

**THE IMPORTANCE OF BEING EARNEST AS REGARDS  
BOTH PROPOSITIONAL AND PRAGMATIC BEHAVIOUR**

**Daniel Candel Bormann**

*Universidad de Alcalá*

*ABSTRACT*

Shewan's by now classic *Oscar Wilde: Art and Egotism* (1977) suggests that in *The Importance of Being Earnest*, Oscar Wilde's characters adhere to Brown & Levinson's Politeness Principle in their dialogues. This article partly criticizes such an assumption; it holds that in the dialogues the characters' utterances flout the Politeness Principle, thus leaving room for Wilde's conception of the self to come through. The article also states that such a flouting can only be understood by inserting a new variable into Brown & Levinson's equation  $W_x = D(S,H) + P(H,S) + R_x$ .

According to Shewan, Wilde's literary career was devoted both to the investigation of the self and its freedom from any outside imposition; and the creation of an expressive medium for his findings through the characters of his literary works (Shewan 1977: 1). Shewan argues that Wilde's opinions come best through in *The Importance of Being Earnest* (henceforth referred to as *Earnest*),<sup>1</sup> a comedy of manners in which "the inner monologue is ventriloquized as a one-man show with audience. [...] The author's voice proceeds from no one character but from the whole play" (Shewan 1977: 3); Shewan is herewith saying that Wilde's conception of the self reaches the play-goer only through the characters' witty inner monologues. Her argument is based on the assumption that, given that inner monologues transcend the power relationship holding between fictional characters, they can carry Wilde's outrageous ideas through to the audience without damaging the play's power structure.

It follows for Shewan that *Earnest's* interest lies not in the construction of specific characters, but in the way in which each voices Oscar Wilde's opinions at certain

moments. The play as a whole would thus, in a way, be its main character; the characters themselves would only function as stereotypes. Such an analysis is not wrong; every character does at times voice Wilde's ideological stance, and the inner monologues are indeed instrumental in creating Wilde's self. But as it stands, Shewan's argument also caters for some contradictions: according to Shewan, some of the play's characters *are* nearer than others to Wilde's point of view. Thus

1. Algernon stands nearest to Wilde's point of view (Shewan 1977: 187).
2. Jack is in an intermediate position (Shewan 1977: 187).
3. Lady Bracknell is the only character who is not in line with Wilde's self, for "earnestly saving face, she alone grows no wiser and gets no fun" (Shewan 1977: 188).

The present article partially contradicts Shewan's study: while all characters do indeed voice Wilde's conception of the self at one time or another, the extent to which they do so varies from character to character, since it is not only their inner monologues, but also their conversational behaviour which gives us clues as to the self Wilde is proposing. Therefore the play-goer's awareness of Wilde's opinions depends not merely on the play's propositional, but also on its pragmatic content; indeed, one of the most important aspects in the structure of *Earnest* would be its interaction between propositional *and* pragmatic content. Thus, though not incorrect, Shewan's study lacks, and is in need of, a pragmatic dimension.

## METHOD

This article is organized in two sections: section 1 will present both the notion of Wilde's self according to Shewan and the thesis which will guide the analysis of pragmatic behaviour in *Earnest*. It will also account for the selection of three of the play's characters —Jack, Algernon and Lady Bracknell— for analysis.

Section 2 is an analysis of the conversational behaviour of each pair of the selected characters in the following order: 1. Jack : Algernon; 2. Jack : Lady Bracknell; 3. Algernon : Lady Bracknell. Each analysis will include a "preliminary section", which consists of an attempt to establish both the power relationship holding between participants, as well as expectations regarding the degree of politeness they owe to each other; and a section "testing expectations", consisting of an analysis in terms of politeness of the conversational behaviour between every pair, to see whether and why expectations are or are not fulfilled.

## PROBLEMS

1st problem: It affects the analysis and presentation of data regarding the preliminary section, i.e. the power relationship holding between each pair of characters. I have tried to follow Brown & Levinson (1987)'s notion of politeness with its now customary analysis of conversational interaction in terms of P (power), D (social

distance) and R (rating of imposition). It has not proved possible to schematize P and D completely.

Brown & Gilman's objection as regards the uniformity of D is a serious one, and initially, their attempt to break it up into distance relation and relationship affect seems to me very promising (Brown & Gilman 1989: 192-96). In *Earnest*, breaking up D would seem to apply particularly well for the dialogues between Jack and Algernon, for on the one hand D is low in terms of *distance relation*, but in terms of *relationship affect* it seems to shift between affection (low D) and dislike (high D). However, such a break-up of D is not easily reflected in a chart.

P is also a far from uniform variable. Thus, there is no one P between Lady Bracknell and Jack. These characters do not seem to differ too much in terms of economic power; on the other hand, Lady Bracknell is older than Jack, socially his superior because of her fake pedigree (which came through marriage);<sup>2</sup> and finally she is Gwendolen's mother. How score such a variety of Ps; with +3 —one point for each factor— or only +1? Moreover, how formalize expectations regarding high P and low D, as for example, in the case of Lady Bracknell and Algernon? Therefore, and taking into account all these difficulties as regards the statistical representation of D and P I have preferred to verbalize an expectation after commenting on each case, rather than muddle my way through with numerical statistics.

2nd problem: It concerns the presentation of empirical data. The dialogues selected for analysis do not offer enough evidence to order data according to specific and invariable parameters. This is why each pair which engages in a dialogue presents its own characteristics; thus interaction between Jack and Lady Bracknell will be amenable to an analysis along the lines of question-answer-evaluation sequences, while the conversational behaviour of Jack and Algernon can be most fruitfully analyzed by looking into their use of directives and their topic control. Thus division into different sections of each pair's pragmatic behaviour is not methodologically induced; its aim is merely to make things a little easier for the reader. I take solace from the fact that other articles, for example Bennison's article on Stoppard's *Professional Foul* (1993), have had to approach this issue in a similarly eclectic fashion.

3rd problem: The last problem is linked to the selection of data to be analyzed. Selection has not always proved easy, since many of *Earnest's* comical effects depend on an irony which aims at the play-goer rather than the characters of the play. By rule of thumb, the easiest way to distinguish between an irony which is important for the purpose of our analysis and one which is not is to distinguish between instances in which characters against whom the irony is directed recognize it as such and instances in which they do not. Thus Jack's "I don't want to put the asses against the classes" (333) is relevant for this article, while Algernon's "I killed Bunbury this afternoon" (372) is not, for, while both are ironic, only the former is recognized to be so by its addressee —in both cases it is Lady Bracknell. This rule, whose application I will not comment on for obvious reasons of space, is not without problems; there are some cases where, even though not acknowledged by the addressee, irony might be an indicator of the power relationship holding between different characters. On the other hand, not including this rule might result in much unnecessary and confusing analysis.

## 1 MAIN THESIS - WILDE'S CONCEPTION OF THE SELF AND ITS IMPORTANCE FOR A PRAGMATIC ANALYSIS OF *EARNEST*

To analyze the pragmatic manifestation of the self as Wilde saw it, we have to understand what this self is. In *The Critic as Artist*, Wilde sees man in terms of energy, so much so that "To have a capacity for a passion and not to realize it, is to make oneself incomplete and limited" (1018). Thus Wilde's basic tenet is that man should always strive to be himself and, given that for Wilde all external authority, even that of social decorum and propriety, is detrimental to the development of the self, individuals should not accept authority from outside their self, for, as he indicates in *The Soul of Man under Socialism*,

Man has sought to live intensely, fully, perfectly. When he can do so without exercising restraint on others, or suffering it ever, and his activities are all pleasurable to him, he will be [...] more himself (1103-04)

Following the terminology set forth in *Earnest* (326), throughout the present article this practice of trying to do as one pleases will be referred to as "bunburying". Therefore it should follow that bunburying in *Earnest* should also be reflected in the characters' pragmatic behaviour; to do as they like, characters will be expected to undermine the power-relationships holding between themselves and their fellow characters.

The main thesis of this article is then quite straightforward: *Earnest's* characters being essentially flat, their conversational behaviour should be basically ruled by the politeness principle advanced by Brown & Levinson (with the proviso stated earlier),<sup>3</sup> to wit: "the weightiness of an FTA is calculated thus:  $W_x = D(S,H) + P(H,S) + R_x$ " (Brown & Levinson 1987: 76). But since there are significant departures from this equation in the conversational behaviour of some of *Earnest's* characters, and always in the understanding that the play's characters *are* flat, this article will try to locate such divergences from theory and account for them by inserting one further variable in Brown and Levinson's equation called "bunbury" or B; this variable will stand for what Shewan defines as Wilde's self, and will hopefully account for the shortcomings of Shewan's analysis as referred to earlier.

The characters under analysis — Jack, Algernon and Lady Bracknell — have been selected because they show the most basic gradation in terms of bunburying. Throughout *Earnest*, Algernon is the most consistent bunburyist, i.e. always tries to do as he likes, while Lady Bracknell never does. Jack occupies an intermediate position: while he does indulge in occasional bunburying, at home he is well-known for his respectability; besides, he intends to marry and therefore feels he has to do away with his bunburying habits.

## 2. CONVERSATIONAL BEHAVIOUR

### 2.1. JACK AND ALGERNON

#### *passages to analyze*

Act I 322-327, 335-37, 339

Act II 353-4, 355

Act III 367-70

*preliminary section*

Jack/Algernon

P: HIGH Jack is wealthier than Algernon and is also a man with social responsibilities; he is a JP and has a ward to look after.

D: LOW They know each other well. In theory they are presented as friends, but the fact that Algernon is a confirmed, and Jack only a half-hearted bunburyist, creates tensions between them.

Conclusion The fact that D is so low may lessen politeness, but because of P, Jack should in any case command some from Algernon.

*testing expectations*

*directives:* Between Jack and Algernon, the use of directives should be restricted to Jack, since it is he who commands respect over Algernon. However, findings indicate quite the contrary. For a start, Algernon issues as many directives as Jack (20:20). Thus Jack has enough power not to give Algernon any information about his country seat (325), even though the latter asks for it; and on the other hand, Algernon can forbid Jack to eat the cucumber sandwiches he had prepared for his aunt and eat them himself (323).

The way directives are uttered is as important as overall numbers, and this also runs counter to expectations. Seven of Jack's directives are repetitions of two initial directives which Algernon does not react to. Thus in the first act Jack has to ask four times for his cigarette case before getting it back; and in Act II and III Jack has to ask Algernon five times to leave, and to no avail. At other times, Jack's use of directives is merely a response to the fact that Algernon is annoying him. For example, just after Jack has been refused as Gwendolen's husband, Algernon strikes up a wedding march on the piano, which drives Jack mad, so that he exclaims: "For goodness sake don't play that ghastly tune, Algy!" (334). Thus the context in which directives are uttered reinforces the impression that expectations are not fulfilled in Jack and Algernon's dialogues.

The way directives are uttered also tells us that Algernon is a far better conversationalist than Jack. For example, in the last quote Jack plainly forbids Algernon to play the piano, and leaves it at that. However, earlier on Algernon tells Jack not to eat cucumber sandwiches, and is able to elaborate on this directive in quite a skillful way by both flattering and threatening Jack's positive face. Instead of cucumber sandwiches, Algernon urges his friend—bold on record—to "Have some bread and butter" (323), and redresses by saying that that is what Gwendolen likes most, thus catering for Jack's positive face. However, when Jack obeys and starts eating bread and butter, Algernon immediately turns his redress into scorn; he accuses Jack of "behav[ing] as if [he] were married to her already" (323) and thus threatens the same positive face he had just helped maintain before.

*topic shift and control:* This article uses topic at its broadest, and thus defines it as any utterance which, compared to the previous utterance, marks a complete change

as to what the utterance *is about*. Topic control and topic shift are important categories to be analyzed in the present article, because their distribution manifests power relationships. Participants who wield power in a conversation usually dictate the direction of topic shift and control (van Lier 1988: 123; Fairclough 1992: 140-41, 205).

Again, in terms of sheer numbers, it is possible to say that in Jack and Algernon's dialogues expectations are not fulfilled as regards topic. Jack, whose power is greater than Algernon's, initiates fewer topics than Algernon (4:9). In itself, this kind of evidence is not such as to be too conclusive. However, the interesting thing is once again not so much the distribution of topic initiation, but rather the context in which such distribution takes place.

Judging from the reaction of the speaker's addressee, only one of the four topic shifts Jack makes is offensive, which is curiously the very first that occurs:

JACK: [...] Eating as usual, I see, Algy!

ALGERNON (stiffly): I believe it is customary in good society to take some slight refreshment at five o'clock. (322)

In contrast to Jack's reticence to make use of topics which might be offensive, Algernon positively indulges in them, as seven out of nine topic shifts bear witness. Algernon's behaviour is all the more outrageous in that, in terms of content, there is one particular topic shift he insists on leading the conversation back to (three times altogether), even though after the first time he should know that Jack disapproves of it: reference to Jack's ward Cecily. Here is one of those repetitions:

ALGERNON: I would rather like to see Cecily.

JACK: I will take good care you never do. And you are not to speak of her as Cecily. (336)

Thus Wilde uses topic shift in his endeavour to undermine the power relationship holding between Jack and Algernon.

## 2.2. JACK AND LADY BRACKNELL

### *passages to analyze*

Act I 332-4

Act IV 373, 373-4, 375-7, 380, 382, 384

### *preliminary section*

Jack/Lady Bracknell:

P: HIGH Both are equally rich, but Lady Bracknell is older than Jack; besides, as Gwendolen's mother she has a say in who her daughter will marry; also, in terms of social class she is respectable, whereas Jack's pedigree is uncertain.

D: HIGH They are near strangers, and because of Jack being Gwendolen's suitor there seems to be little affection between them.

Conclusion P and D point towards high politeness from Jack towards Lady Bracknell

In general terms, Jack and Lady Bracknell's conversational behaviour has one added complexity if compared with Jack and Algernon's: it witnesses a reversal in the power-relationship which has to be taken into account when analyzing data. At the beginning of the play, P as explained in the chart should make Lady Bracknell expect politeness from Jack. Here it is quite possible that social class membership does only make a difference to Lady Bracknell, for Jack does not seem to care much about it (334). In any case, this should not really alter expectations.

But in Act IV (374), a reversal, or rather, a disruption of power takes place, when Lady Bracknell becomes aware of the wealth Cecily will inherit in the future and therefore of her potential as a suitable wife for Algernon. Thus Lady Bracknell in turn comes to depend on Jack to allow a marriage, so that one of the dimensions of P becomes more balanced. This change should be reflected by a renegotiation and a more even distribution of power between Jack and Lady Bracknell.

*testing expectations*

*politeness:* Generally, findings accord with initial expectations: at first Lady Bracknell is granted politeness by Jack, while she does not feel it necessary to reward him in the same terms. However, once the power reversal takes place, Jack becomes cockier, and it is Lady Bracknell who starts moving towards more polite behaviour. Since the power relationship here is not static, report of overall numbers would be of little relevance; therefore the following analysis will be reported as an ongoing process.

a) politeness before the power reversal: In certain settings, questions can be "an important tool of power and control" (van Lier 1988: 235). More specifically, Shiffrin implies that *information-seeking questions* are typically associated with participants ranked higher in terms of power (see Shiffrin 1993). Shiffrin also remarks that such questions "are typically comprised of either two-part question-answer exchanges or three-part question-answer-evaluation sequences" (Shiffrin 1993: 173). The latter triptych appears with overwhelming frequency throughout Jack and Lady Bracknell's conversational interaction.

Evidence roughly squares with initial expectations. The main bulk of the first conversation (332-34), in which Lady Bracknell tries to elicit information about Jack's economic and social possibilities, is taken up by seven question-answer-evaluation sequences; Lady Bracknell is always the one who asks and evaluates. The way these seven sequences are performed reinforces expectations. In general terms, direct questions can impinge on the addressee's negative face, since

ordinary communicative intentions are often potential threats to cooperative interaction. Communicative intentions are regulated and encoded in speech acts, and if one looks at the conditions on the felicitous use of speech acts, the sources of threat became clear. For to ask someone to do something [in this case, ask for information] is to presuppose that they can and are willing to do it [i.e. provide information] (Brown & Levinson 1987: 146)

Following Brown & Levinson, Lady Bracknell would not be much concerned about Jack's negative face. Her questions carry no redressive elements; even worse, one of them positively threatens Jack's negative face by enclosing a direction as to what Jack's answer should be: "You have, *of course*, no sympathy of any kind with the Radical Party?" (333, my italics). And her evaluations are as often negative as they are positive:

JACK: Oh, she goes about very little. She is a lady considerably advanced in years.

LADY BRACKNELL: *Ah, nowadays that is no guarantee of respectability of character.* What number in Belgrave Square?

JACK: 149.

LADY BRACKNELL (shaking her head): *The unfashionable side. I thought there was something. However, that could easily be altered.* (333, my italics)

According to Shiffrin, "Although R [the lower-ranked participant] can temporarily adopt S [the higher-ranked participant]'s questioning role, too overt and prolonged adoption of this role can be rejected as behavior inappropriate for an interview" (Shiffrin 1993: 168). At this point, Jack and Lady Bracknell radicalise Shiffrin's expectations, for here they are participants in a veritable interrogation, rather than a "bland" sociolinguistic interview. In this first dialogue, Lady Bracknell carries Shiffrin's theory to the extreme of not even answering Jack's only direct question in a way which is nowhere near kindness (incidentally the next quote follows hard on the previous):

JACK: Do you mean the fashion, or the side?

LADY BRACKNELL (sternly): Both, if necessary, I presume. (333)

As regards Jack's conversational behaviour, he also adheres closely to Shiffrin. Four times Jack answers Lady Bracknell's questions directly and to the point. When he is less sure of her reaction he inserts hedges in his answers, three times altogether: "I must admit" (332), and "I fear", which appears twice on the same page (333). Once he also dares to ask a question, but he is very careful about it and fulfills Heringer's deference conditions by presupposing he has permission of the addressee to put his question (Brown & Levinson 1987: 163): "*May I ask you then what you would advise me to do?*" (335, my italics).

It can be said then, that on the whole Jack adheres quite closely to Brown & Levinson's politeness principle, while Lady Bracknell does not do so.

b) politeness during the power reversal: The power reversal takes place in the second dialogue between Lady Bracknell and Jack (373, 373-4, 375-7). The context in which this dialogue occurs is different from the first one on two accounts: in terms of setting, apart from Lady Bracknell and Jack, there are now more people present — Algernon, Gwendolen and Cecily; also, the dialogue takes place in Jack's, not Algernon's house. As regards topic, conversation now centers on Algernon marrying Cecily. Typically it is the husband who has to bring money into a marriage, and Algernon is known by both Lady Bracknell and Jack to have very little. Both points



may result in Lady Bracknell being from the start a little more polite, but without on the whole changing the initial power relationship, since previous conditions still hold.

Again findings accord with expectations. Lady Bracknell is indeed a little more reserved. Her first two questions are devoid of evaluation; in the first one she even makes use of Heringer's deference condition: "may I ask" (373), and the second one is softened with her assurance that "I merely desire information" (373). However, that softener is in turn followed by an ironic reference to Jack's uncertain origins. Then two question-answer-evaluation sequences follow (373), in which Lady Bracknell again displays lack of politeness by evaluating one of Jack's answers in the negative; and in which Jack, without being impolite, shows less deference than in the previous dialogue, since his answers are all to the point and devoid of redressive action.

Tension starts to mount when Lady Bracknell states that so far she is satisfied with her questioning (373), for here she is behaving as though there had been no reversal of conversation topic. Hence Jack's irritated and ironic "How extremely kind of you, Lady Bracknell!" (373). When Lady Bracknell asks Jack about Cecily's fortune, Jack is at last able to turn the tables and from then on engages in no less than three FTAs. To her question he answers to the point, followed by a very rude "Good-bye, Lady Bracknell. So pleased to have seen you" (374). Jack also interrupts Lady Bracknell twice, and does so to furnish her with unpleasant information, first about his being Cecily's guardian —thus that his consent is necessary for her to marry (375); then about the fact that legally she will continue being his ward until she is thirty-five (376).

After a while, the change in terms of power does also dawn on Lady Bracknell. At first she continues slighting Jack, for at one point she neglects him and selects Cecily as next speaker. When Jack interrupts her to tell her that he is her guardian, Lady Bracknell fixes her attention on him again. Initially she tries to impose her former role as higher ranked on him; thus "after careful consideration" she decides "to overlook my nephew's conduct to you [Jack]" (376) —as if she was the higher ranked participant on whose sole decision the matter rested. But when Jack still declines to give his consent, her behaviour becomes extremely polite: "*My dear Mr. Worthing [...] I would beg of you to reconsider your decision*" (377). Politeness is indicated by a number of facts: Lady Bracknell activates negative politeness by addressing Jack as Mr. Worthing, thus creating a distance between him and her; by using the performative of begging; and finally by hedging the little impositive thrust begging has with "would". She uses positive politeness in her selection of a convenient adjective to accompany the term of address: "dear", thus indicating affection towards him, and claims in-group membership with Jack through the use of the possessive pronoun "my".

### 2.3. ALGERNON AND LADY BRACKNELL *passages to analyze*

Act I 327-9

Act IV 372-3, 374-5

*preliminary section*

Algernon/Lady Bracknell:

P: HIGH Lady Bracknell is wealthier than Algernon. She is also his aunt

D: LOW They know each other well and seem to quite like each other

Conclusion P points towards mutual politeness, but more coming from Algernon. Lady Bracknell should also be able to engage in FTAs with relative ease. On the other hand, politeness might be occasionally broken by Algernon because of D without being resented

Since in Algernon and Lady Bracknell's dialogues P and D remain stable, but on the other hand R changes from low to high, it will be interesting to test expectations with this shift in mind, for

it would seem to be possible to make an empirical test of the [politeness] theory [by finding] pairs of speeches involving the same two characters such that the relationship between the characters would be the same on the occasions of the two speeches with respect to two out of three weightiness variables (P, D, and R) but clearly different on the third. (Brown and Gilman 1989: 173)

Thus, enquiry into Algernon and Lady Bracknell's interaction will be subdivided into one section in which R is low and another one in which it is high.

*testing expectations*

*Low R* (Act I 327-29): With low R, findings seem to support initial expectations.

## a) Lady Bracknell

As regards topic shifts, and given Lady Bracknell's higher P, she carries most of the conversational weight. She is generally the one who initiates and shifts topics, four times altogether, compared with none by Algernon. This is all the more telling, since, as we saw, Algernon's behaviour to Jack is marked by a reversal of expectations in terms of topic control. Lady Bracknell's topic shifts can be quite abrupt, as the following example shows: "I never saw a woman so altered; she looks quite twenty years younger. And now I'll have a cup of tea, and one of those nice cucumber sandwiches you promised me" (328).

In terms of FTAs, the previous quote leads us to another characteristic of Lady Bracknell's conversational behaviour, which squares with high P and low D; she threatens Algernon's face with a high frequency, although, because of D, she usually makes amends through redressings, and in all sorts of ways. Negative politeness affords the following examples: in the previous quote Lady Bracknell taxes Algernon's negative face, but redresses with the adjective "nice". Redress also occurs when she asks her nephew to arrange the music for her last reception that season (329):

But I would be much obliged if you would ask Mr. Bunbury, from me, to be kind enough not to have a relapse on Saturday, for I rely on you to arrange my music for me. (329)

Here, apart from the usual hedging, Lady Bracknell is taking responsibility off Algernon's shoulders by making Bunbury responsible in case her nephew should turn down her offer.

Positive face is also taxed and positive politeness used as redress in some cases; thus Lady Bracknell greets Algernon with: "I hope you are behaving very well" (327), which is a dispreferred first pair part for a greeting. It carries a threat to Algernon's positive face, since it implies distrust in Algernon's usual course of action and thus no sharing of values. Something similar happens when Lady Bracknell tells Algernon who she intends him to sit next to during dinner: "I've quite a treat for you tonight" (328); here Lady Bracknell is threatening Algernon's negative face by assuming that she knows, and therefore is catering for, his positive face, which is ironic, given that the play-goer has been told just before that Lady Bracknell's very assumption is precisely what Algernon dislikes about her dinners (326-27).

Evaluations and turn-length are also conspicuous parameters in this relationship: Lady Bracknell tends to finish a conversational pair with an evaluation, sometimes in the form of an advice; besides, her evaluations mark the longest turns both of Lady Bracknell *and* Algernon. Differences in turn-length and the presence of evaluation can signal an asymmetrical power relationship between participants. Lady Bracknell provides three evaluations in the first dialogue—two of them quite at length—two in the second one and one in the third one, for only one very short evaluation by Algernon in the third dialogue. To Algernon's cheeky answer to the greeting referred to before—"I'm feeling very well" (326)—Lady Bracknell evaluates by remarking that "That's not quite the same thing. In fact the two things rarely go together" (328). And Algernon's comments about poor Bunbury's illness are met with an advice for the latter to "[make] up his mind whether he was going to live or to die" (329), and a lengthy diatribe on health as the "primary duty of life" (329). Evaluations and advice such as these are the sole birthright of powerful people.

b) Algernon: Here, too, findings seem to support the initial hypothesis. The first thing one notices is that Algernon addresses Lady Bracknell as "Aunt Augusta", and not like Jack, as Lady Bracknell, which points towards low D and possibly affection.

As regards the interaction between the politeness a high P demands and its possible breakdown by a low D, we can witness it at its best in the fact that Algernon is quite able to proffer dispreferred second pair parts whenever Lady Bracknell threatens his negative face, but always does so with much hedging. Thus, when Lady Bracknell's wish to eat cucumber sandwiches cannot be fulfilled, Algernon feels "greatly distressed about there being no cucumbers [in the market]" (328). He also rejects her invitation for dinner that evening, but not without being "afraid, Aunt Augusta, I shall have to give up the pleasure of dining with you to-night after all" (328), and by finding it "a great bore, and I need hardly say, a terrible disappointment to me" (328). The "pleasure" of dining with his aunt, the "boredom" and "disappointment" of not being able to do so, plus the fact that it is "They" (whoever they might be) who think Algernon should stay with Bunbury, all place Algernon's decision in the line of duty, i.e. at one remove from his natural disposition, thus catering for Lady Bracknell's positive face (328) and in close correspondence with the feelings an obliging nephew should entertain for his aunt in such a situation.

*High R* (Act IV 372-73, 374-75): With high R, the politeness expected by high P and low D is only partially fulfilled. This does, however, not contradict initial expectations, since the higher R is, the more politeness risks being cancelled out.

High R means something different for each character and covers different parts of the sections under analysis. Lady Bracknell perceives high R as more extended, completely covering both dialogues. For her, high R starts with her arrival at Jack's house, since she finds both Jack and Gwendolen, and Algernon and Cecily—who Lady Bracknell does not know yet—in each other's arms. For Algernon, a high R worthy of neglecting politeness is possibly restricted to the moment when Lady Bracknell starts deciding whether to allow his marriage to Cecily.

Evidence for high R in Lady Bracknell and low R in Algernon is straightforward. Lady Bracknell starts both high R dialogues by allocating her nephew as next speaker with a vocative: "Algernon!" (372, 374); to which he twice responds respectfully with "Yes, Aunt Augusta". This may be a perceived high R on her part, but not on his. Echoing her dialogues with Jack, Lady Bracknell also starts a sequence composed of three questions and answers in which it is she who asks and Algernon who dutifully answers; this marks her as the higher-ranked of the two. Two of her questions are bold on record—"When did Mr. Bunbury die?" (372) and "What did he die of?" (372), one offers redress: "*May I ask* if it is in this house that your invalid friend Mr. Bunbury resides?" (372, *my italics*).

Twice Lady Bracknell threatens Algernon's negative face, the first time with a directive, bald on record: "Never speak disrespectfully of society" (374); the second time by imposing on Algernon—although with some redress—that "The marriage, I think, had better taken place quite soon" (374). But due to his desire to be married as soon as possible, Algernon does not perceive it as such and thanks his aunt for it. The only time Algernon feels his face threatened is when Lady Bracknell starts deciding about his marriage to Cecily. Here Algernon becomes positively rude—"And I don't care twopence about social possibilities" (374)—both by using "social possibilities", the very words his aunt had uttered just before, and by swearing.

### 3. EVALUATION OF DATA

This article has found significant departures in the conversational behaviour between the first pair (Jack/Algernon), but not between the second and third pairs (Jack/Lady Bracknell, and Algernon/Lady Bracknell). Since these departures cannot be accounted for by theory, it is necessary to include one further variable into Brown & Levinson's equation. I will now argue that this variable is B (bunbury), the very principle Shewan (1977) locates only in the play's inner monologues. I will do so by showing that the inconsistencies and shortcomings of Shewan's main argument are thus resolved, and that Shewan's argument suffers from making no distinction between the propositional content of the characters' utterances and their pragmatic behaviour. If we state that the variable responsible for the play's departures is indeed B, we may explain that some of the play's characters are nearer than others to Wilde's astringent disagreement with society, even while all voice his opinions at some time or other.

*Lady Bracknell*: Even Lady Bracknell does so, as here for example: “Algernon is an extremely, I may almost say an ostentatiously, eligible young man. He has nothing, but looks everything. What more can one desire?” (375). But the difference between Lady Bracknell and Jack or Algernon is that she never acknowledges the existence or possibility of a B dimension in her nor anybody else’s conversational behaviour, and, since she commands politeness over Jack and Algernon, she can set the tone of their dialogues. This is why, whenever Jack or Algernon are engaged in conversation with Lady Bracknell, they follow Brown & Levinson’s politeness principle.

*Algernon*: Since Algernon scores highest on B, he is the one who can best disrupt normal conversational behaviour. It is also easiest for him to do so when talking with some other person who acknowledges the B dimension—in this case Jack—for people who do not accept B, e.g. Lady Bracknell, would not understand him and simply reject his behaviour as outrageous and uncooperative. This is why Algernon can break expectations when engaged in conversation with Jack, but not with his aunt.

*Jack*: B also explains Jack’s behaviour; since he is a reticent bunburyist, on the one hand he does acknowledge B as one dimension of  $W_x$ , on the other hand, being less proficient in B than Algernon, he also scores lower on it. Thus, the normal power relationship between Jack and Algernon is reversed in ways which cannot be accounted for without B. Again, as in Algernon’s case, conversational behaviour between Lady Bracknell and Jack is ruled by the normal equation  $W_x = D(S,H) + P(H,S) + R_x$ ; Jack could not possibly incorporate B into the equation, for he would quite simply not be understood by his addressee.

#### 4. CONCLUSION

The present article has tried to add a pragmatic insight into Shewan (1977)’s study of *Earnest*. It has done so by analyzing the conversational behaviour of three of the play’s characters, more specifically by trying to account for the departures their behaviour makes in terms of Brown and Levinson’s politeness theory. It has also posited a variable B which seems to do justice to the fact that when they are on their own, some characters—Jack and Algernon—feel free to depart from the politeness principle, while they adhere to it when they are engaged in a dialogue with other characters, such as Lady Bracknell. Thus, in *Earnest*, B functions as a variable necessary to understand the conversational behaviour of its characters. But B also explains that, as regards the propositional content of their inner dialogues, all characters do indeed voice Wilde’s point of view, while in terms of their pragmatic behaviour they do not.

#### Notes:

<sup>1</sup> All references to Wilde’s works are taken from: Wilde, Oscar. *The Works of Oscar Wilde*, London: Collins, 1966.

<sup>2</sup> “When I married Lord Bracknell I had no fortune of any kind. But I never dreamed for a moment of allowing that to stand in my way” (374)

<sup>3</sup> Given its complexity and for the reasons explained above (1st problem), the value of  $W_x$  cannot be comprised “on a simple summative basis” (Brown & Levinson 1987: 76)

**Works cited:**

- Bennison, Neil. “Discourse Analysis, Pragmatics and the Dramatic ‘Character’: Tom Stoppard’s *Professional Foul*.” *Language and Literature* 2:2 (1993): 79-99.
- Brown, Roger and Albert Gilman. “Politeness Theory in Shakespeare’s Four Major Tragedies”. *Language in Society* 18 (1989): 159-212.
- Brown, Penelope and Stephen C. Levinson. *Politeness: Some Universals in Language Usage*. Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1987.
- Faiclough, Norman. *Discourse and Social Change*. Oxford: Blackwell, 1992.
- Garcés Conejos, Pilar. “Ejemplo práctico de pragmática literaria: una propuesta metodológica multidisciplinar.” *Actas del XI Congreso de AESLA*. Ed. J.M Ruiz et al. Valladolid, 1995.
- Shewan, R. *Oscar Wilde: Art and Egotism*. London: Macmillan, 1977.
- Schiffrin, D. *Approaches to Discourse: Language as Social Interaction*. Oxford: Blackwell, 1993.
- Van Lier, Leo. *The Classroom and the Language Teacher: Ethnography and Second-language Classroom Research*. London: Longman, 1988.
- Wilde, Oscar. *The Works of Oscar Wilde*. London: Collins, 1966.