



JÖNKÖPING UNIVERSITY

*School of Education and
Communication*

A King's Privileges, Obligations, and Function:

A Qualitative Study on Power and Language Use in the TV Show
House of the Dragon

COURSE: *English for Secondary School Subject Teachers IIIc, 15 credits*

WRITER: *Gustav Backlund*

EXAMINER: *Jenny Malmqvist*

SUPERVISOR: *Annika Denke*

TERM: *Spring 2025*

Title: A King's Privileges, Obligations, and Function: A Qualitative Study on Power and Language Use in the TV Show *House of the Dragon*.

Author: Gustav Backlund

Pages: 28

Abstract

This study aims to investigate power in language. More specifically, the study aims to investigate how a position of power affects how an individual performs speech acts. Additionally, the study aims to identify how power is legitimized through language. The investigation focuses on a fictional character in a TV show, *House of the Dragon*, who holds the title of king, Viserys 1st Targaryen. The study is qualitative in nature and relies on the author's interpretations of the character's intentions behind each speech act analyzed. The results show that the king is allowed to use language almost entirely how he wants to, even performing Face-Threatening-Acts, FTAs, towards anyone with impunity. The king is, however, more careful with his speech acts when he desires to either maintain an open relationship with characters close to him, e.g., his daughter, or when what he says has drastic consequences, such as war. To identify the legitimacy of power, the term was defined through two aspects, symbolic and functional, to illustrate that the power in the king's speech acts originates from other factors. The analysis argues that these two aspects, the social contract (symbolic), and the special, objective value of language (functional), are the sources that granted his power legitimacy. Both sources are also dependent on each other. In other words, the king's authority requires recognition and cooperation from enough characters in order to perform his speech acts with impunity. However, not only does the social contract require the king's compliance to adhere to social rituals as well, but it is also observed in the study that when the social contract has been established the king's speech acts actually worked as intended. When everyone agrees that the king has the authority to declare war, whether he intends to or not, his language can lead other characters to kill strangers on a battlefield. This ability of speech acts is considered in this paper to be the effect of both symbolic and functional power. This paper is also emphasizing the necessary relationship between the two aspects in order for power to be powerful.

Keywords: Power, symbolic, function, speech act, pragmatics, FTAs, *House of the Dragon*

Table of Content

1. Introduction	1
2. Aim and Research Questions.....	2
3. Background.....	3
3.1 Power	3
3.2 Pragmatics: Indirectness and Context	4
3.2.1 Governing Axioms and Motives	5
3.2.2 Politeness and Face	7
3.3 Field of Research: Power and Language.....	7
4. Material and Method	10
4.1 Material	10
4.2 Method	11
5. Results and Analysis.....	12
5.1 The King's Negative Goals	12
5.2 The King's Positive Goals	14
5.3 Competing Goals.....	16
5.4 The Role of Power	18
5.4.1 Symbolic Power	18
5.4.2 Functional power	20
6. Discussion.....	22
7. Conclusion.....	25
List of References	26
Primary material.....	26
Secondary material.....	26

1. Introduction

Power is one of the most addressed concepts in the humanities. Michel Foucault, for instance, whose academic contributions primarily revolve around power, is one of the most prominent voices in social sciences and philosophy of the 20th century. Currently, as of this writing, his works are quoted by 1,409,201 other sources in Google Scholar's database alone (Google Scholar, 2024). There are many ways to discuss the concept of power. In this essay, power is studied within the linguistic field of pragmatics, i.e., meaning-making in language use. The role and effects of power in meaning-making have been covered by many linguists. One study (Morand, 2000) investigated the relationship between language and power, with a specific focus on communication in workspaces between superiors and subordinates. In the case of this paper, the study analyzes a fictional character, rather than people in everyday lives. Specifically, the character analyzed is King Viserys 1st Targaryen from the TV show *House of the Dragon*, a fantasy-epic filled with court-drama and political intrigue. Viserys is in a position that would be considered more powerful than all others within the text universe. Furthermore, this paper intends to understand how Viserys has legitimate power. In order to understand this, this paper introduces two aspects of power. These aspects are described as symbolic (Bourdieu, 1999) and functional (Lee & Pinker, 2010) power. Bourdieu (1999) has expanded on the aspect of symbolic power in language by observing how social contracts and consensus play a pivotal part in locating the source of power, illocution. Lee and Pinker (2010) propose the idea of the strategic speaker, which this paper describes as the functional aspect of power. The idea observes how strategy in language use is a natural component, or phenomenon, and is connected to the evolutionary processes of humans, which suggests that cooperation proves its value, in part, through evolution (2010). This paper investigates how a position of power affects a character's language use and, by extension, what gives power its legitimacy. This essay intends to identify the legitimacy of power by observing the king's speech through these two aspects presented (Bourdieu, 1999; Lee & Pinker, 2010) and the relationship between these two aspects.

2. Aim and Research Questions

The aim investigated is how a position of power affects speech acts and what gives power its legitimacy. To achieve this aim, the essay will examine a fictional character, King Viserys 1st Targaryen, and how he uses speech acts to reach his goals. The following research questions have been formulated to achieve the aim:

- How does Viserys 1st Targaryen's position of power affect his speech acts?
- How is Viserys 1st Targaryen's power in language use legitimized?

3. Background

The background for this essay will firstly address and define the word 'power'. Afterwards, the linguistic concepts that were necessary to apply in order to perform the analysis of the primary material will be presented. Lastly, an overview of previous research studying the relationship between power and language will be presented in order to provide context and perspective when discussing the results of this essay.

3.1 Power

The main concept that this essay is concerned with is power. However, power is a complicated term, and using it analytically even more so. Thus, it is important to firmly establish a working definition that is consistent throughout this essay. This essay argues that to properly define the word 'power', it is essential to apply two categories, or aspects of power. The two aspects are symbolic (Bourdieu, 1999) and functional (Lee & Pinker, 2010) power.

First, the paper will address Bourdieu (1999) and how his work contributes to the understanding of symbolic power. According to Bourdieu, linguists preceding himself have tried to identify the illocution, or force, of a phrase within the words themselves of a given language, exclusively (1999, p.75). In Bourdieu's sense, it is an act of misrecognition if the illocutionary force is perceived only within the words themselves (1999, p.52). For Bourdieu, there are two forces at work, and both provide the illocution to the uttered phrase (1999, p.52): "the special value objectively accorded to the legitimate use of language and the social foundations of this privilege". To fail to perceive and recognize both aspects is to inevitably fall "into one or other of two opposing errors" (1999, p.52). Bourdieu ascribes the phrase 'symbolic power' to the source concerned with the social foundations of privilege (1999). This essay will use this phrase also. However, since Bourdieu does not primarily attend to the other source, the special and objective value of language, this essay will turn to Lee and Pinker (2010) and their theory of the strategic speaker to provide further clarification.

Lee and Pinker (2010) have investigated language use based on the theory of the "strategic speaker". The theory affirms the possibility of being strategic in language use, which aligns with the pragmatic field of linguistics (Thomas, 1995; Yule, 1996; Levinson, 1983; Huang, 2007). However, Lee and Pinker also argue that the strategic element is an integral, evolutionary component in language use and indirect speech acts. The theory of the strategic speaker observes a speaker "who seeks plausible deniability when he or she is uncertain whether the

hearer is cooperative or antagonistic" (2010, p.785). The theory highlights an aspect of human interaction other than the social ritual (2010, p.801). Social ritual, or symbolic power, is synonymous with their depiction of "cooperation theories" (2010, p.786), and pure cooperation presupposes a perfect overlap of goals and interests between participants in a given social context (2010, p.787). Lee and Pinker argue that speech acts also contain a "strategic rationale" (2010, p.801). The strategy element is necessary when there is no perfect overlap in interests. In other words, when the uncertainty of the other participant's role as either cooperative or antagonistic starts to affect the interaction, being strategic in your meaning-making becomes a naturally optimal course of action (2010, p.801). This essay observes an overlap between the strategic rationale (2010, p.801) and the special and objective value of language (Bourdieu, 1999, p.52) because the strategic rationale draws arguments from evolution, something that can be seen as special, objective, and valuable. To phrase it, this essay will describe "the strategic rationale" as 'functional power'.

Furthermore, it is necessary to address that the use of the word 'power' in this essay is not in agreement with how it is used in other references. Power is used within pragmatics to observe when a difference in power between speaking participants affects how language is employed in the interaction (Thomas, 1995; Yule, 1996). It is, however, too narrow a description for the purposes of this essay. Therefore, when power is discussed in the pragmatic sense of the word, this essay will interpret the term as 'influence' instead, which will be reiterated when the topic is addressed. Power, as discussed in this essay, determines outcomes. In other words, with power comes influence.

Thus, this essay will define power accordingly: power is dependent on two aspects. The first aspect is represented as symbolic power, i.e., the social contract, societal norms, majority consensus, privilege, and obligation. The second aspect is represented as functional power, i.e., the fact that strategy works in uncertain territory. Functional power observes that "successful communication" is actually successful, technically speaking.

3.2 Pragmatics: Indirectness and Context

When we speak, we act. In other words, we perform speech acts (Yule, 1996, p.47). Therefore, if we assume that our actions matter then, by extension, what we say also matters. A command is an example of a speech act since the utterance performs an action (Yule, 1996, p.47). Speaking is also something that is not just saying exactly what is meant. Sometimes people speak directly, or sometimes the speaker cannot express their ideas, so the interlocutor needs to

strategize their way around that which cannot be expressed. Although this is not what pragmatics is interested in (Thomas, 1995, p.49,156). Rather, pragmatics is concerned with illocution (1995, p.49), i.e., the force or intention behind the words uttered, and therefore *intentional indirectness* (Thomas, 1995; Yule, 1996; Levinson, 1983; Huang, 2007). In other words, pragmatics is concerned with intent, whether ill or well, and motivated strategies through indirect speaking. Because the focus is on illocution, however, context is crucial in understanding a speaker's meaning (1995, p.156). A sentence is not enough to properly interpret its illocution, e.g., the phrase 'it's him' could be an accusation, a confirmation, or perhaps a cry of relief. Meaning is not inherent in the parts but rather seems to be derived from the context as a whole (1995, p.22). This observation reinforces the previous idea that strategy is a real possibility in interaction since meaning is not completely accessible to anyone.

Three a priori assumptions are needed to analyze indirectness in a pragmatic sense (Thomas, 1995, p.119). The first assumption is concerned with rationality (1995, p.121). "The assumption of rationality" means that illocution can only be discerned by the hearer on the assumption that the speaker is behaving rationally and is not afflicted by other factors such as insanity (1995, p.121). Second, the assumption is that "indirectness is costly and risky" (1995, p.119), meaning that an indirect illocution usually costs more energy to produce and that comes at the risk of not being properly understood by the listener. Thirdly, analyzing indirectness assumes the "principle of expressibility" (1995, p.120). The principle merely states that "anything that can be meant can be said" (1995, p.120). In the analysis of the primary material, it was assumed that the character in question adhered to these three points.

3.2.1 Governing Axioms and Motives

The field of pragmatics uses concepts and tools to help understand and analyze illocution. The concepts and tools that are used from the field when analyzing the results will now be presented. To reiterate from section 3.2, pragmatics is more concerned with indirectness and the tools that will be presented help understand indirect language use primarily. Although, observing the lack of indirectness employed could help provide the analysis with more understanding, with regard to the aim of the study.

The first set of tools helps illustrate how the level, meaning amount or quality, of indirectness is employed, by way of four universal axioms (Thomas, 1995, p.124): power, social distance, imposition, and rights and obligations. As mentioned previously in section 3.1 of this essay, the axiom of 'power' should be understood as 'influence' within the framework of this essay.

Importantly, the universality means that these axioms manage to cover all the interlocutor's possible considerations that govern their strategy, not to claim a universal application of all these axioms in any given context (1995, p.124). This study prioritizes the analytical use of three axioms, namely power, social distance, and competing goals.

The axiom of power recognizes which interlocutor has the highest degree of influence on the outcomes of a given interaction (Thomas, 1995, p.124). A king, e.g., would typically have a higher degree of influence over the outcome than anyone. The influence can be identified based on its legitimacy, reference, expertise, or its ability to reward, or coerce (1995, p.125).

The axiom of social distance refers to the principle of 'closeness' in an interaction between two people (Thomas, 1995, p.128). This axiom measures the level of indirectness employed based on how close, from a social perspective, the interlocutors are. In other words, there would be a difference if the interlocutor addressed the king when they have never met, as opposed to greeting the king who is simultaneously the interlocutor's father.

The governing axioms cannot, however, clearly analyze the primary material on their own. The second set of tools applied helps identify motives for indirectness. These general motives also rest similarly on the aforementioned 'universal' type of categorization (Thomas, 1995, p.142): the desire to make one's language more/less interesting, to increase the force of one's message, competing goals, and politeness/regard of face. It is important to note that these motives also focus primarily on why and where indirectness is employed at a sentence-level analysis. They are not focusing on why the sentence was even said, at least not on their own accord.

The motive for making one's language more/less interesting is quite clear. The motivation is to use indirectness to either draw, or divert, attention to what you are going to convey. The axiom of competing goals refers to instances when an interlocutor has two or more goals that are competing in value and priority (Thomas, 1995, p.145). To exemplify, perhaps a propositional goal, 'I don't want to declare open war on your enemies', competes with an interpersonal goal, 'our alliance is very important for the stability of the kingdom'.

Lastly, politeness/face will be addressed on its own in the following section. This is due to the fact that politeness/face has received more attention academically, causing theories and other concepts to emerge as a consequence (Thomas, 1995, p.143).

3.2.2 Politeness and Face

Politeness, in the pragmatic sense, is unlike the other motivations previously mentioned. It is in a relationship with a multitude of other motivations (Yule, 1996, p.60). These motivations are, but are not limited to, being "tactful, generous, modest, and sympathetic towards others" (1996, p.60). Politeness is therefore motivated by the relationship an interlocutor has with others (1996, p.60). To understand the motivation for politeness better, multiple linguists (Huang, 2007; Yule, 1996; Thomas, 1995; Brown & Levinson, 1987; Lee & Pinker, 2010) incorporate the concept of 'face' with politeness. 'Face' is described by Yule (1996, p.60) as: "the public self-image of a person". Goffman (1959, p.13) explains this by pointing out the general interest people have for the other's socio-economic status, conception of self, attitude, competence, and trustworthiness, in any given social interaction. The degrees vary depending on the context, but the importance people lay in one's 'face' has a relation to the interest people have in the other's 'face'. It is generally all the information we can garner about someone when interacting with them. How competent, generous, and likable is the person we are conversing with? 'Face' therefore has a direct impact on our social opportunities and, by extension, our survival options. A person's face is also an ever-changing phenomenon, meaning that every interaction impacts one's face indefinitely. This is observed by Brown and Levinson (1987, p.61), and they conclude that a person's face is in constant need of maintenance. Your face, i.e., your social status, is always liable to threats and praises, to be destroyed and celebrated.

Face-Threatening-Acts (Brown & Levinson, 1987, p.65), or FTAs, describe speech acts that can "intrinsically" threaten one's face in a given interaction. The intrinsic nature of an FTA is based on two assumptions about social interaction (1987, p.65), which have both been previously presented in this essay but, to reiterate, they are the assumption of rationality and the universality of face. Understanding this, the analysis is given additional aspects to consider when analyzing the king's meaning-making, which include decisions on avoiding, or not avoiding, FTAs with his subjects, and the King's face.

3.3 Field of Research: Power and Language

This section will account for previous research surrounding power and language. It is worth highlighting that the sources in this section do not use fiction as their primary material, apart from one. The purpose of the following sources is primarily to provide perspective and context to the theoretical aspect of power, specifically the relationship between power and language.

This means that the material and the focus of the studies vary in relation to the present essay, but there is theoretical overlap.

The first study is the exception to the rule stated above, namely a study that resembles the present essay (Amalia et al., 2023). The study investigates language, particularly politeness strategies, and power in the TV show *Bridgerton* (2023). The study's understanding of 'politeness strategies' correlates to the understanding presented in section 3.2.2 in this essay. The results show mainly that characters in power are "free" to act and to say how they want and feel (2023, p.395). Interestingly, according to the findings of the study, "bald on-record politeness strategies" are dominant when in a position of power (2023, p.394).

The next study presented analyzes the relationship between power and language in an autobiography, specifically from the perspective of the powerless. A Foucauldian analysis of the autobiography of Sharankumar Limbale, named *Akkarmashi* (Siva & Balansundri, 2023), revealed that "language perpetuates power". The autobiography is set in India, with specific attention to the caste system (2023). They examine the language in the autobiography that reinforces power dynamics and "perpetuate social hierarchies" to investigate how language functions as a tool for power and control (2023, p.28). Siva and Balansundri mean to show through their analysis how language is a tool for possible "domination and control", and they want to "demonstrate" the relevancy of Foucault (2023). In other words, their understanding of the relationship between language and power highlights manipulation, oppression, dominance, and ill intent.

The relationship between power and language has also been examined by others (Ng & Deng, 2017), although they differ in their focus and material from the first two studies (Siva & Balansundri, 2023; Amalia et al., 2023). Ng and Deng focus on a technical understanding of the relationship, partly by emphasizing prepositions (2017). For example, by placing power conceptually "behind" language, they mean to analyze how language reveals and reflects power (2017, p.5). Another preposition they use to understand the relationship is to perceive the power 'of' language, meaning language that can maintain dominance, unite and divide nations, and create influence through language use (2017, p.5).

Another aspect of the relationship between power and language focuses more on language than power. The following studies (Holtgraves & Lasky, 1999; Benaicha & Al-Shara'h, 2024)

focused on speech acts by investigating a large group of people. Holtgraves and Lasky observed the speech act of persuading, and that 'powerful' language increased agreement between the message and the messenger, regardless of gender (1999, p.203-204). 'Powerful' language was defined through linguistic markers, such as the absence of hedges, hesitations, and tag questions (1999, p.196-197). In other words, the linguistic capabilities of an interlocutor significantly increased their ability to persuade other participants. Benaicha and Al-Shara'h revealed that social distance had a significant impact on how the interlocutor performed the speech act of expressing gratitude, and that this was regardless of nationality (2024, p.793).

Lastly, the following study by Sievers et al. (2024) performed an investigation different than the rest of the previously mentioned studies by incorporating neuroscience into the investigation. They approached the concepts of power and pragmatics by investigating 'consensus-building' conversation and its effects on the brain. The groups that reached a consensus on the test had greater neural alignment during the brain scan (2024, p.1). Of the groups that reached a consensus, some groups had participants that had 'social status', who controlled different social dynamics of the conversation like unequal turn-taking (2024, p.4-6). However, those groups had reduced neural alignment in the post-brain scan in comparison to groups that included participants and were 'socially central', meaning, e.g., prioritizing the inclusion of all participants (2024, p.4-5). This implies that consensus based on inclusion and cooperation showed greater neural alignment than consensus based on the exertion of power.

To summarize, this overview provides insight into the academic field and situates the present study in relation to previous research. The studies highlight key perspectives on the relationship between power and language, such as: how power enables direct and effective speech (Amalia et al., 2023; Holtgraves & Lasky, 1999), how power is embedded in social structure and language itself (Siva & Balansundri, 2023; Ng & Deng, 2017; Benaicha & Al-Shara'h, 2024), and the importance of agreement and inclusion when building consensus (Sievers et al., 2024).

4. Material and Method

4.1 Material

House of the Dragon is a fictional fantasy drama produced by the American company HBO, created by Ryan Condal and George R.R. Martin. The show is based on the writings of George R.R. Martin's high-fantasy franchise *A Song of Ice and Fire*, particularly the novel *Fire & Blood*. It coexists within the same screen-adapted universe as the renowned TV series *Game of Thrones*. The series is based around characters of noble birth in this fantasy universe and follows the court-drama that has the highest influence in the realm, on the continent named Westeros. It tells the story of how House Targaryen, the family house that has ruled Westeros for over a century, enters into a civil war between two rival factions within the house itself. The consequences of this civil war result in a downfall that House Targaryen never recovers from.

This study focuses on a specific character, King Viserys 1st Targaryen. He ascends the Iron Throne in a time of peace and prosperity in Westeros but throughout his reign, discord grows from within. His firstborn child and daughter, Rhaenyra, is named heir in her teenage years, the first pronounced female heir to the throne. All the Lords and Ladies swear fealty to her, as per tradition. Over the coming years, however, more are questioning whether a woman should rule. After the loss of Viserys' wife and Rhaenyra's mother, Aemma, Viserys remarries Otto Hightower's daughter, Alicent, who is also The Hand of The King, the king's right-hand man. Alicent gives birth to four children. The eldest, being a male, becomes the suggested replacement for Rhaenyra behind closed doors. Alicent and Rhaenyra, who were close friends at a young age, become increasingly antagonistic towards each other, forming factions within the house that both vie for the throne. While Viserys never witnessed the civil war, due to his demise beforehand, it is well established that he could have prevented this conflict had he acted differently.

This essay analyzes material exclusively from season one. The series has currently, as of this writing, produced two seasons in the years 2022 and 2024. The episode runtime averages between 53-67 minutes. The first season consists of ten episodes, but the research has only analyzed the first eight episodes since the character being analyzed for this paper is deceased by the end of the eighth episode. Eventually, due to the scope of this essay, the number of samples, meaning excerpts and amount of material from the source, was reduced in comparison to the total material gathered when performing the analysis.

4.2 Method

This is a case study (Bryman, 2016, pp.60-61) of a relatively limited sample, focusing on one character within a specific social position and context. More specifically, the essay makes use of "critical case sampling", which means that the sample has been chosen because of the character's unique social position (2016, p.409), i.e., the highest position of power in a political hierarchy. Transcription was the primary method of collecting samples from the material. The transcription made use of the TV-series subtitles to help the sampling. Thus, the use and placement of punctuation marks originate from the subtitles. The same can be said for capital letters and other spelling, such as Ser instead of Sir. The subtitles were only altered when it was observed that there were actual grammatical errors and not intended alternatives, or, if added/lessened clarification for context was needed in which case brackets were used. Additionally, regarding the statement from the previous section concerning the reduced number of samples, the selection of excerpts from the total amount gathered was based on how clearly it was for the author to discern the motivations of the character analyzed.

The design of the study was emergent in nature (Dörnyei, 2007, p.37), meaning that the analysis did not rely on any preconceived design or categorization beforehand. The study is also interpretive, meaning that this essay stresses trying to understand the social world by way of interpreting the world through its participants (Bryman, 2016, p.375). The emergent design was to identify interpreted motivations and goals of the character in each context (2007, p.38), to therefore analyze how language was used in order to achieve these goals. The identified goals of Viserys were then generalized into three categories: positive goals (meaning he wanted something), negative goals (meaning he did not want something) and competing goals (which is a reference to the linguistic understanding presented in section 3.2.1).

In order to identify the goals of Viserys in each scene, the pragmatic vocabulary and its tools, presented in section 3.2 of this essay, were applied to describe the steps taken analytically to interpret the goals. The speech acts were then analyzed to identify how his position of power affected the speech acts. Additionally, the analysis that identifies symbolic and functional power was based on mostly the same samples as the previous analysis, in addition to clarifying certain insights.

5. Results and Analysis

This section will present the results and analysis of how power affects Viserys 1st Targaryen, as well as how symbolic and functional power legitimizes his power.

5.1 The King's Negative Goals

This section will present interactions where the King's goals were identified as to reject, not being willing, or simply not wanting to take part of an interaction.

Example 1

The King's wife, Aemma, has passed away due to a difficult childbirth which also ended in the baby's death. During the first council meeting after this incident, the King is pressed by his council members to proclaim his heir, since his line has greatly weakened and is in open question. They argue for some time until the King intervenes, ending the meeting with his statement.

01. **Lord Strong:** If we cannot agree on an heir, then how can we expect-

02. **The King:** My wife and son are dead! I will not sit here and suffer crows that come to feast on their corpses!

Sapochnik (2022, S01E01, 44:00)

In this example, the King shows no intention of wanting to have this discussion. His first sentence is a speech act that marks his close social relation to two recently deceased people. This acts as an explicit statement to provide force for his unwillingness to partake in the discussion being held, which is marked in the second sentence. He does not hesitate to make an FTA towards all his council members, by comparing them to scavengers with nothing but self-interest, and that he suffers in their presence. Additionally, he performs this utterance with no direct repercussions and leaves directly after without being intervened. This signals the power relation between all the members and the King. Thus, the King performs this speech act primarily on the premise of social distance, or closeness, and on the premise of the power axiom to mark his unwillingness to partake any further. He achieves his goal of not wanting to take part in this discussion.

Example 2

Otto, the Hand of the King, has been informed by a spy that Daemon and Rhaenyra have been spotted together at a brothel, involved in activities that a niece and uncle should not perhaps be involved in together. At the break of dawn, the Hand makes his way to the King's bedchamber to relay this information. When relaying the information, however, the King refuses to accept these accusations and returns with an accusation of his own, quickly followed by his desire to be left alone.

01. **The King:** This is a lie. You have been lied to.

02. **Otto:** I only wish that were true, Your Grace.

[...]

03. **The King:** Are you so sick with ambition that you would have my daughter stalked? Spied upon? Awaiting your best chance to destroy her reputation?

04. **Otto:** I have no such intent, Your Grace.

05. **The King:** You think yourself a cunning man. Your designs are obvious. Do you wish to have your blood on the Iron Throne so badly that you are willing to destroy mine own? Just get out. Leave me... at once.

06. **Otto:** Your Grace.

Kilner (2022, E.04, 38:43)

In this example, the observed goal of the King is to reject this rumor that is brought before him. In Otto's insistence on the validity of these rumors, the King instead places the accusation on him in his attempt to reject the first. The King performs multiple FTAs here, e.g., applying disgust to an interpreted goal of Otto, "sick with ambition", insinuating insidious ulterior motives for Otto's desire to share this information, "destroy her reputation". Further analysis also suggests that the King is attempting to silence this rumor regardless of its validity. A scene later on in the episode, when the King and his daughter first talk about the rumor directly, shows this:

01. **Rhaenyra:** For a lie? You've yet to ask me for the truth of what happened.

02. **The King:** The truth does not matter, Rhaenyra. Only perception. You have exposed yourself. Now we must both suffer the consequences.

Kilner (2022, E.04, 53:00)

The King does not only express little trust for Otto by accusing him of hidden motives such as treason. He also displays a lack of trust in Otto by not asking him to help silence the rumor, but by using the axiom of power to discredit Otto's attempt to spread the rumor. The King has expressed that he is more concerned with perception than the truth itself.

5.2 The King's Positive Goals

This section will present interactions where the King's goals were identified to want something, whether confirmation, information, or resolution in an interaction.

Example 3

After the death of the King's newborn son, Daemon is now the default heir by tradition, being the eldest and closest male relative to the King. In response to this, Daemon proposes a toast in a brothel to his newly dead nephew, calling him "The Heir for a Day". After hearing this, the King has summoned his brother to the throne room by himself, while the King is surrounded by his personal guard, the Kingsguard.

Sapochnik (2022, E.01, 53:35)

01. **The King:** Did you say it?

02. **Daemon:** I don't know what you mean.

03. **The King:** You will address me as "Your Grace" or I will have my Kingsguard cut out your tongue. "The Heir for a Day". Did you say it?

04. **Daemon:** We must all mourn in our own way, Your Grace.

...

05. **The King:** I have decided to name a new heir.

06. **Daemon:** I'm your heir.

07. **The King:** Not anymore. You are to return to Runestone and your lady wife at once, and you are to do so without quarrel, by order of your King.

08. **Daemon:** Your Grace.

This example shows two different positive goals: one, the King wants to confront his brother directly regarding the rumor of the toast; two, he wants to inform his brother that he is to be disinherited as heir to the throne and at the same time remove him from the court. The goals are not competing with each other, since the King has no intention of employing indirectness in his speech acts, nor showing any courtesy in his utterances. His first utterance is a direct request

for confirmation about the validity of the rumor. His second is a direct threat if Daemon does not comply with the social contract, and then asks again. Only the second time, considering the looming threat now affecting the interaction, is more of a command than a request. In the second part, he declares that the succession has now altered and orders Daemon to return to his wife's home, which is leagues away from the capital, removing him from his duties and his position in court. Again, there is no indirectness being employed, and he explicitly uses his power as King to order him to comply. Given the context and the force behind the King's utterances, all Daemon has to say is to address his Grace to show compliance.

Example 4

The King has summoned his entire family for supper, meaning both Rhaenyra's and Alicent's side of the family. This is King Viserys' last supper before his passing. Tensions are high between both sides and, even in his decrepit state, the King rises from his chair to hold a speech.
Patel (2022, E.08, 50:48)

01. **The King:** It both gladdens my heart and fills me with sorrow to see these faces around the table. The faces most dear to me in all the world... yet grown so distant from each other... in the years past.

He removes a golden mask from his face that was covering half of it, revealing it to be greatly damaged by his disease. His right eye lost and his cheeks blistered and scarred.

02. **The King:** My own face... is no longer a handsome one... if indeed it ever was. But tonight... I wish you to see me... as I am. Not just a king... but your father. Your brother. Your husband... and your grandsire. Who may not, it seems... walk for much longer among you. Let us no longer hold ill feelings in our hearts. The crown cannot stand strong if the House of the Dragon remains divided. But set aside your grievances. If not for the sake of the crown... then for the sake of this old man who loves you all so dearly.

The interpreted goal of the King here is to achieve reconciliation between his family members. He implores the listeners to choose reconciliation over hostility by emphasizing his legitimate influence through a whole host of titles: king, father, husband, brother, and grandfather. He recognizes explicitly that his demise is close and therefore implies that his wish for reconciliation extends beyond his lifespan. He implies a threat, not requiring himself to be enacted, by alluding to consequences for not complying with his request that are not desirable.

5.3 Competing Goals

This section will present interactions where the King's goals were identified to be in conflict of each other.

Example 5

The King is holding a private audience with Lord Corlys and his wife Rhaenys, the King's cousin. This takes place after a heated argument at the latest council meeting between Lord Corlys and the rest of the council regarding a brewing conflict in a southern province in Westeros, where Lord Corlys has started to suffer casualties and supplies.

Yaitanes (2022, E.02, 14:20)

01. **Lord Corlys:** Your Grace.

02. **The King:** I'm glad we could meet. I know tempers ran hot today, and I wanted to assure you how much I value the bond between our houses. Rhaenys is my favorite cousin after all.

03. **Lord Corlys:** I wish to apologize for the tenor at the small council today, Your Grace. It was not my intent to make offense.

04. **The King:** Your fleet is one of the realm's most important assets, Lord Corlys. But you must understand, as King, it is my obligation to avoid war until such time it is unavoidable.

There are two competing goals in this interaction. On the one hand, the King wishes to maintain a healthy relationship with one of the most important allies of the crown. On the other hand, The King does not wish to risk open war. If Lord Corlys' wishes are met, the King fears a chain reaction, resulting in open war with other, bigger factions, would ensue. In order to try to satisfy both goals, the King's utterances are constructed indirectly. He establishes their close relationship on the axiom of social distance, even marking his closeness with his cousin Rhaenys who is also present, to help achieve the first. In order to achieve his second goal of avoiding open war, the King's tactic is more direct. Firstly, the King marks again the value of Lord Corlys as an asset to the King, which does not seem to imply anything further than what the utterance says. Secondly, he also directly marks the obligations of his status, and by doing this, he also marks the power relation between the two. Furthermore, by marking his obligations as King, he increases the imposition of Lord Corlys' request for reacting to the events in the Stepstones, the aforementioned southern province.

Example 6

After having discussions with several people of his small council, the King now feels the need to confront his daughter, Rhaenyra, about his duty to remarry and produce more heirs.

Yaitanes (2022, E.02, 43:50)

01. **The King:** Yes, well, I sometimes forget how alike you both were. Your mother's absence is a wound that will never heal. Without her, the Red Keep has lost a warmth that I dare say it will never recover.

02. **Rhaenyra:** It pleases me to hear you say this. To know that I'm not alone in my grief.

03. **The King:** I wish I had known better what to say to you in the aftermath. I struggled to realize that my daughter had so quickly become a woman grown. But I know she understands what is now expected of me.

04. **Rhaenyra:** The King must take a new wife.

05. **The King:** I could never replace your mother. No more than I intend to replace you as heir. But you are my only heir and our line is vulnerable, too easily ended. And by marrying again, I may begin to ensure that we are better defended.

The interaction displays two competing goals, from the King's perspective. Firstly, he needs to inform his daughter of the coming changes concerning his duty to remarry. Secondly, he wishes to maintain the interpersonal relationship with his daughter who, from his perspective, might not like the propositional goal that he wants to convey. He tries to achieve both by first emphasizing his closeness to both Rhaenyra and her mother. He implies an apology for his behavior through his wish of knowing better, and by marking his misrecognition of viewing his daughter as a woman. He also introduces his propositional goal by marking it as a duty, something that is expected of him rather than something he wants. He states that the duty should not be perceived as a threat to their interpersonal relationship, or her own legitimate influence, her succession. He then defends the reasoning behind his duty by marking the potential dangers of not obliging. There seems to be little interest for the King to use the axiom power to achieve his goals. In fact, his direct response to Rhaenyra marking this axiom is to immediately return to expressing their most shared interest, the love for Rhaenyra's mother.

5.4 The Role of Power

This section will present the results and analysis of what role power has had in the King's interactions. The results and analysis will be categorized into symbolic and functional power, respectively.

5.4.1 Symbolic Power

This section focuses on presenting the presence of power in interactions that can be ascribed to as symbolic power. The first aspect presented reveals the presence of symbolic power in the King's privileges. Particularly in relation to everyone else on the basis of the power axiom.

Example 1

He performs FTAs with impunity:

01. **The King:** My wife and son are dead! I will not sit here and suffer crows that come to feast on their corpses!

Sapochnik (2022, E.01, 44:00)

Example 2

He can disregard the social ritual of addressing others with their titles when others are consistently expressing his:

01. **The King:** This is a lie. You have been lied to.

02. **Otto:** I only wish that were true, Your Grace.

Kilner (2022, E.04, 38:43)

Example 3

He does not suffer penalties in general when phrasing himself directly when others act as if they would suffer for phrasing something directly:

01. **The King:** You will address me as “Your Grace” or I will have my Kingsguard cut out your tongue. “The Heir for a Day”. Did you say it?

02. **Daemon:** We must all mourn in our own way, Your Grace.

Sapochnik (2022, E.01, 53:35)

These examples display certain privileges the King has when interacting with people. When analyzing them, it shows that all of these privileges are due to the compliance in a given social

framework (Bourdieu, 1999). People agree, whether consciously or not, that it is acceptable for a King to behave in this manner.

Another aspect of how symbolic power plays a role is in his obligations as king. Viserys often expresses discontent towards certain obligations, but nevertheless complies with in the end:

Example 6

01. **The King:** Yes, well, I sometimes forget how alike you both were. Your mother's absence is a wound that will never heal. Without her, the Red Keep has lost a warmth that I dare say it will never recover [...] But I know she understands what is now expected of me.

Yaitanes (2022, E.02, 43:50)

Example 6

01. **The King:** I could never replace your mother. No more than I intend to replace you as heir. But you are my only heir and our line is vulnerable, too easily ended. And by marrying again, I may begin to ensure that we are better defended.

Yaitanes (2022, E.02, 43:50)

Example 7

The hour is late into the evening, and the King is being consulted by Lord Strong, in private.

01. **The King:** I never asked to remarry.

02. **Lord Strong:** As King, you have a claim on all things. Even those you don't want. Marriage is not an obligation you can put off for long.

Yaitanes (2022, E.02, 41:14)

Example 8

Daemon has returned after his and Lord Corlys' successful attack on the pirates that dwelled in the Stepstones. The King had already sanctioned this assault. He meets with the King in the throne room to announce the success with the entire court present.

01. **The King:** Who holds the Stepstones?

02. **Daemon:** The tides... the crabs, and 2,000 dead Triarchy corsairs, staked to the sand to warn those who might follow.

The King steps down from the throne and approaches Daemon.

03. **The King:** Rise.

They embrace and applause fills the room.

Kilner (2022, E.04, 07:47)

One analysis to draw from these examples is how important the ritual and institution of marriage is in a feudal society such as this one. The political aspect of symbolizing unity and alliance between factions through marriage is so valued in this universe that even the person in a position of absolute power must oblige. Additionally, with regards to example 8, the king's response to Daemon's actions seem limited because of ritual and obligations. Even though they are brothers, and Viserys expresses multiple times his love for his brother, he struggles to maintain a healthy relationship with him. Therefore, his response might not have been so diplomatic if not for the presence of the court, who expect the king to act ritually acceptable.

5.4.2 Functional power

This section presents the presence of power in interactions that can be ascribed to as functional power. One aspect that reveals a legitimate function of the king's role is to be a peacekeeper. Whether that was honored by all the kings during the Targaryen reign or not is not what is relevant here. One of the titles the king holds in this universe is *Protector of the Realm*, which means that the king is the peacemaker and peacekeeper of the Seven Kingdoms, the name of the realm in this universe. A previous example will help clarify what is said:

Example 5

01. **The King:** But you must understand, as King, it is my obligation to avoid war until such time it is unavoidable

Yaitanes (2022, E.02, 14:20)

To give such a responsibility, whether people should be sent off to war or not, to one person opens up a function. For example, a conflict arises, such as the one in the Stepstones, and people differ in how to solve the matter. Having one person predisposed to having the final say on how to deal with the matter at hand helps mitigate the possibility of one conflict becoming two, or three. The person who holds the power of final say can clearly state whether negotiations or open war is the decision and then, if consensus is maintained, everyone knows what to do in response. A person could always make unwise decisions, however, which is why a council is also established to provide, ideally, sound advice. Therefore, it can be argued that the power

discussed is functional, and, by placing this power in someone's hands, that function becomes available.

A second excerpt reveals another functional power; that when absolute power is in the hands of someone, they act as a barrier against looming uncertainty. Many people desire power. We can see this exemplified in **example 2** (Kilner, 2022, E.04, 38:43), when the Hand of The King, Otto, is suspected of using his daughter as a means to grant his house a seat at the royal family, by way of marrying her off to King Viserys. Although, he is not the only one who is craving such power:

Example 9

The king is confronting Daemon on the rumors that he and Rhaenyra were being intimate. Daemon being hungover and lying on the ground while the king is standing over him.

Kilner (2022, E.04, 48:30)

01. **Daemon:** Give me Rhaenyra to take to wife and we will return the House of the Dragon to its proper glory.

02. **The King:** Of course. It is not my daughter you lust for, is it? It's my throne.

Even the king's own brother lusts for his throne. This desire is not something that the people of Westeros are unaware of. For instance, should there be a power vacuum, then conflict and violence will surely rise to the surface where factions form, pronouncing their own claim to this power. This is eventually what happens when Viserys dies, and the civil war begins. That is why, in **example 1** (Sapochnik, 2022, S01E01, 44:00), conflict brews immediately because of the uncertainty on who will succeed Viserys and become his heir. By implementing a clear line of succession, a social ritual with consensus, certainty is maintained. The collective consensus on who is in power, and how that power is transferred, creates stability and certainty. It is argued here that stability and certainty are available functions of power, even though it is a social ritual that needs consensus on how it is implemented for those functions to become available.

6. Discussion

This section will discuss the results of the essay, focusing primarily on how the results relate to the studies presented in section 3.3 of this essay. With regard to the first research question, it was clear that the king was given little resistance from others to achieve his personal goals in interactions. If he wanted to leave, no one stopped him. If he felt the need to express something, he could often do so without fear of consequences. These behaviors reflect a unique freedom and privilege of his position that correlates with the “bald-on record politeness strategies” seen from the characters in *Bridgerton* (Amalia et.al, 2023). Additionally, when Viserys performed such actions more directly, a common response was for the other interlocutor to merely speak his title, “your Grace”. This response could be interpreted to mean multiple things at once, from the perspective of the other. One interpretation is that the response is the interlocutor’s admission of the difference in influence on the situation, but it could also be interpreted to mark their social distance. This marking of social distance could be based on the premise of gratitude, which would align with Benaicha and Al-Shara’h (2024), but it could also mark that the interlocutor has no other response left than to comply in disagreement and thereby marks the difference in influence and social distance negatively. This is also in alignment with the idea of conceptualizing power “behind” language (Ng & Deng, 2017, p.5), which, in the case of this essay, could be rephrased as power behind language revealing itself as influence. However, the observation of Viserys’ freedom in his position of power was also shown in the results to have limitations. The importance of Viserys’ communicative competence when he needed to, e.g., persuade, which correlates to Holtgraves and Lasky’s emphasis on communicative competence (1999), was revealed in certain scenes when his position of power was not sufficient to achieve his goal. For instance, when speaking with his daughter in particular, Viserys preferred using indirectness when interacting with her, indicating his need for strategic use of language and also, perhaps, revealing his linguistic competence since they came to an agreement in this scene. Another aspect worth noting in the scene with Viserys and Rhaenyra is that Viserys seems to understand, whether conscious or not, that consensus through cooperation seems to be, naturally, more desirable than consensus through mere exertion of power. This indication correlates with the importance of agreement and inclusion in consensus-building seen in the study by Sievers et al. (2024).

Reflecting on the second research question, it seemed that, even though Viserys could enjoy a vast number of privileges when it came to his language use, he was also bound by obligations

that were needed in order to retain his legitimacy and the function of his role. As shown in example 7 of the results, the expectations of the king from the realm seem to at least problematize the notion from Siva and Balansundri (2023), that power in language only perpetuates hierarchical discrimination. In other words, it is clear that Viserys can use domination and control in language to get what he wants. However, since he claims to aspire to be a good king, Viserys agrees to the obligations of his role in order for the king to be a king. Viserys values the importance of having a king, as in the role itself, who sues for peace and pursues prosperity for the realm, which means that the king must play his part in maintaining order. This nuanced way of thinking, understanding the king's privileges, obligations, and function, which is partly revealed in example 5 from the results, could also be understood through Ng and Deng (2017, p.5) and their concept of the power 'of' language.

Power, as discussed in this essay, also manages to map out the importance of the relationship between symbolic and functional power. We humans are capable of influencing how we perform social rituals, and that is where symbolic power becomes a relevant and important phenomenon to observe, but the fact that rituals and language itself actually work does not seem to be of our making. It simply is the fact that we can use language. This is the essence of functional power. Referring back to Lee and Pinker (2010), and the evolutionary underpinnings that affect indirectness, it seems logically coherent to extend the idea of "equilibrium under natural selection" (2010, p.786) to the function of power in language use. Bourdieu (1999, p.113) exemplifies how authority is only authoritative if there are legitimate receivers. For instance, a commander is only a commander if he or she has soldiers under their command. The commander is also not a private because people with higher authority have granted him or her the title, and there was a group of people that defined commander in a 'formal' setting, granting legitimacy due to social ruling. There is always a need for group consensus for power to have power here. However, Bourdieu does not expand on why so much effort and resources are spent on organizing a chain of command. In order to be effective in combat and to achieve a victory, there needs to be coherence in the collaboration in the army to achieve said goal. For this coherence there needs to be a chain of command, so as to enable the coherence to be effectively implemented. If everyone were to proclaim their own plan of engagement, cohesion would be lost. The enabled efficacy when collaborating can therefore be argued to be a natural phenomenon. Collaboration works, but how that collaboration is to be conducted needs consensus. Thus, power has a function, but is only available once consensus, or compliance, is established. It does seem to be the case that by analyzing either symbolic or functional power

exclusively, you ultimately blind yourself and produce a perspective of power that only observes half of what is happening.

7. Conclusion

In conclusion, this study reveals that King Viserys 1st Targaryen's power in *House of the Dragon* manifests through both symbolic and functional elements, profoundly affecting his speech acts and interactions. Symbolically, his power stems from social constructs and his adherence to societal rituals, granting him privileges that allow him to operate above customary norms without repercussions. These privileges, such as his impunity in performing face-threatening acts or disregarding politeness rituals, are accepted due to a collective consensus regarding his authority. The king's role also demonstrates the constraints of symbolic power, particularly evident in his compliance with obligations like marriage, a ritual which is crucial for alliances to maintain political stability in Westeros.

Functionally, Viserys' power serves as a mechanism for maintaining peace and mitigating uncertainty. His ability to unilaterally decide on issues like war reflects a pragmatic function of centralized authority—to act as a stabilizing force in times of political uncertainty. Viserys' role as a peacekeeper and the implicit threat of instability in his absence underscore the necessity of power for societal cohesion in this fictional universe.

Ultimately, the study highlights how power influences language, legitimizing speech acts that might otherwise be unacceptable. Viserys' usage of power to achieve both personal and political aims, often employing direct or indirect language depending on the context, illustrates the nuanced relationship between authority, language, and societal expectations. This nuanced exploration of the linguistic aspects of power in Viserys' interactions suggests that power, while granting significant freedom, also demands adherence to certain roles and expectations that sustain the broader social structure.

List of References

Primary material

- Kilner, C. (Director). (2022 September 11). *The King of the Narrow Sea*. (Season 1 episode 4). [TV-series episode]. In R. J. Condal (Producer), *House of the Dragon*. HBO Max.
<https://www.hbomax.com/se/sv>
- Patel, G. V. (Director). (2022 October 9). *The Lord of the Tides*. (Season 1 episode 8). [TV-series episode]. In R. J. Condal (Producer), *House of the Dragon*. HBO Max.
<https://www.hbomax.com/se/sv>
- Sapochnik, M. (Director). (2022 August 22). *The Heirs of the Dragon*. (Season 1 episode 1). [TV-series episode]. In R. J. Condal (Producer), *House of the Dragon*. HBO Max.
<https://www.hbomax.com/se/sv>
- Yaitanes, G. (Director). (2022 August 22). *The Rogue Prince*. (Season 1 episode 2). [TV-series episode]. In R. J. Condal (Producer), *House of the Dragon*. HBO Max.
<https://www.hbomax.com/se/sv>

Secondary material

- Amalia, N. I., Rohmani, N. I., & Bahtiar, J. Y. (2023). Representation of Power through Politeness Strategies in Bridgerton Season 1 Movie. *Elsya: Journal of English Language Studies*, 5(3), 385–397. <https://doi.org/10.31849/elsya.v5i3.14131>
- Benaicha, R., & Al-Shara'h, N. (2024). A Contrastive Study of Gratitude Speech Act: A Case Study of Algerian and Jordanian Arabic. *Theory and Practice in Language Studies*, 14(3), 786–795. <https://doi.org/10.17507/tppls.1403.20>
- Bourdieu, P. (1999). *Language & Symbolic Power*. Blackwell Publishers LTD.
- Brown, P., & Levinson, S. (1987). *Politeness – Some Universals in Language Usage*. Cambridge University Press.
- Bryman, A. (2016). *Social Research Methods*. Oxford University Press.

- Dörnyei, Z. (2007). *Research Methods in Applied Linguistics*. Oxford University Press.
- Goffman, E. (1959). *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life*. Penguin Books.
- Google Scholar. (n.d.). *Michel Foucault*. Retrieved September 26, 2024, from https://scholar.google.se/scholar?hl=sv&as_sdt=0%2C5&q=michel+foucault&btnG=&oq=Michel
- Holtgraves, T., & Lasky, B. (1999). Linguistic Power and Persuasion. *Journal of Language and Social Psychology, 18*(2), 196–205. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0261927X99018002004>
- Huang, Y. (2007). *Pragmatics*. Oxford University Press.
- Jaszczolt, K. M. (2002). *Semantics and Pragmatics: Meaning in Language and Discourse*. Pearson Education.
- Lee, J. J., & Pinker, S. (2010). Rationales for Indirect Speech: The Theory of the Strategic Speaker. *Psychological Review, 117*(3), 785–807. <https://doi.org/10.1037/a0019688>
- Leech, G. (1983). *Principles of Pragmatics*. Longman Group LTD.
- Morand, D. A. (2000). Language and Power: An Empirical Analysis of Linguistic Strategies Used in Superior-Subordinate Communication. *Journal of Organizational Behavior, 21*(3), 235–248. [https://doi.org/10.1002/\(SICI\)1099-1379\(200005\)21:3<235::AID-JOB9>3.0.CO;2-N](https://doi.org/10.1002/(SICI)1099-1379(200005)21:3<235::AID-JOB9>3.0.CO;2-N)
- Ng, S., & Deng, F. (2017). Language and Power. *Oxford Research Encyclopedia of Communication*. <https://doi.org/10.1093/acrefore/9780190228613.013.436>
- Sievers, B., Welker, C., Hasson, U., Kleinbaum, A. M., & Wheatley, T. (2024). Consensus-Building Conversation Leads to Neural Alignment. *Nature Communications., 15*(1). <https://doi.org/10.1038/s41467-023-43253-8>

Siva, V., & Balasundari, S. (2023). Language and Power in Sharankumar Limbale's Akkarmashi: A Foucauldian Reading. *New Literaria*, 4(2), 28–37.

<https://doi.org/10.48189/nl.2023.v04i2.004>

Thomas, J. (1995). *Meaning in Interaction: An Introduction to Pragmatics*. Pearson Education Limited.

Yule, G. (1996). *Pragmatics*. Oxford University Press.