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



Linguistics Society of Iran

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ABSTRACT

This study investigates how knowledge, authority, and epistemic legitimacy are discursively regulated in postgraduate thesis defense interaction. Drawing on [Grice's \(1975\)](#) Cooperative Principle and integrating insights from Critical Discourse Analysis ([Fairclough, 2015](#)) and contemporary critical pragmatics, the study analyzes 30 English-medium PhD thesis defenses conducted at an Iranian university. Rather than treating maxim violations as neutral communicative breakdowns, the study conceptualizes them as interactional sites where institutional norms of academic legitimacy are negotiated and enforced. Adopting a dialectical approach that distinguishes between researcher-imposed analytical categories and participant-oriented interpretive frameworks, the analysis identifies 340 instances of candidate contributions interpreted as cooperation gaps across the maxims of Quality, Relation, Quantity, and Manner. Violations of Quality were most frequent (39.1%), typically involving overgeneralization or insufficient evidential grounding. Examiner responses predominantly took the form of Direct Demands for Precision or Evidence (42.5%), functioning as mechanisms of epistemic verification. Violations of Relation (27.9%) were commonly addressed through Topic Redirection, reinforcing examiners' control over thematic boundaries. By situating Gricean pragmatics within an asymmetrical institutional setting, the study argues that cooperation in thesis defenses is not presupposed but actively regulated. Examiner interventions operate as forms of epistemic and discursive gatekeeping through which academic authority is enacted and reproduced. The findings contribute to critical applied linguistics by demonstrating how micro-pragmatic interactional practices sustain macro-institutional hierarchies. 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 merely an academic ritual marking the completion of research; it is a high-stakes institutional encounter in which knowledge claims are publicly scrutinized, authorized, and either ratified or contested ([Ahmadi & Yousofi, 2025](#)). Although structurally organized as dialogue, the defense is characterized by pronounced asymmetries in epistemic status, interactional rights, and evaluative authority. Examiners possess institutional legitimacy to question, challenge, and redirect; candidates are positioned as accountable knowledge claimants whose scholarly credibility is under assessment. In this sense, the defense functions as a site where academic knowledge is not only presented but discursively regulated. Following [Swales \(1990\)](#), we recognize the defense as a distinct academic genre with its own conventions, expectations, and gatekeeping functions that extend beyond mere content evaluation.

Research on academic discourse has long recognized that institutional talk differs fundamentally from ordinary conversation ([Drew & Heritage, 1992](#)). In evaluative settings, turn allocation, topic control, and standards of relevance are tightly managed. Yet relatively little research has examined how such 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 particularly salient in thesis defense research, where existing studies have tended to focus on genre structure, politeness strategies, rhetorical moves, or candidate anxiety, rather than on the micro-pragmatic negotiation of epistemic legitimacy.

[Grice's \(1975\)](#) Cooperative Principle (CP) provides a foundational framework for understanding conversational expectations through its maxims of Quantity, Quality, Relation, and Manner. However, Grice's model presupposes relatively symmetrical participation and a shared commitment to mutual understanding. In institutional evaluation contexts, cooperation cannot be assumed to be neutral or egalitarian. Contemporary scholars in critical pragmatics (e.g., [Haugh, 2017](#); [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.

Thus, applying the Cooperative Principle to thesis defense discourse requires theoretical expansion. Instead of asking simply which maxims are violated, it becomes necessary to examine who has the authority to define a violation, how such categorizations are interactionally achieved, and how regulatory responses reproduce academic hierarchies. From a Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) perspective ([Fairclough, 2015](#); [Van Dijk, 2006](#)), institutional discourse both reflects and sustains broader

structures of power ([Aghaei et.al., 2022](#); [Rajabi et.al., 2024](#); [Aghaei et al., 2012](#); [Rajabi, 2015](#)). Examiner interventions—requests for clarification, challenges to evidence, topic redirections—may be interpreted not only as conversational repairs but also as enactments of epistemic authority.

The Iranian English-medium thesis defense context offers a particularly revealing site for such analysis. In many Iranian postgraduate programs in applied linguistics and related disciplines, defenses are conducted in English, a language that functions simultaneously as an academic medium and global disciplinary currency. Candidates must therefore demonstrate not only mastery of research content but also the ability to perform epistemic accountability in a second language under evaluative pressure. Despite growing attention to English-medium higher education, little research has systematically investigated how pragmatic norms of cooperation are negotiated within such asymmetrical, multilingual academic encounters.

This study addresses this gap by integrating Gricean pragmatics with Fairclough's three-dimensional CDA framework. Rather than treating maxim violations as objective communicative failures, we conceptualize them as interactional sites where institutional expectations become visible. 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 reassert epistemic and discursive control. Crucially, our analytical framework adopts a dialectical position on the status 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 [Sarangi'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 types 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 within an asymmetrical institutional 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-stakes 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 (CDA) 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 institutional 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 (researcher-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 this study, we adopt a dialectical position: 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. 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 participant resources, underscores the critical pragmatics orientation of the study.

[Grice's \(1975\)](#) Cooperative Principle (CP) and its constituent maxims—Quality, Quantity, Relation, and Manner—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, 2017](#); [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 (Relation) or what constitutes sufficient evidence (Quality) is unevenly distributed. As [Sarangi and Slembrouck \(1992\)](#) argue, in institutional talk, the dominant party (the examiner) often holds the authority to interpret a candidate's utterance as a "violation," thereby triggering regulatory interventions. Thus, 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 site 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 within 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 not only content knowledge but also the ability to "perform" academic identity through discursively appropriate behavior.

2.3. *The Defense as Institutional Talk*

Drawing on Conversation Analysis (CA) in Institutional Settings ([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 a professional/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-medium context, these dynamics are further layered by linguistic identities. The use of English—often a second language for both parties—adds a dimension of Linguistic Capital ([Bourdieu, 1991](#)). 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 extensively documented, academic discourse communities enforce norms of textual competence that are often implicitly tied to native-speaker standards, creating additional challenges for non-Anglophone scholars.

2.4. *Situating the Study within Recent Scholarship*

Recent research in critical applied linguistics has increasingly moved toward "criticality" in academic interaction. Studies on Evaluative Talk in educational 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. *Research Design: A Critical Pragmatic Approach*

This study employs a qualitative-dominant mixed-methods design, utilizing Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) integrated with Pragmatic Coding. The approach moves beyond mere frequency counts to examine the functional and ideological implications of interactional moves. Following [Fairclough's \(2015\)](#) framework, the methodology was designed to capture the dialectical relationship between micro-level pragmatic choices (maxim violations) and macro-level institutional power (gatekeeping).

3.2. Corpus and Contextual Variables

The corpus consists of 30 complete, naturally occurring English-medium PhD defenses recorded at a major branch of Islamic Azad University, Iran, between 2025 and 2026. This institution was selected for three reasons: (a) it represents one of the largest higher education networks in the Middle East, with a diverse student body spanning multiple provinces; (b) it maintains a robust English-medium postgraduate program in applied linguistics and related disciplines, ensuring a sufficient corpus of naturally occurring EMI defenses; and (c) its defense format follows a standardized national protocol, facilitating cross-case comparability. However, we acknowledge that institutional prestige, regional variation, and supervisor-examiner networks may influence interactional dynamics. Following [Swales \(1990\)](#), we recognize that genre conventions are locally negotiated, and our findings are therefore contextually situated rather than universally generalizable. The analytical transparency provided through rich description of excerpts enables readers to assess the transferability of findings to their own institutional contexts.

The total duration of the recorded material is approximately 45 hours, yielding a transcript of approximately 210,000 words. This unified doctoral corpus, comprising 30 PhD defenses across three disciplines within the humanities, provides a robust empirical foundation for examining epistemic gatekeeping at the highest level of academic credentialing. Following [Hyland \(2000\)](#), we recognize that disciplinary variation may influence interactional norms; however, the shared institutional framework of the defense genre, where candidates are expected to demonstrate original contribution, methodological rigor, and evidential accountability, ensures sufficient commonality for cross-disciplinary comparison.

To address the need for demographic transparency, the following variables were documented (See Table 1):

The study encompassed 30 doctoral defenses, which were distributed across Applied Linguistics/ELT ($n = 22$), English Literature ($n = 5$), and Translation Studies ($n = 3$); regarding gender composition, the candidate cohort comprised 18 females and 12 males, while the examiner panel consisted of 14 females and 16 males. All examiners held doctoral degrees and represented a range of academic ranks, including 12 Assistant Professors, 14 Associate Professors, and 4 Full Professors. Finally, linguistically, all participants were L1 speakers of Persian, with English consistently serving as the institutional lingua franca throughout the defense proceedings.

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

Data collection followed strict ethical protocols. Written informed consent was obtained from all candidates and examiners. To minimize the Observer's Paradox, recordings were made using stationary digital recorders, and the researcher maintained a non-participant role. All names and identifying institutional markers were pseudonymized during transcription.

3.4. Coding Procedure and Reliability

The analysis proceeded through three rigorous stages:

1. Initial Coding (Identification of Gaps): The transcripts were coded for breaches of the four Gricean maxims (Quality, Quantity, Relation, Manner). Following [Thomas \(1995\)](#), we distinguished between flouting (exploiting a maxim for implicature) and violation (unostentatious failure to observe).

2. Regulatory Move Classification: Based on an adapted version of Najafian's model, examiner responses to these gaps were coded into four categories: Direct Demand for Precision/Evidence, Topic Redirection, Prompting for Elaboration, and Corrective Formulations.
3. Critical Interpretation: Each sequence (Violation → Regulatory Move) was analyzed for its role in asserting epistemic authority and gatekeeping.

3.4.1. Addressing Overlapping Maxims:

In cases where an utterance appeared to breach multiple maxims (e.g., a response that was both vague [Manner] and unsupported [Quality]), the researchers employed "Functional Dominance" coding. The utterance was categorized based on the primary focus of the examiner's subsequent challenge. If the examiner asked for evidence, it was coded as Quality; if they asked for clarity, as Manner.

3.4.2. 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.

3.4.3. 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, the rich description of excerpts (provided in Section 4) allows readers to evaluate the interpretive leaps made during the analysis.

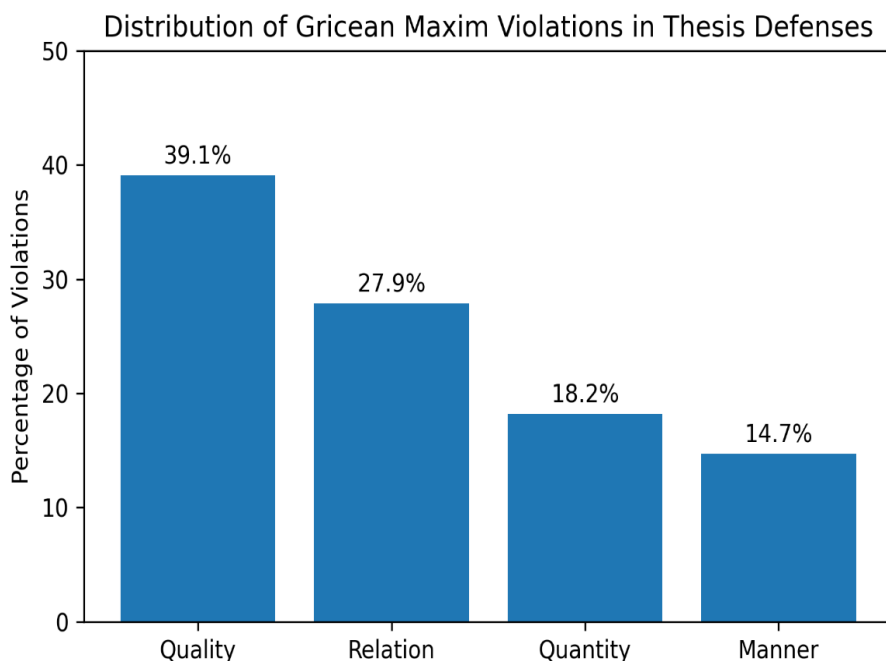
4. Results and Discussion

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 institutional agenda. This reinforces the findings of [Drew & Heritage \(1992\)](#) regarding the asymmetrical control of "what counts as relevant" in institutional settings. The "Cooperative Principle" is thus 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 examiner's 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...") functions to strip 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 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 are referring to?"*

In this sequence, the examiner's corrective formulation functions not merely as a request for clarity but as an institutional sanction of the candidate's linguistic capital ([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 context. 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.

Significantly, our analysis revealed that Manner violations were almost exclusively addressed through Corrective Formulations (9.3% of all regulatory moves), where examiners reformulated the candidate's utterance into what they deemed a "clearer" version. These reformulations, while ostensibly supportive, perform a discursive appropriation; they replace the candidate's voice with an examiner-authorized institutional version, effectively delegitimizing the candidate's linguistic agency. As [Swales \(1990\)](#) notes, the defense operates as a "gatekeeping encounter" where candidates must demonstrate not only content knowledge but also the ability to "perform" academic identity through linguistically appropriate discourse. In EMI contexts, this performance is doubly demanding, as candidates must simultaneously manage content accuracy and linguistic fluency under evaluative pressure.

4.5. Challenging the Universality of Cooperation

The findings strongly contest the Gricean assumption of a "shared goal." In a defense, the goals are often Divergent: the candidate seeks to defend a fixed text, while the examiner seeks to deconstruct it

to test its durability. Therefore, "Cooperation" is not a prerequisite of the interaction but a Regulated Outcome.

In the Iranian context, this is further complicated by cultural norms of politeness (e.g., Ta'arof), which may lead candidates to use indirectness (perceived as Manner or Quantity violations) to avoid appearing confrontational with an elder/authority figure. Examiners, however, operating within the "Western" norms of English-medium academic discourse, interpret this indirectness as a lack of clarity or a failure of Quality. This creates a Pragmatic Mismatch where institutional power is used to override cultural communicative styles. Such mismatches highlight the intersection of linguistic capital ([Bourdieu, 1991](#)) and cultural capital in shaping the outcomes of academic gatekeeping encounters.

4.6. Disciplinary Variation in Regulatory Patterns

While the overall patterns were consistent across disciplines, some disciplinary variation emerged. In Applied Linguistics defenses, Quality violations were most frequently addressed through demands for empirical evidence (e.g., "Which study supports this claim?"). In Translation Studies, Quality violations more often involved theoretical justification (e.g., "What theoretical framework grounds this analytical choice?"). In English Literature, Manner violations were comparatively more frequent, suggesting that aesthetic or interpretive discourse may involve greater tolerance for ambiguity than empirical or theoretical discourse. These findings align with [Hyland's \(2000\)](#) observations that disciplinary differences shape both the expectations and the evaluation of academic discourse.

5. Conclusion

This study has re-examined the thesis defense not as a simple communicative event, but as a complex site of epistemic regulation and institutional gatekeeping. By applying a critical pragmatic lens to 30 English-medium PhD defenses, we have demonstrated that Gricean cooperation is not a default state but a highly managed performance. The findings indicate that while candidates frequently struggle with the maxims of Quality and Relation, these "cooperation gaps" serve as interactional catalysts that allow examiners to enact their institutional authority through specific regulatory moves.

The dominance of Quality-related interventions suggests that the defense functions primarily as a mechanism for verifying the "evidentiary accountability" of the candidate. Furthermore, the systematic use of Topic Redirection reinforces the asymmetrical power structure, where the examiner holds the ultimate right to define thematic relevance. The analysis of Manner violations has revealed the hidden dimension of linguistic capital in EMI contexts, demonstrating how language performance becomes entangled with epistemic evaluation. These results move beyond a "deficiency model" of candidate

communication; instead, they highlight how the inherent pressures of the defense, compounded by the demands of interacting in a second language, produce specific pragmatic patterns that sustain academic hierarchies.

5.1. Pedagogical and Institutional Implications

The findings have significant implications for Graduate Education and English for Academic Purposes (EAP).

1. **Pragmatic Resilience Training:** Rather than focusing solely on rhetorical moves or grammar, graduate programs should provide training in "interactional resilience"—specifically, how to handle direct challenges to evidence (Quality) and how to maintain relevance under pressure. For example, EAP courses might include mock defense simulations where candidates practice responding to examiner challenges using structured frameworks (e.g., "I appreciate the question. Let me clarify by referring to Section X of my study, where the data suggest..."). Such practice can reduce anxiety and increase candidates' ability to manage interactional tension.
2. **Explicit Instruction on Epistemic Accountability:** Students need to be made aware of the "suspended trust" inherent in the defense genre. Curriculum designers might develop awareness-raising modules that analyze transcribed excerpts from actual defenses (anonymized) to familiarize candidates with common examiner challenge patterns and effective response strategies. Understanding that an examiner's challenge is a regulatory norm rather than a personal failure can improve candidate performance and reduce anxiety.
3. **Examiner Reflexivity Workshops:** The study also suggests a need for "examiner reflexivity." Institutions could organize workshops for faculty examiners that address (a) the potential impact of linguistic bias in EMI assessments, (b) awareness of cultural pragmatic differences (e.g., indirectness as politeness rather than lack of clarity), and (c) strategies for maintaining rigorous evaluation while minimizing unnecessary discursive appropriation.

5.2. Limitations and Directions for Future Research

While this study provides a detailed critical analysis, it is subject to several limitations that must be acknowledged. First, the corpus was restricted to one university branch in Iran, which may limit the generalizability of the findings to other institutional cultures. Second, the analysis relied primarily on transcript data. The inclusion of triangulation methods, such as stimulated recall interviews or post-defense reflections from participants, could provide deeper insights into the intentions behind the maxim violations and the perceptions of the regulatory moves.

Future research should adopt a multimodal perspective, examining how non-verbal cues (gestures, pauses, gaze) contribute to the negotiation of authority. Additionally, longitudinal studies

tracking how a candidate's pragmatic competence evolves from the proposal stage to the final defense could offer a more dynamic view of academic apprenticeship. Comparative studies between Persian-medium and English-medium defenses could further illuminate the impact of linguistic capital on the exercise of epistemic power. Cross-disciplinary comparisons across more distant fields (e.g., humanities vs. STEM) could also reveal how disciplinary epistemologies shape interactional expectations. Finally, the increasing prevalence of online/hybrid defenses in the post-COVID era ([Aghaei et al. 2022](#)) opens new avenues for investigating how the medium of interaction affects the dynamics of epistemic gatekeeping.

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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Declaration of Interests

The authors declare that they have no conflict of interest.

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Ethical Consideration

This manuscript adheres to the ethical guidelines provided by the Committee on Publication Ethics (COPE) for ensuring integrity and transparency in the research publication process.

About the Authors

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Appendix A

Decision Tree for Coding Maxim Violations

A decision tree was developed to guide coders through stepwise assessment:

1. Does the utterance deviate from expected informativeness, truthfulness, relevance, or clarity?
 - If No → No coding required
 - If Yes → Proceed to Step 2
2. Does the examiner respond to the utterance?
 - If No (utterance passes without comment) → Code as acceptable (no violation)
 - If Yes → Proceed to Step 3
3. Is the examiner's response a recognition of implicature (flouting) or a challenge to the form/adequacy (violation)?
 - If Recognition of implicature (e.g., uptake without challenge) → Code as FLOUTING (excluded from analysis)
 - If Challenge to form/adequacy (e.g., "That doesn't answer my question," "Where is your evidence?") → Code as VIOLATION → Proceed to Step 4
4. What is the primary focus of the examiner's regulatory move?
 - Evidence/truthfulness → QUALITY
 - Relevance/topic control → RELATION
 - Informativeness/elaboration → QUANTITY
 - Clarity/precision → MANNER