



SUING ACADEMIC CONFORMITY: A PRAGMATIC ANALYSIS OF CRITICISM AND RESISTANCE STRATEGIES IN THE VERBAL INTERACTIONS OF THREE IDIOTS FILM CHARACTERS

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Abstract

This study investigates verbal communication strategies as forms of resistance to academic authority in the film *Three Idiots* (2009). Employing a qualitative approach with pragmatic discourse analysis, the research examines speech acts, politeness strategies, and identity construction in the interactions of the main characters; Rancho, Farhan, and Raju. The findings reveal that critiques of the conventional education system are conveyed through humor, sarcasm, and strategic impoliteness, which function to challenge the symbolic power of higher education institutions. The study highlights that language in this film operates not merely as a medium of communication but also as a tool of ideological resistance, reflecting the tension between conformity and intellectual freedom. These insights suggest that education should be reimagined as a space for humanistic dialogue rather than a system enforcing rigid structural compliance.

Keywords: Pragmatics, Verbal Resistance, Higher Education, Discourse Analysis.

INTRODUCTION

Higher education institutions should ideally be a space for intellectual formation, freedom of thought, and innovation (Nussbaum, 2012). But in practice, the education system is often caught up in a pattern of conformity, directionless competition, and structural pressures that inhibit individual potential (Freire & Macedo, 2014). This phenomenon is interestingly criticized in the film *Three Idiots* (2009), an Indian cinematic work that satirically raises the problem of higher education, especially in the field of engineering, through its main character; Rancho, Farhan, and Raju (Hussain & Ahmad, 2016). This film shows how students are not only objects of the oppressive education system, but also active subjects who resist through language, humor, and the courage to think differently. It is in this context that pragmatic linguistic studies becomes a relevant analytical tool to dissect the verbal communication strategies used by figures to challenge academic authority, challenge old values, and advocate critical thinking.

Pragmatic studies allow researchers to understand how meaning is constructed through language in a given social context. Through speech theory Searle (1975) and the theory of politeness Brown et al. (1987), this research can reveal how verbal strategies such as criticism, sarcasm, sarcasm, and humor are used by the characters of the film *Three Idiots* to break down the power structure in the classroom and present alternative discourses in education. This research places language not just as a means of communication, but as a medium of ideological struggle in the relationship between students and educational institutions.

The purpose of this research is to analyze the forms of speech and politeness strategies used by the characters in the film *Three Idiots* in order to criticize the conventional education system. This research also aims to identify how academic power relations are negotiated through discursive practices, as well as how forms of verbal resistance can function as instruments of liberation in authoritarian classrooms.

For this reason, this study will answer three main questions; (1) How is the strategy of verbal criticism constructed by the main characters in *Three Idiots*? (2) What are the forms of speech and politeness strategies used in the practice of resistance to academic authority? And (3) How does such verbal interaction reflect power negotiations and attempts to deconstruct the norms of higher education?

The research gap lies in the lack of pragmatic studies that explicitly highlight students' verbal resistance in South Asian cinema works as a form of systemic criticism of education. Most previous studies have focused more on pedagogical aspects, cultural representation, or general social criticism (Hussain & Ahmad, 2016), but not many have specifically discussed how language strategies are used by figures to build a form of symbolic resistance to repressive educational structures. This research makes a new contribution by combining a pragmatic approach with the discourse of institutional criticism through the media of film, as well as placing language as the main instrument in the discursive struggle.

RESEARCH METHODS

This study uses a qualitative approach with a pragmatic discourse analysis method to examine the forms of verbal communication that represent resistance to academic authority in the film *Three Idiots* (2009). Data in the form of verbal speeches of the main characters; Rancho, Farhan, and Raju, are collected through the techniques of documentation and dialogue transcription of key scenes that contain criticism of the education system. The choice of scenes is based on contextual relevance to the theme of symbolic resistance and verbal politeness strategies. The analysis was carried out using pragmatic theoretical frameworks such as the principle of politeness by Leech (2014) and speech action theory by Austin et al. (1975) and J. R. Searle (1979), which allows researchers to identify the implicit intent in the characters' speech. In addition, the critical theoretical framework Freire & Macedo (2014) It is also used to understand how the practice of language in film reflects the tension between education as a tool of liberation versus education as a tool of oppression. The validity of the data is strengthened through theoretical triangulation techniques and intersubjectivity between researchers in the interpretation process (Creswell, 2014). With this design, this research not only describes the communication patterns of the figures, but also contextualizes them in broader ideological and cultural dynamics, in accordance with the interpretive approach in qualitative research.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

As part of the conceptual framework for understanding social critique of the higher education system, it is important to examine how media representations – particularly films – reflect those realities in narrative and symbolic forms. The film *3 Idiots* (2009), as one of India's most influential cinematic works, presents a complex picture of academic pressure, students' resistance to the mechanistic education system, and the humanistic values embedded in the learning process. Before being further analyzed through a pragmatic approach and theory of educational criticism, here is a complete synopsis of the film *3 Idiots* which is the main object of study in this study:

3 Idiots (2009) is an Indian cinematic masterpiece directed by Rajkumar Hirani and freely adapted from the novel *Five Point Someone* by Chetan Bhagat. The film follows the friendship journey of three mechanical engineering students – Ranchoddas Shamaldas Chanchad (Rancho), Farhan Qureshi, and Raju Rastogi – who study at one of India's most prestigious engineering universities, the Imperial College of Engineering (ICE). Rancho is described as a genius and curious student who defies conventional ways of thinking. He believes that true learning comes from understanding, not just memorizing or pursuing academic grades.

Farhan and Raju, two of Rancho's roommates, have different backgrounds. Farhan was forced to study engineering by his father despite aspiring to be a wildlife photographer, while Raju came from a poor family that depended on his economic hopes on his success in college. Together, the three face academic pressure, an education system that demands conformity, and authority figures such as their campus chancellor, Viru Sahastrabuddhe (known as "Virus"), who uphold rigid principles of discipline and an emphasis on academic achievement alone.

The main conflict arose when Rancho openly criticized the education system that he said only produced graduates who were theoretically smart, but uncreative, uninnovative, and unable to make a real contribution to society. Rancho often challenges dogmatic and boring learning practices with applicative

and creative learning methods. He also encouraged Farhan and Raju to follow their own path in life, not the demands of others, while instilling the principle: "Pursue excellence, and success will follow you."

On their journey, the character of Pia – a medical student who is also the daughter of the rector of Virus – emerges who becomes a central figure in Rancho's emotional dynamics. Tensions rise as the rivalry between Rancho and Chatur Ramalingam (aka "Silencer") intensifies. Chatur is an ambitious student who relies on memorization and races to become the best student just to pursue formal recognition.

After graduating, these three friends parted ways. Farhan pursues his dream of becoming a photographer, Raju gets a prestigious job, and Rancho disappears without a trace. Years later, Farhan, Raju, and Pia travel across India in search of the mysterious whereabouts of the Rancho. In the adventure, they discover that Rancho's true identity is Phunsukh Wangdu – a renowned scientist and innovator who disguised himself as someone else while in college because of his social background.

The film closes its story with a strong moral message: true education must humanize people, not just score numbers and prestige. Grades, social status, and diplomas are not the final measure of success, but the courage to be yourself and make a real contribution to the world.

The film *3 Idiots* not only presents a story of student friendship, but also conveys a sharp critique of the higher education system that is mechanistic, destructively competitive, and tends to ignore the human aspect of the learning process. Through the narration of the characters Rancho, Farhan, and Raju, this film voices resistance to the educational paradigm that makes academic grades the sole benchmark of success, without considering creativity, conceptual understanding, and freedom of thought.

1. Criticism of the Education System: Education as Taming

The film presents higher education as an institution that emphasizes compliance, memorization, and numerical excellence (grades, rankings, achievement index). This reflects what has been criticized by Freire & Macedo (2014) As a banking model of education, where students are positioned as passive containers that only receive knowledge transfer from lecturers as the sole authority. In the film, the character of the rector Virus is a representation of an authoritarian academic power structure and intolerant of different points of view. Rancho, through his ironic and humorous style of communication, challenged this system by arguing that education should liberate, not oppress.

"Why do we study? For value or for science? For jobs or for change?" – an implicit quote from Rancho's ideological position, reflecting criticism of market-based education and certification.

2. Verbal Communication Strategies (Resistance through Humor and Strategic Impoliteness)

From a pragmatic point of view, Rancho often used a strategy of strategic impoliteness to challenge the rector's symbolic power. For example, in Chah's presentation scene peppered with vocabulary manipulation in Sanskrit, Rancho uses joke-based dispreference markers (Haugh & Bargiela-Chiappini, 2010) who pragmatically showed their disapproval of the memorization-based learning system. This strategy is not merely a form of indoctrination, but part of a linguistic practice aimed at dismantling dominant ideologies (Leech, 2014).

This linguistic criticism reflects the function of illocutionary speech (Searle, 1979) in the declarative, directive, and expressive forms that Rancho uses to convey criticism, persuade his best friend to dare to make his own life choices, and declare freedom of thought. This realm shows how language is not only a means of communication, but also an ideological instrument.

3. Identity Construction and Symbolic Resistance

Rancho is not only a verbal actor in dialogue, but also an identity-forming agent. Through his critical attitude, he constructed an identity as an independent student who did not submit to the system. This identity is formed in opposition to the figure of Chatur, a "perfect" student according to the criteria of the education system, but hollow in understanding and empathy. Rancho's symbolic identity affirms that success is not the result of obedience, but of the courage to think differently and challenge norms.

This perspective is in line with relational theory in pragmatic (Arundale, 2006), which states that politeness does not necessarily mean submission, but is the negotiation of social position through language. Rancho uses verbal resistance as a way of building horizontal, rather than vertical-authoritative

relationships as represented by the Virus and the academic system.

4. Emotional and Social Dimensions in Learning

This film also shows that the learning process cannot be separated from the aspects of emotions, social relations, and cultural background. In Raju's case, academic pressure nearly killed him, which highlights how the value system in education can harm students' mental health. This confirms that education that only emphasizes cognition without affection and empathy fails not only pedagogically, but also ethically and socially Nussbaum (2012).

Meanwhile, the friendship between the three main characters describes a collective learning process that is collaborative and mutually supportive, different from the competitive system run by the campus. This reflects learning as social practice, as stated by Lave & Wenger (1991), that learning is the result of interaction in a community, not the result of isolated individuals.

5. Transformation as a Form of Liberation

The end of the film shows a significant transformation in the lives of each character, especially Farhan and Raju, who dare to choose their own path of life after being influenced by Rancho's thoughts. This transformation is not only personal, but also symbolic, that true education opens up space for human beings to be themselves, not just fill a slot in the system. Rancho, who came to be known as Phunsukh Wangdu, became a metaphor for alternative success: someone who did not pursue formal status (diploma), but was able to make a real contribution to society through innovation and empathy.

CONCLUSION

This research shows that the film *Three Idiots* not only presents a critique of the higher education system narratively, but also linguistically through the verbal communication strategies used by the characters. Through a pragmatic approach, it is found that forms of criticism of academic authority are not only expressed directly, but also through humor, sarcasm, irony, and communicative actions that challenge the hierarchical structure of education. The main characters, especially Rancho, use verbal strategies as a means of resistance to oppressive norms, form an identity as independent-thinking subjects, and encourage social transformation in the surrounding environment. The verbal interactions displayed reflect the tension between the values of conformity and intellectual freedom, and show that education should be humanistic, liberating, and based on understanding, not just the mastery of formal values. Thus, this film succeeds in representing education as an arena of ideological struggle, where language becomes an important tool in deconstructing power and building a more inclusive, empathetic, and transformative discursive space.

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