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Regulating Knowledge in Thesis Defense Discourse: A Critical Pragmatic Analysis of Examiner–Candidate Interaction

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ABSTRACT

This study shows how knowledge, authority, and epistemic legitimacy are regulated in postgraduate thesis defense interaction. Based on Grice's (1975), Cooperative Principle and using ideas from Critical Discourse Analysis (Fairclough, 2015), and recent critical pragmatics, this study analyzes 30 English language PhD thesis defenses conducted at an Ahvaz university. This study does not consider maxim of violations as neutral communicative breakdowns; the study conceptualizes them as interactional sites where rules of academic legitimacy are discussed and followed. Using a dialectical approach that we compared two perspectives: the categories define by researcher and participant's own interaction, we analyzed 340 cases of candidate statements interpreted as cooperation gaps across the maxims of Quality, Relation, Quantity, and Manner. Based on the findings, Quality was the most frequently violated maxim. The candidates often made general statements or did not provide enough evidence. Relation maxim was also found in the data, and the examiners redirected the discussion. The study claims that cooperation in thesis defenses is not presupposed but actively regulated by replacing Grice's maxims in an asymmetrical institutional setting. Examiners and their interventions act as forms of epistemic gatekeeping that help maintain academic authority during defenses. The findings contribute to critical applied linguistics by demonstrating how micro-pragmatic interactional practices sustain macro-institutional hierarchies; in other words, small interactional practices during defenses maintain institutional power relations. Pedagogically, the study calls for explicit training in pragmatic resilience and evidential accountability in graduate education.

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1. Introduction

The postgraduate thesis defense is not exactly an academic completion of research, but it is an important institutional situation in which knowledge claims are authorized and contested. Although the defense structurally conducted as dialogue, the participants are not in an equal position, and this is clear in their interaction and evaluation. The committee members possess institutional legitimacy to question, challenge, and redirect; the postgraduate participants are positioned as accountable knowledge claimants whose scholarly credibility is under assessment. In this case, the defense acts as a site where academic knowledge is not only presented but discursively regulated. Due to Swales (1990), we consider the defense as an academic genre with its own conventions, expectations, and gatekeeping function.

Earlier studies on academic discourse have shown that academic conversation basically differs from everyday conversation (Drew & Heritage, 1992). During assessment situations, turn-taking, topic control, relation are managed. So, some research has examined how regulation operates at the level of pragmatic norms-specifically, how expectations of cooperation, relevance, and evidentiality are invoked, enforced, or strategically suspended in moments of interactional tension. This gap is noticeable in the research, which has focused on genre structure, politeness, rhetorical moves, or participants' feelings, rather than the small interaction of epistemic legitimacy.

Grice's cooperative principle (1975) provides an essential frame for understanding discourse expectations through its maxims (quantity, quality, relation, and manner). However, Grice's model presupposes relatively symmetrical participation and a shared commitment to mutual understanding. In university assessment contexts, interaction cannot be assumed to be neutral. Contemporary scholars in critical pragmatics (e.g., Haugh, 2015; Kádár & Haugh, 2013) have emphasized that pragmatic norms are socially situated and ideologically embedded rather than universally applicable. What counts as "relevant," "adequately evidenced," or "sufficiently clear" is not merely a cognitive matter but a function of institutional authority and disciplinary convention.

Therefore, using the cooperative principle in thesis defense conversation needs theoretical expansion. If maxims are violated, it will become necessary to examine who has the power and authority to violate, how classifications are interactionally achieved, or how responses produce institutional hierarchies. According to critical discourse analysis (CDA) (Fairclough,

2015; Van Dijk, 2006), academic discourse both reflects and sustains broader structures of power. Examiner interventions may be interpreted not only as conversational repairs but also as enactments of epistemic authority.

Thesis defense in the English language offers a particularly revealing site for such analysis. In many Iranian postgraduate programs in the field of English teaching or linguistics, defenses are conducted in English, a language that functions simultaneously as academic language and world disciplinary currency. The participants of thesis defenses must demonstrate mastery of research content and the ability to exercise epistemic accountability in a second language under conditions of evaluation. Meanwhile, despite such attention to higher education in English, little research has investigated how cooperation in pragmatics is negotiated in asymmetrical and bilingual academic encounters.

The study addresses this gap by integrating Gricean pragmatic Fairclough's three-dimensional framework. Instead in treating maxim violations as objective communication failures, we Rather than treating maxim violations as objective communicative failures, we conceptualize them as interactional situations in which academic expectations become touchable and visible. We analyze how participants of defense get treated as insufficiently informative, irrelevant or unclear, and how examiner responses function as regulation moves that We analyze how candidate contributions come to be treated as insufficiently informative, inadequately evidenced, irrelevant, or unclear, and how examiner responses function as regulatory moves that reinforce epistemic and discursive control. Our analytical framework adopts a conversational situation of maxim violations: while we employ Grice's maxims as analytical heuristics to identify systematic patterns in candidate-examiner interaction, we simultaneously treat the examiner's regulatory response as the primary evidence that a violation has been interactionally consequential. This approach, informed by McHoul's (1990) critique of applying conversational maxims to asymmetrical settings and Sarang's (2000) work on activity types, ensures that our analysis remains grounded in the participants' own interactional orientations.

This study builds on and extends recent scholarship in critical applied linguistics that has examined evaluative talk in educational settings and epistemic injustice in academic gatekeeping (Fricker, 2007). While Izadi (2018) have contributed valuable insights into pragmatic dimensions of academic interaction, their analyses have not systematically integrated Gricean pragmatics with CDA to examine how examiner regulatory moves function as mechanisms of epistemic gatekeeping. The present study extends this line of inquiry by (a) providing a more

comprehensive corpus of EMI thesis defenses, (b) operationalizing the concept of pragmatic gatekeeping through empirical interactional evidence, and (c) examining the intersection of linguistic capital and epistemic authority in a non- Anglophone academic context. The study is guided by the following research questions:

RQ1. Which Gricean maxims are most frequently treated as breached in English-medium postgraduate thesis defenses?

RQ2. What type of examiner regulatory moves follow these perceived breaches?

RQ3. How do these violation- regulation sequences illuminate the operation of epistemic authority and institutional power in the defense as a genre?

By analyzing thirty complete thesis defense transcripts, this research contributes to critical applied linguistics in three ways. First, it recontextualizes the cooperative principle in an asymmetrical academic setting, demonstrating that cooperation is actively negotiated rather than presupposed. Second, it operationalizes the concept of epistemic and discursive gatekeeping through empirical interactional evidence. Third, it offers pedagogical implications for graduate education, arguing that pragmatic competence in high academic interaction requires explicit training in evidential reasoning, relevance management, and interactional resilience.

2. Theoretical Framework

The theoretical architecture of this study integrates Gricean pragmatics with critical discourse analysis and the emerging field of critical pragmatics. This synthesis allows for an examination of thesis defense discourse that moves beyond mere classification of communicative errors toward an understanding of how micro-interactional moves sustain academic hierarchies.

2.1 From Ideal Cooperation to Regulated Interaction

A fundamental epistemological challenge in applying Gricean pragmatics to institutional discourse concerns the distinction between etic (research–imposed) and emic (participant–oriented) perspectives on maxim observance. Following Sarangi (2000), we recognize that the analyst's identification of a maxim violation does not necessarily correspond to the participants' interpretive frameworks. In the study, we adopt a dialectical position: while we employ Grice's maxims as analytical heuristics to identify systematic patterns in candidate-examiner interaction,

we treat the examiner's regulatory response as the primary evidence that a violation has been interactionally consequential. In other words, a candidate's utterance is coded as a cooperation gap only when it is treated as such by the examiner through an identifiable regulatory move. This approach, informed by McHoul's (1990) critique of applying conversational maxims to asymmetrical settings, ensures that our analysis remains grounded in the participants' own interactional orientations rather than imposing external normative criteria. The reflexive acknowledgement of this dual perspective, maxims as both analytical tools and participants' resources, underscores the critical pragmatics orientation of the study.

Grice's (1975) cooperative principle and its constituent maxims were originally formulated as a model for rational, purposeful communication. While foundational, the Gricean framework has faced significant criticism for its perceived universalism and its failure to account for sociocultural variables and power imbalances (Wierzbicka, 1991; Sarangi & Slembrouck, 1992). In the context of a thesis defense, the assumption of mutual goals is complicated by the evaluative nature of the genre.

Building on critical pragmatics (Haugh, 2015; Kádár & Haugh, 2013), this study treats the CP not as a set of static rules but as a negotiated normative framework. In an asymmetrical setting like a defense, the right to define what is relevant or related, or what constitutes sufficient evidence (quality), is unevenly distributed. As Sarangi and Slembrouck (1992) argue, in academic talk, the dominant party (the examiner) often holds the authority to interpret a candidate's utterance as a "violation", thereby triggering regulatory interventions. So, cooperation in this study is viewed as a regulated performance rather than a natural state of dialogue.

2.2 Epistemic Authority and Discursive Gatekeeping

A critical examination of the thesis defense requires a focus on epistemic authority – the socially recognized right to possess, produce, and validate knowledge (Heritage, 2013). The defense is a situation of epistemic struggle where the candidate attempts to claim the status of a knowing subject, while examiners exercise their role as epistemic gatekeepers.

Following Fairclough's (2015) three- dimensional model, we analyze the defense discourse across three levels:

1. The textual level: the specific linguistic realizations of maxim violations and regulatory moves.

2. The discursive practice: how participants produce and interpret these moves based on their institutional roles.
3. The social practice: how these interactions reproduce the macro–structures of academic power and "gatekeeping".

The concept of gatekeeping (Erickson & Shultz, 1982) is here operationalized through pragmatic intervention. When an examiner challenges a candidate for failing to provide evidence (quality) or for being tangential (relation), they are not merely "restoring conversational order"; they are policing the boundaries of what is sayable and valid in the academic field. These interventions function as evaluative talk, where the examiner's meta- discursive comments (e.g., that is not the point, where is your evidence for this claim?) serve to assert disciplinary dominance. As Swales (1990) notes in his genre analysis framework, gatekeeping encounters require candidates to demonstrate content knowledge and the ability to "perform" academic identity through discursively appropriate behavior.

2.3 The defense as academic talk

Due to conversational analysis in academic situations (Drew & Heritage, 1992), this study recognizes that the defense possesses distinct structural footprints:

a. Asymmetrical Turn-taking: Examiners typically control the initiation and termination of sequences.

b. Inferential Frameworks: Utterances are interpreted through an academic lens rather than a personal one.

c. Goal Orientation: The interaction is driven by the institutional mandate of rigorous vetting and quality control.

In the Iranian English language context, these dynamics are further layered by linguistic identities. The use of the English language adds a dimension of linguistic capital. The "Manner" maxim, for instance, becomes not just about clarity but about the performance of academic fluency and the ability to navigate complex disciplinary terminology. As Hyland (2000, 2005) has documented, academic discourse communities enforce norms of textual competence that are often implicitly closed to native speaker standards, creating additional challenges for non-Anglophone scholars.

2.4 Situating the study in recent scholarship

Recent research in critical applied linguistics has increasingly moved toward "criticality" in academic interaction. Studies on evaluative talk in education settings and epistemic injustice (Fricker, 2007) suggest that communication gaps are often sites where certain voices are marginalized or subjected to higher burdens of proof. Hyland's (2005) work on metadiscourse has illuminated how academic writers position themselves and their claims, but the interactional dynamics of oral defense discourse remain comparatively under- explored. This study builds on the work of Izadi (2018) but extends their findings by specifically focusing on the regulatory nature of examiner responses to perceived pragmatic failures.

3. Methodology

3.1 Design: Critical Approach

In this research, a qualitative mixed-methods approach has been used by synthesizing CDA and Pragmatic Coding. Not only do we account for the frequency of occurrence, but we also investigate the functional and ideological implications in the discourse. Based on Fairclough's account, the methodology aims for two levels of analysis: Micro and Macro. At the micro level, the violations of maxims are in focus; however, at the macro level, gatekeeping in institutional power is analyzed.

3.2. Data

The data were collected from 30 PhD defense sessions at Islamic Azad University in 2025. This is one of the largest universities in the region, with a large body of students, faculty, and higher education disciplines, majors, and subject matters. The defense sessions in higher education follow international regulations related to standard research guidelines and policies. As Swales (1990) put it, the negation of genre must be identified so that the collected data can be contextually situated and not just be generalized universally. This research gives a clear picture of each discourse analysis based on the exact description of each excerpt. What has been targeted here is to convey the cultural and contextual setting and what is in store for readers.

The recording of 30 PhD defense sessions provided 45 hours of discourse to analyze. When transcribed, it comprised 210,000 words. The doctoral sessions were within three disciplines in the humanities, which provided a fundamental ground for analysis, covering epistemic gatekeeping at a high level of scientific credibility. To observe Hyland's (2000)

account in terms of genre effect, we have to be cautious of variations within different disciplines that could have an impact on the way speech interaction is directed, steered, and navigated.

The common ground for variations within disciplines is fulfilled through genre applied in each defense session, where students have to perform their original contributions, methodological dynamics, and academic and research responsibilities at PhD defense sessions to impress, persuade and convince the research board of reviewers.

Table 1 displays the demographic information and variables:

- **Disciplinary Distribution:** 22 defenses in Applied Linguistics/ELT, 5 in English Literature, and 3 in Translation Studies.
- **Gender Balance:** Candidates (18 Female, 12 Male); Examiners (14 Female, 16 Male).
- **Examiner Experience:** All examiners held PhDs; 12 were Assistant Professors, 14 Associate Professors, and 4 Full Professors.
- **Linguistic Background:** All participants were L1 speakers of Persian, using English as the institutional lingua franca.

Table 1

Corpus Demographic and Structural Overview

Variable	Category	Frequency
Degree Level	PhD (all defenses)	30
Disciplinary Distribution	Applied Linguistics/ELT	22
	English Literature	5
	Translation Studies	3
Candidate Gender	Female	18
	Male	12
Examiner Gender	Female	14
	Male	16
Examiner Academic Rank	Assistant Professor	12
	Associate Professor	14
	Full Professor	4
Language Background	L1 Persian, L2 English (all participants)	30
Avg. Defense Duration	Approximately 90-110 minutes	—
Avg. Number of Examiners	3-4 (internal and external)	—

3.3 Data Collection and Ethical Considerations

Standard measurements and criteria regarding the consent form were used for both subjects and co-researchers. A recorder was used, and the researcher did not take part. When the data was transcribed, the names were pseudonymized so that the participants' real identities could not be identified.

3.4 Coding Procedure and Reliability

***Three-phase analysis*:**

1. Gap Identification: We coded all the transcriptions to see if they flouted or violated the four maxims. Flouting means that an implicature has been exploited, and violation means that a maxim has been unostentatiously failed to be observed.
2. Regulated Classification of Move: We used Najafian's model to code each examiner response into four classifications: Direct Demand for Precision/Evidence, Topic Redirection, Prompting for Elaboration, and Corrective Formulations.
3. Critical Interpretation: To analyze each sequence of moves, e.g., in terms of violations of regulatory moves to assert epistemic authority or gatekeeping.

***Addressing Overlapping Maxims*:**

Some points to be clarified in case an utterance was categorized for multiple breaches. In some cases where the responses could not be identified in any of the four maxims clearly, the functional dominance technique was utilized, that is, if the examiner, for example, requested truthfulness, the utterance was coded as quality

Distinguishing flouting from violation:

To address the methodological challenge of distinguishing between strategic flouting and genuine violation, we adopted a two-tier coding procedure. First, following Thomas (1995), we identified flouting when the candidate's utterance clearly and deliberately deviated from the maxim while the examiner recognized and responded to the implicature without challenging the form of the utterance. For example, when a candidate responded to a methodological question with a detailed theoretical justification (apparently violating Relation), the examiner's uptake of the theoretical point without redirection was treated as evidence of flouting. Second, a violation was coded only when the examiner's subsequent regulatory move explicitly treated the utterance as deficient or inadequate (e.g., "That doesn't answer my question," "Where is your evidence?").

The examiner's response thus served as the primary discriminant between flouting and violation. To further ensure coding consistency, we developed a decision tree that guided coders through a stepwise assessment of (a) utterance deviance, (b) examiner recognition, and (c) regulatory response. This procedure yielded a final Cohen's Kappa of 0.81 for violation identification, with disagreements resolved through negotiated agreement.

Inter- coder reliability:

To ensure robust coding, 25% of the data was independently coded by two researchers (the author and a PhD colleague trained in pragmatics). Initial agreement was 76%. Disagreements (primarily regarding Manner vs. Quantity) were resolved through "Negotiated Agreement" (Garrison et al., 2006), involving a joint review of the full interactional context until 100% consensus was reached. The final Cohen's kappa was 0.81, indicating high reliability.

3.5. Analytical Reflexivity and Subjectivity

Acknowledging the reviewer's concern regarding subjectivity, this study adopts a reflexive stance. We recognize that the identification of a maxim violation is not an objective discovery but an interpretive act performed by the researchers, mirroring the interpretive act performed by the examiners during the defense. To enhance validity, we employed analytic triangulation by comparing patterns across different disciplines. Furthermore, Rich Description of excerpts allows readers to evaluate the interpretive leaps made during the analysis.

4. Results and Discussion

The analysis revealed a total of 340 cooperation gaps (maxim violations) and 428 examiner regulatory moves. The distribution of these moves (see Table 2) suggests that the thesis defense is not a neutral exchange of information but a tightly policed discursive event where the "right to know" and the "right to claim" are constantly negotiated.

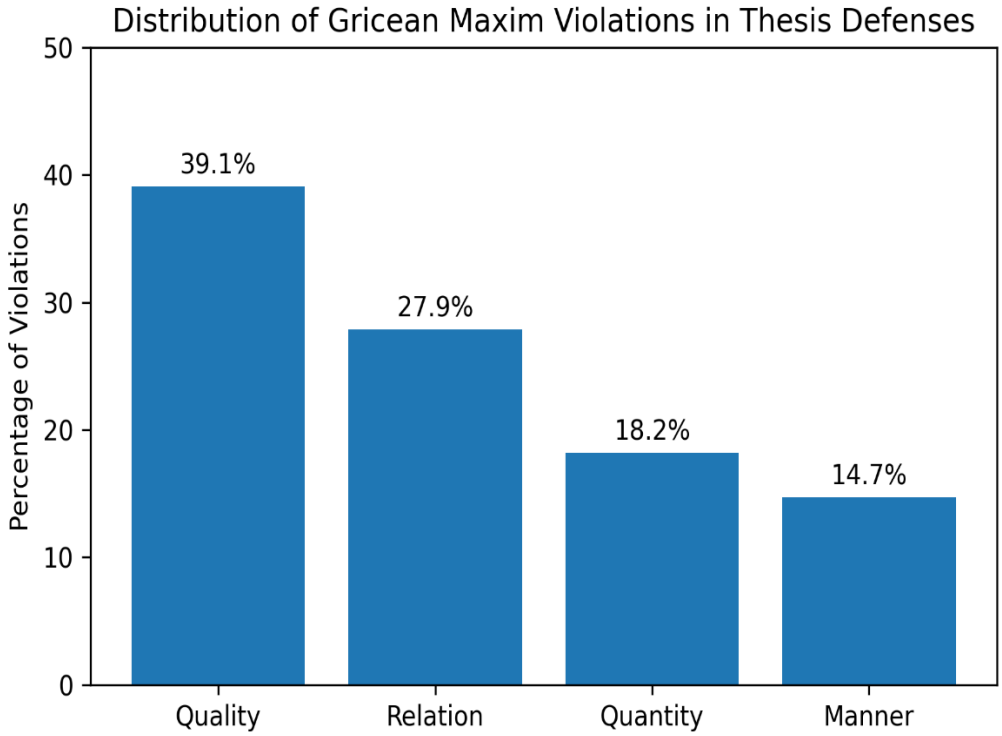
Table 2

Distribution of Maxim Violations and Regulatory Responses

Maxim Violated	Frequency (%)	Primary Regulatory Move	Frequency (%)
Quality	133 (39.1%)	Direct Demand for Precision/Evidence	42.5%
Relation	95 (27.9%)	Topic Redirection/Refocusing	28.0%
Quantity	62 (18.2%)	Prompting for Elaboration	20.1%
Manner	50 (14.7%)	Corrective Formulation	9.3%

Figure 1

Distribution of Maxim Violations by Discipline



4.1. Epistemic Policing: Quality and the Demand for Evidence

The predominance of quality violations (39.1%) underscores the defense's primary function as an evidentiary tribunal. Unlike ordinary conversation, where the "Truth" of a

speaker's claim is often granted by default (the truth bias), in a defense, the candidate's claims are subject to "Suspended Epistemic Trust".

When candidates made overgeneralized claims (e.g., "this method is the most effective in all EFL contexts"), examiners did not merely interpret this as a communicative slip. Instead, they employed direct demands for evidence, which function as tools of epistemic gatekeeping.

Excerpt 1 (PhD Defense, Applied Linguistics):

Candidate: "*The findings suggest that teachers always prefer task-based instruction over traditional methods*".

Examiner: "*Wait. Always? On what empirical basis are you making this universal claim? Show me the specific data point in chapter 4 that justifies "always*".

In Excerpt 1, the examiner's move is not just a request for information; it is a discursive policing of the sayable. By forcing the candidate back to the "evidentiary foundation," the examiner reasserts the institutional requirement that academic knowledge must be contingent and substantiated. The high frequency of these moves (42.5%) indicates that the quality of a candidate's contribution is the primary site where their academic legitimacy is tested.

4.2. Discursive Boundary-Setting: Relation and Topic Control

Violations of relation (27.9%) often occurred when candidates attempted to deflect challenging questions by shifting to more comfortable topics-a strategy we term "safe- haven redirects."

However, the analysis shows that examiners rarely allowed these shifts to succeed.

The use of Topic redirection (28.0%) functions as a mechanism of thematic authority. Examiners frequently interrupted tangential responses to pull the candidate back to the academic agenda. This reinforces the findings of Drew and Heritage (1992) regarding the asymmetrical control of what counts as relevant in academic situations. The cooperative principles are suspended: the examiner has the right to be irrelevant (by asking side questions), but the candidate must maintain a hyper-relevance to the examiner's prompt.

Excerpt 2 (PhD Defense, Translation Studies):

Examiner: "*You claim that this translation strategy is culture- specific. How would this apply to a different cultural context*"?

Candidate: "*Well, I think in general, translation is always influenced by cultural factors, and many scholars have discussed this, like Venuti and…".*

Examiner: "*Let's not go to general theory. I asked specifically about your data. How does your data support this claim about cultural specificity*"?

Here, the examiner's topic redirection functions as a gatekeeping move that refuses to allow the candidate to retreat into theoretical generalization. The candidate's attempt to shift to safer ground (general theory) is explicitly rejected, reinforcing the examiner's authority to define what is relevant and when.

4.3. The "Pragmatic Gatekeeper" and the Performance of Authority

The data suggests that the examiner's role is that of a pragmatic gatekeeper. This is not merely a metaphorical label; it is operationalized through the ability to categorize the candidate's speech as deficient (too vague, too long, unsupported).

Contrary to the deficiency model, which views the candidate as an unskilled communicator, a critical pragmatic lens reveals that the pressure of the defense – the high cognitive load and the linguistic demands of EMI- often produces these violations. The examiners regulatory moves, while ostensibly helping to clarify the discourse, also serve to reproduce the academic hierarchy. Each corrective formulation (e.g., so what you are actually trying to say is…) is functional in stripping the candidate of their discursive agency, replacing their voice with the authorized institutional version of the claim.

4.4. The Manner Maxim and Linguistic Capital in EMI Contexts

While Manner violations constituted the smallest proportion of cooperation gaps (14.7%), their analysis reveals the most profound implications for English-medium academic gatekeeping. In the EMI context of this study, where all participants are L1 Persian speakers using English as an academic lingua franca, violations of the Manner maxim—manifesting as syntactic disfluency, lexical imprecision, or unclear referentiality—were frequently interpreted by examiners as indicators of epistemic uncertainty rather than linguistic performance.

Excerpt 4 (PhD Defense, Applied Linguistics):

Candidate: "*The... um... the thing that I follow the supervisor... I mean, the way that teachers, they think about... you know, their teaching*"...

Examiner: "*Could you please express that more precisely? What exactly is 'the thing you follow the supervisor' you are referring to*"?

In this excerpt, the examiner's corrective formulation functions not merely as a request for clarity but as an institutional limitation put on the candidate's response to uncover the candidates' linguistic capital following Bourdieu (1991). The candidate's hesitation and imprecise reference, which might be pragmatically acceptable in informal academic discussion, become grounds for evaluative scrutiny in the defense conversations. This pattern aligns with Hyland's (2005) observation that academic discourse communities enforce norms of textual competence that are often implicitly tied to native-speaker standards. This can be seen among Iranian students in the defense sessions.

The analysis showed that maxim of manner violations were almost exclusively addressed through corrective formulations (9.3%) among all regulatory moves. The results indicated that examiners reformulated the candidate's utterances into what they deemed a precise version. These corrective reformulations perform a discursive appropriation; they replace the candidate's voice with an examiner-authorized institutional version, effectively delegitimizing the candidate's linguistic agency. This is in line with Swales (1990), who notes that defense operations are gatekeeping encounters where candidates must demonstrate not only content knowledge but also the ability to perform academic identity through linguistically appropriate discourse. In graduate defense sessions, this performance is doubly demanding since candidates must control precise content and accuracy of their language and discourse moves to manage the evaluative pressure.

4.5. Challenging the Universality of Cooperation

Cooperative principles may be regarded as challenges that exist in all defense sessions since Gricean maxims need shared goals between the addressees and addressors. In a defense, the goals are often violated since the students are not capable enough to challenge the professors who are experts in the field of research. Thus, the candidate seeks to defend a fixed text and focus on the dissertation content. But the examiner seeks to deconstruct it to test its durability. Therefore, the themes are different, and cooperation may fade away. This does not give a prerequisite of the interaction to offer an appropriate outcome.

The other challenge is to face the difference in social ranks between Iranian professors and students who are not in the same positions and level. This can be seen in the Iranian context since the cultural norms of politeness (e.g., homographic titles and ranks) may hinder conversation regulation. Social distances between the candidates and examiners in the defense

sessions may lead candidates to use indirectness of Manner or Quantity violations to avoid appearing confrontational with an elder/authority figure. However, examiners may operate within their norms of English-medium academic discourse and experiences to interpret this indirectness as a lack of clarity or a failure of the quality maxim. This creates a pragmatic failure to override cultural communicative styles, and this affects the intersection of linguistic capital. This is matched with Bourdieu (1991), who agrees this mismatch affects both linguistic and cultural capitals in shaping the outcomes of academic interactions.

4.6. Disciplinary Variation in Regulatory Patterns

In the defenses of applied linguistics defense sessions, quality maxim violations were predominantly addressed through requests for empirical evidence, although the overarching patterns remained consistent across various disciplines. Quality maxim violations were more frequently associated with the need for theoretical justification. The candidates need to remined the need to know the theoretical framework underpins any analytical choice. In the realm of English literature, manner maxim violations appeared to be more prevalent, indicating that aesthetic or interpretive discussions may exhibit a higher tolerance for ambiguity compared to empirical or theoretical discussions. These results are consistent with Hyland's (2000) insights that disciplinary distinctions influence both the expectations and evaluations of academic discourse.

5. Conclusion

Findings of the study focused on the dissertation defense sessions to uncover the evaluation of Gricean cooperative principles of quality, quantity, relevance and manner in exchanges between the examiners and graduate candidates. The purpose was to examine them not merely as a straightforward communicative event, but rather as a multifaceted arena of epistemic regulation and institutional gatekeeping. By employing a critical pragmatic perspective on 30 English-medium PhD defenses, the results have shown that Gricean cooperation is not an inherent condition but a carefully orchestrated performance. The results revealed that while candidates often faced difficulties with the maxims of quality and relation as cooperation gaps in their speech, the examiners asserted their institutional authority through particular regulatory moves.

The quality maxim indicated that the defense primarily served as a tool for confirming the candidates' evidentiary accountability, as the prevalence of interventions related to the truth and falsehood of exchanges uttered by the candidates. Moreover, the deliberate use of topic redirection strengthened the existing power imbalance wherein the examiner retains the ultimate authority to determine thematic relevance. Maxims of manner violations have uncovered the concealed aspect of linguistic capital within the contexts, illustrating how language performance intertwines with epistemic assessment. These findings transcend a deficiency model of candidate communication since they underscore how the intrinsic pressures of the defense. The candidates were often exacerbated by the challenges of engaging in a second language, generating distinct pragmatic patterns that uphold academic hierarchies.

5.1. Pedagogical and Institutional Implications

Findings of the study have significant implications for graduate candidates who are going to participate in MA or PhD defense sessions. They need to be familiar with the phases of defense session process. They also need to focus on rhetorical moves and grammar; graduate programs should provide training in interactional resilience and how to handle direct challenges to evidence of quality and quantity maxims to maintain relevance under pressure. Moreover, graduate programs might include mock defense simulations where candidates practice responding to examiner challenges using structured frameworks. The results of the study can help graduates manage the conversations and cooperative principles of maxims. For instance, "*I appreciate the question. Let me clarify by referring to Section X of my study, where the data suggest...*", and so on. Such practices can reduce anxiety and increase candidates' ability to manage interactional conversations.

The results of the study help the graduates to follow explicit instruction on epistemic accountability and be aware of the suspended trust inherent in the defense genre. Curriculum designers might develop awareness-raising modules of Gricean maxims that analyze transcribed excerpts from actual defenses anonymized to familiarize candidates with common examiner challenge patterns and effective response strategies. The results of the study can provide graduates with examiners' challenges to avoid personal failures, improve candidate performance, and reduce anxiety.

5.2. Limitations and Directions for Future Research

This present research makes a comprehensive critical analysis of the role of Gricean's (1975) Cooperative Principles and integrates insights from CDA. The study's contributions showed that there are some cooperation gaps across the maxims of Quality, Relation, Quantity, and Manner. Violations involve overgeneralization or insufficient evidential grounding. However, it is important to recognize the limitations of the study. The sample size was small, and it dealt with the data gathered in a single university in Iran. This may restrict the applicability of the findings to other institutional contexts. Then, the analysis predominantly utilized transcript data, as highlighted by the reviewers, incorporating triangulation methods, such as stimulated recall interviews or post defense reflections from participants that could be biased. Finally, the interpretations of defense session interactions were based on the motivations behind the maxim violations and the perceptions of the regulatory actions.

Future directions should focus on a multimodal approach to investigate non-verbal signals such as gestures, pauses, and gaze in the negotiation of authorized language in the society. There is a need to conduct longitudinal studies for searching candidate's pragmatic competence when they start writing proposals and finish their dissertations. This can be more dynamic perspective on academic apprenticeship and analyses between Persian and English defense sessions. Furthermore, the researchers may clarify the influence of learners' linguistic capital on the exercises of epistemic power and language modals. There is also a need to follow cross-disciplinary studies and uncover how disciplinary epistemologies influence interactional and transactional exchanges among the interlocutors. Finally, the online defense sessions can be investigated to figure out the differences between online and in-person postgraduate defense sessions to explore how the medium of interaction impacts the role of epistemic markers in the regulation of defense session processes.

Declaration

We confirm that this work is original and is not under consideration by any other journal.

Transparency Statements

The datasets analyzed during the current study are available from the corresponding author on reasonable request.

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