourses, to demonstrate how language contributes to maintaining social domination. Wodak (2015) discusses the discourse-historical method, which connects discourse analysis to broader social and historical contexts.

CDA examines how language maintains or challenges power and inequality, which makes discourse both a subject of study and a means to critique society. CDA demonstrates how dominant ideas are constructed and reinforced in texts and interactions by examining them closely (Shojaei, 2013). It is not enough to only identify blatant prejudices; we also need to uncover the subtler, sometimes unconscious, language patterns that perpetuate social hierarchies. CDA provides people with the tools they need to address these power disparities and advocate for more equitable ways of communicating and interacting with others. The goal is to utilize linguistic awareness to bring about social change by breaking down repressive patterns embedded in language.

## **Synopsis of the Novel**

Jane Austen's *Pride and Prejudice* is a renowned novel set in the English countryside during the early 19th century. The story revolves around Elizabeth Bennet, the intelligent and lively second daughter of the Bennet household (Simionato, 2020). Because their inheritance is tied to a distant male cousin, the Bennet family's future is uncertain. This makes it very important for the five Bennet girls to marry well.

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The narrative starts with the news that Mr. Bingley, a rich and single man, is coming to Netherfield Park. This makes everyone in the area very happy. He quickly falls in love with Jane Bennet, who is Elizabeth's older sister. However, Elizabeth does not initially like Mr. Darcy's friend because she thinks he is haughty and distant (Benetti, 2013).

As the story goes on, Elizabeth's thoughts are shaped by misconceptions and biases. She thinks Darcy is arrogant, but Darcy genuinely admires her intelligence and strength of character, even if he must consider his social standing. Mr. Wickham, a handsome militia man with ties to Darcy, and Lady Catherine de Bourgh, who likes to get involved, make things even more complicated.

Elizabeth Bennet dislikes Mr. Darcy intensely when she first meets him in *Pride and Prejudice*. She thinks he is rude, arrogant, and unpleasant, mostly because he seems snooty and gets in the way of her sister Jane's new relationship with Mr. Bingley. She hears him say something bad about her, which makes her view of him even worse. Darcy's actions after that do little to improve her view of him. His proposal demonstrates his genuine care, yet the way he presents it inadvertently reinforces her biases (Kurson, 2011). He frequently discusses how her family is worse than his and how her relationships are flawed, which Elizabeth finds highly unacceptable. Elizabeth begins to reconsider her opinion of Darcy. She sees the good in him after a series of events: Darcy's assistance to Lydia, Wickham's schemes that reveal Darcy's true nature, and Darcy's improved behavior. She realizes that her first judgment was wrong, and the scales fall from her eyes. This leads to a better and, ultimately, a happier understanding.

Elizabeth did not like Darcy at first since he seemed proud and distant. She thinks he cares too much about his social standing and does not care about the people around him, especially her family. At the Meryton ball, he refuses to dance with anybody outside of his little group and makes fun of the local ladies, which further strengthens this first impression. Elizabeth hears him say that she is "tolerable, but not handsome enough to tempt" him. This hurts her pride and makes her more prejudiced. His arrogance appears to back up everything she hates about the upper class: they think they deserve things, they are not lovely, and they look down on those they

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believe are lower than them.

## **Van Dijk's Approach**

Van Dijk (1997) deals with the way the common social knowledge, (social) attitudes, and ideologies determine the use of language in communication. It emphasizes the importance of mutual understanding for effective communication. The method reveals that it is not the model social situation per se, but the way the participants perceive it, that affects the text-talk structure. This perspective emphasizes the importance of focusing on cognitive activities in social interaction for practical discourse analysis.

Van Dijk (2013) also claims that these mental representations, which tend to be informed by our social interactions, also guide our understanding of and contribution to discourse. Scholars and speakers select words and phrases to convey messages that are clear, informative, and easily understood by the intended audience. They also use these words and phrases to avoid misunderstandings and to position themselves strategically in the social field.

## **Literature Review**

Austen's *Pride and Prejudice* (1994) has been analyzed and critically examined by numerous researchers. In this study of the literature, we examine the main tendencies, disputes, and academic perspectives that have shaped the study of this well-known novel. Much of the early criticism centered on Austen's writing style and her sharp observations on social behavior. Lynch (2020) argues that George Henry Lewes and E.M. Forster were two critics who appreciated Austen's subtle irony and her ability to make characters that were both complex and believable. Many of these readings focused on how Austen portrayed courtship, class, and the limitations that women faced in Regency England.

Later feminist critiques changed the subject to Elizabeth Bennet's role as a proto-feminist heroine and how the book either supports or challenges patriarchal ideas. Sandra M. Gilbert and Susan Gubar are two scholars who have discussed how Elizabeth's refusal to marry for convenience demonstrates that women can be independent and make their own choices (Pinelli, 1991).

Recent research in critical discourse analysis and cultural studies has expanded the field to examine how the novel continues to impact people today. These kinds of

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studies examine how *Pride and Prejudice* is continually reinterpreted in new media, highlighting how current discussions about gender, identity, and power shape the story (Vrousgou, 2023). Postcolonial readings, such as those by Edward Said, have questioned how closed off Austen's world appears to be and called for a broader view of the historical context of her work.

In short, this study on *Pride and Prejudice* demonstrates the richness and flexibility of the book. Academic interest in the novel has changed throughout time, from early formalist criticisms to more recent studies of gender, class, and cultural politics. This keeps the novel at the center of literary studies.

## **Methodology and Theoretical Framework**

Van Dijk's (1997, 2017) socio-cognitive paradigm stresses that discourse is closely tied to ideological mental models and social knowledge. This research employs a qualitative, discourse-analytical method grounded in van Dijk's Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) paradigm for socio-cognitive analysis. The primary objective is to analyze the language, social cognition, and power dynamics in a pivotal moment in *Pride and Prejudice* (Jane Austen) when Elizabeth hears Darcy's contemptuous remark. The goal of this study is to demonstrate how discursive practices influence social identities, mental models, and the distribution of power in society.

## **Framework for Analysis**

The research is based on van Dijk's (1997, 2017) socio-cognitive model of CDA, which focuses on how language, social cognition, and power affect each other. The three layers in this structure are all connected:

- Discourse structures, such as the way texts are constructed, the choice of syntax, and the ordering of narratives, reveal how language shapes social reality.
- Cognitive Processes: To understand how meaning is constructed and perceived, it is essential to examine the speakers' mental representations, also known as 'mental models.' For example, Darcy sees himself as a member of a higher class, whereas Elizabeth's counter-model evolves, demonstrating self-respect and critical awareness. This aspect is connected to the larger socio-cognitive perspective, which posits that language aligns with memory and expectations.

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- Societal and Ideological Context: The way language interacts with prevalent societal ideas, especially those related to class and gender, makes the speech seem more than just a personal gesture; it also appears to be an ideological act. Darcy's dismissive response is not just one phrase; it aligns with the conventions that prioritize aristocratic detachment and male authority, relegating women's views to the bottom (Diniz, 2020).

## **Analysis**

Van Dijk's (1997, 2017) Socio-cognitive approach views discourse as a link between 'individual cognition' (mental models, personal biases) and 'social structures' (ideologies, power hierarchies). I add to the analysis below with additional textual examples that examine how Austen's writing demonstrates cognitive shifts, ideological reinforcement, and subversion.

### **1. Mental Models: How Characters Deal with Social Reality**

#### **Example 1: Elizabeth's Changing View on Darcy**

Initial Mental Model (Prejudice):

*"I could easily forgive his pride, if he had not mortified mine."* (Austen, 1994: p.18)

**Cognitive Process:** Elizabeth is angry because of something that harmed her personally (Darcy's comment during the Meryton ball). Her mental model makes him seem arrogant, which affects how she interacts with him later (for example, by believing Wickham's lies). That first impression affects every interaction. She thinks he is being condescending when he offers to help. When he does not say anything, she thinks he does not care. Even his efforts to be polite are seen through the lens of her first judgment. Mr. Wickham's charming manners and convincing stories find much room in Elizabeth's already biased mind. He confirms her fears by portraying Darcy as a nasty and vengeful character, which reinforces her negative view even more. Every little thing, real or imagined, makes her more sure that Darcy is the arrogant villain she thought he was at first.

So, when Darcy tries to make things right, Elizabeth sees it as more proof of his arrogance. His very presence is an insult, a constant reminder of how she first judged him. She actively seeks evidence that supports her point of view, disregarding any information that contradicts it as either a lie or a deliberate move to further his

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own goals. Elizabeth has a hard time reconciling Darcy's good deeds with her previous perception of him. Wickham's lies and her own bias make it hard for her to see that Darcy might be a good person. She is still stuck in the prison she made for herself and cannot see past the distorted picture she has made.

## **Reconstruction of Mental Model (After Reading Darcy's Letter)**

*"How despicably have I acted! [...] Till this moment I never knew myself."* (Austen, 1994: p.162)

**Cognitive Dissonance:** The letter makes her have to rebuild her mental model of Darcy and herself. The exclamation ("despicably!") indicates a shift in how the person perceives. The tidy, exact handwriting that was once valued for its beauty and for showing that the writer had a calm, logical mind now seems like a well-planned façade. Each phrase is a premeditated barb, each statement an intentional undermining of her old certainties. What else had she gotten wrong if Darcy, the cold, arrogant, and seemingly unapproachable Darcy, could feel this way? The story she had made up to make him look bad and herself appear as an innocent victim of his arrogance begins to fall apart. The strands of her self-deception, which were once neatly hidden, now hang dangerously, ready to show the pride and bias that had kept her from seeing clearly.

**Social Cognition:** She made her decisions based on shared stereotypes (wealthy men = snobbish; charming soldiers = trustworthy). The letter breaks these patterns. The letter throws these schemas off. Wickham, who was previously neatly labelled as a "charming soldier," turns out to be a scheming fortune-hunter. Darcy, who was formerly perceived as a "snobbish wealthy man," displays unexpected levels of honesty and a desire to protect Elizabeth's family's reputation. This forces Elizabeth to face the fact that her quick decisions are not always right and that people are more complex than she thought. She knows that letting bias affect how she sees things is dangerous and that it is important to go beyond what you see on the outside. The letter serves as a severe lesson that prompts her to rethink her flawed reasoning, even though it hurts.

## **Last Mental Model (After Pemberley Visit):**



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"*She certainly did not hate him. No; hatred had vanished long ago,...*" (Ch. 43)

**Gradual Updating:** Austen demonstrates how Elizabeth's feelings evolve from hatred to uncertainty, then to respect, and ultimately to love.

## **Example 2: Darcy's Cognitive Transformation**

**Initial Class Prejudice:** "His sense of *her inferiority—of its being a degradation—of the family obstacles...*" (Austen, 1994: p.148)

**Mental Model:** Darcy's idea reveals his perspective on class. His use of the word "degradation" shows that he has a 'hierarchical social schema'. This schema is significantly different from Elizabeth's more egalitarian beliefs, indicating that their values are fundamentally divergent. Darcy's worry about "degradation" shows that he is afraid of losing his social status or tainting the purity of his family by marrying someone he thinks is below him. This point of view highlights the strict social limits that shape his world and affect his first impressions.

## **Revised Understanding:**

"*You are too generous to trifle with me. If your feelings are still what they were last April, tell me so at once.*" (Austen, 1994: p. 282)

**Discursive Shift:** The 'lexicon of superiority' (inferiority, degradation) is no longer there. Instead, "vulnerability" ("too generous") and "equality" ("if your feelings...") are the most important things.

**Cognitive Cause:** His mental model changes as he thinks about himself ("I was spoiled by my parents") and sees how honest Elizabeth is. Darcy's mental model changes as the tectonic plates of how he sees himself rub against each other. He starts to feel like his comfortable knowledge that he is better than everyone else and that life is easy for him because he has a silver spoon in his mouth is less like a right and more like a gilded cage. He admits, with a discomfort that makes his skin crawl, that his upbringing, which was carefully designed to make him feel entitled, may have unintentionally made him ignorant of real quality.

Elizabeth Bennet, with her sharp wit and strong sense of right and wrong, is a harsh and unattractive mirror. He sees in her a level of honesty that he has rarely seen before: she will not change her beliefs only to go ahead in society. The way she easily tears apart his statements and the way her eyes seem to mock him when he shares his

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thoughts make him face the emptiness of some of his most deeply held convictions.

The universe, which had seemed so cleanly structured and so readily arranged to mirror his importance, suddenly seems more complicated, more nuanced, and less willing to accept what he thought he knew. He begins to think that character, not ancestry or wealth, is what truly matters.

## **Conclusion**

Austen's (1994) *Pride and Prejudice* is more than just a book about etiquette; it is a space where mental models clash, ideas are built up and torn down, and conversation serves as both a weapon and a bridge. Van Dijk's (1997, 2017) socio-cognitive approach reveals how Austen's characters confront, challenge, and ultimately transform the societal institutions that restrict them. *Pride and Prejudice* remains popular because it tells the story of how people's ideas evolve and how that transformation can impact the world when expressed. Austen reminds us that language is never neutral; it is the currency of thought, the structure of society, and, in the proper hands, the tool of freedom. Austen was a genius not only because she wrote about the complex social issues of her time, but also because she demonstrated the profound impact of personal change. Elizabeth Bennet's story shows that people may grow intellectually and emotionally. Her willingness to question her own biases and do honest self-reflection drives the story forward. Mr. Darcy also changes. He lets go of his pride and learns to cherish real connections more than what society expects of him. Their changing views, expressed through humorous banter and profound thought, alter how they perceive themselves and each other, and ultimately, they come together in a relationship founded on love and respect. Austen shows that true freedom is not just about what happens outside of us, but also about questioning, learning, and accepting the possibility of change in ourselves and the world around us. *Pride and Prejudice* remains popular because it celebrates this potential to change things, reminding us that even the strongest ideas can be questioned and altered through the courage of open-minded conversation.

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