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The Pragmatics of Epistemic Bias: A Cognitive-Pragmatic and Discourse-Analytical Investigation of Prejudice, Inferential Reasoning, and Belief Revision

Nagamurali Eragamreddy

General Requirements Unit, Preparatory Studies Center, University of Technology and Applied Sciences, Salalah, Sultanate of Oman
Email: Nagamurali.Eragamreddy@utas.edu.om; muralieragamreddi@gmail.com
ORCID: https://orcid.org/0000-0003-1026-183X

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Abstract— *This study examines how epistemic bias is constructed, maintained, and revised through character discourse, contextual assumptions, and pragmatic inference in Jane Austen's Pride and Prejudice. It focuses on the linguistic determinants of prejudicial judgements, the inferential processes that sustain them, and the discourse mechanisms that enable belief revision. A total of 148 epistemically significant discourse segments selected from the three volumes of the 1894 George Allen edition were analysed qualitatively and interpretively across five researcher-developed analytical matrices: Epistemic Encoding, Contextual Assumptions, Inferential Reasoning, Evaluative Positioning, and Belief Trajectory. The findings indicate that attributed accounts, evaluative interpretation, and prior assumptions, particularly Elizabeth Bennet's acceptance of Wickham's claims, reinforced her initial impression of Darcy. Darcy's letter, Elizabeth's visit to Pemberley, and subsequent revelations disrupted this view and prompted critical re-evaluation. The analysis indicates that belief revision requires not only accepting new evidence but also reassessing the assumptions that guided earlier interpretations. Epistemic bias is therefore more than a judgement error; it is a discoursea-mediated process in which prior assumptions shape how evidence is weighed and inferences are drawn.*

Keywords— epistemic bias; pragmatic inference; belief revision; epistemic positioning; Pride and Prejudice

I. INTRODUCTION

Judgements about others are often formed from incomplete information obtained through speech, observed behaviour, reported accounts, and social interaction. The interpretation of such information depends partly on source credibility, prior expectations, and the weight assigned to conflicting evidence. Epistemic bias can arise when these influences produce selective evaluation, allowing an initial impression to persist despite relevant counter-evidence. Consequently, understanding this process requires considering not only what people believe, but also the roles that language, contextual assumptions, and inference play in assessing information. Sperber et al. (2010) describe the cognitive processes involved in evaluating communicated information and guarding against misinformation as epistemic vigilance. In literary narratives, where characters often rely on testimony with limited means of verification, judgements can be shaped by a source's apparent sincerity, social status, or familiarity. Epistemic bias can thus emerge not only from misrepresentation but also from the selective assessment and integration of information into existing beliefs.

Information is rarely accepted without evaluation, as recipients actively assess what they hear. Listeners evaluate the authenticity of sources, check the plausibility of claims, and interpret utterances in light of prior

knowledge and expectations. According to Sperber et al. (2010), epistemic vigilance comprises the cognitive mechanisms mobilised to evaluate communicated claims and guard against misinformation. The same dynamic applies in fiction, where characters frequently depend on others' accounts without independent means of verification. Even when evidence remains uncertain, a listener may accept an account based on a speaker's apparent sincerity, social status, or familiarity. Epistemic bias can therefore result not only from inaccurate information, but also from how information is assessed and assimilated into prior beliefs.

Cognitive pragmatics provides a complementary account of how such judgements develop. Within Relevance Theory, utterance interpretation involves the interaction of linguistic information and contextual assumptions under expectations of relevance (Wilson, 2023). Recent work also indicates how pragmatic inference supports social reasoning about intentional action (Bohn & Frank, 2025). Listeners select contextually relevant information and draw inferences to construct an interpretation, although these processes may also reinforce existing judgements when prior assumptions are not critically examined. In literary discourse, interpretation similarly depends on textual information, reported speech, narrative presentation, and background knowledge; recent work on *Pride and Prejudice* has demonstrated the contribution of narrative and contextual cues to the interpretation of implicit meaning (Nemesi, 2025). A discourse-analytical perspective complements this account by examining how evaluative expressions, descriptions of behaviour, reported speech, and attributed intentions construct character representations and position particular interpretations as more or less credible. The socio-cognitive approach also relates these discursive representations to socially available knowledge claims and assumptions (Brough et al., 2024). Together, these perspectives illuminate the interaction among linguistic choices, contextual assumptions, and pragmatic inferences in constructing and sustaining character judgements.

The interpersonal conflicts in *Pride and Prejudice* exemplify the formation and revision of epistemic judgements, given the novel's multiple narrations, social appraisals, reputational expectations, and progressive disclosure of information. The central analytical trajectory traces Elizabeth Bennet's evolving re-evaluation of Fitzwilliam Darcy across the novel, examining how her impressions of Darcy shift, how she assesses source credibility, why she trusts Wickham's account, and how she reconsiders available evidence. Darcy's letter, Elizabeth's observations at Pemberley, and later disclosures regarding Lydia and Wickham indicate how new evidence challenges established contextual assumptions. Darcy's self-reassessment is examined as a supplementary trajectory rather than a parallel primary focus. This approach treats the novel not simply as a narrative of romantic misjudgement, but as a literary representation of belief formation, inferential reinforcement, and the reconsideration of judgements based on incomplete and socially mediated knowledge.

Although previous research has examined relevance-theoretic interpretation, epistemic vigilance, and literary-pragmatic inference, these perspectives have not consistently been integrated into a single framework explaining how prejudicial judgements are linguistically represented, contextually reinforced, and subsequently revised in extended literary discourse. The present study addresses this gap by examining epistemic encoding, information attribution, evaluative positioning, contextual assumptions, and inferential reasoning as interconnected dimensions of epistemic interpretation. Its contribution lies in showing how these dimensions operate together in the textual representation of belief formation, maintenance, contestation, and revision.

The analysis also requires distinguishing related linguistic and interpretive phenomena. Epistemic modality relates to the expression of degrees of certainty, possibility, probability, or commitment to a proposition. Evidentiality concerns the linguistic marking of the source or basis of information. Attribution identifies the source to which a claim is assigned, whereas grammatical evidentiality marks the information source directly in the clause. Evaluative positioning involves the appraisal of persons, actions, and events, and pragmatic inference refers to conclusions derived from utterance content and contextual assumptions. Although these categories often co-occur in discourse, they are not interchangeable. Accordingly, the analysis does not treat every evaluative expression or report as a marker of modality or evidentiality. Against this background, the study addresses four research questions:

RQ1: How is epistemic bias linguistically constructed through attributed information, evaluative positioning, and expressions of certainty in *Pride and Prejudice*?

RQ2: How do contextual assumptions, social representations, and pragmatic inferences contribute to the maintenance and reinforcement of prejudicial judgements?

RQ3: What discourse mechanisms and evidential encounters facilitate or constrain the revision of established beliefs?

RQ4: How does integrating cognitive-pragmatic and discourse-analytical perspectives illuminate the representation of epistemic judgement and belief revision in literary narrative?

This study contributes to cognitive-pragmatic literary analysis by framing epistemic bias as a discourse-shaped process grounded in source evaluation, contextual assumptions, and pragmatic inference. It further demonstrates that belief revision involves not only incorporating new evidence, but also reconsidering the interpretive assumptions that previously governed how evidence was evaluated.\

II. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 Epistemic Bias, Epistemic Vigilance, and Source Credibility

Epistemic bias refers to the interpretation and assessment of information under the influence of preconceptions, expectations, and social valuations. However, no single definition is shared across pragmatics, cognitive psychology, and discourse studies. In this study, epistemic bias serves as an operational construct referring to an asymmetry in accepting, weighing, or rejecting information when prior beliefs or social expectations override counter-evidence.

The theoretical foundation of the present study is epistemic vigilance, namely the cognitive processes by which individuals evaluate the credibility of received information alongside the competence and trustworthiness of its source (Sperber et al., 2010). Mazzarella and Pouscoulous (2021) highlight the developmental and pragmatic importance of examining communicators' epistemic states and intentions. Chapters in which characters form inferences primarily from testimony and reputation are particularly relevant to Austen's narrative. For instance, the perceived credibility of Wickham's account cannot be separated from Elizabeth's prior appraisal of Darcy and her view of Wickham as a trustworthy informant. Recent experimental work extends this argument by showing how linguistic framing shapes epistemic scrutiny. Giunta et al. (2026) demonstrate that presupposed information may be scrutinised less critically than explicitly asserted claims, a finding consistent with earlier experimental research on linguistic encoding and epistemic vigilance (Giunta et al., 2025). These findings indicate that analysts must examine both propositional content and how information is linguistically encoded. Epistemic vigilance thus provides a foundation for exploring the relationship among source trustworthiness, linguistic presentation, and the selective acceptance of evidence.

2.2 Relevance Theory and Contextual Inference

Relevance Theory conceptualises communication as a dynamic interplay among ostensive stimuli, contextual assumptions, and inferential processes aimed at achieving relevance (Sperber & Wilson, 1995; Wilson & Sperber, 2004). Context is not a fixed set of shared facts, but a subset of assumptions selected and activated during interpretation. Wilson (2023) elaborates on how contextual assumptions guide disambiguation, reference resolution, and implicature derivation. These processes are well-suited to analysing *Pride and Prejudice*, where readers and characters infer meaning from speech, behaviour, and manner. Elizabeth's interpretation of Wickham's narrative is shaped by her existing view of Darcy, and subsequent developments compel her to revise her judgement. Nemesi (2025) similarly indicates that narrative cues and contextual information help convey implicit meaning in the novel. Relevance Theory, therefore, provides a principled basis for examining how contextual assumptions guide interpretation and either reinforce or alter established judgements.

2.3 Epistemic Stance, Modality, and Evidentiality

Epistemic stance concerns how speakers position themselves toward the truth, certainty, and probability of propositions. Epistemic modality and evidentiality represent two closely related yet distinct linguistic categories. Epistemic modality indicates a speaker's degree of confidence regarding the possibility or truth of a proposition, whereas evidentiality marks the source or basis of information (Cornillie, 2009; Murray, 2021). Although these categories may interact, marking an information source does not automatically specify a speaker's degree of certainty. Austen's dialogue captures this distinction clearly. In Chapter 19, Elizabeth states, "I am convinced" (Austen, 1894, Chapter 19), expressing strong epistemic commitment. By contrast, Mrs Bennet's remark that "she told me all about it" (Austen, 1894, Chapter 1) illustrates reported evidence. The first highlights speaker commitment, whereas the second identifies the source of the claim. These examples demonstrate why modality and evidentiality must be distinguished when analysing competing accounts and character judgements.

Gablasova et al. (2017) and Carretero (2023) demonstrate that the deployment of epistemic stance markers is context- and task-dependent. Olcaysoy Okten et al. (2023) and Xu and Cao (2023) further examine diverse linguistic resources for signalling certainty or uncertainty. More recently, Guerra-Lyons et al. (2026) demonstrate how expressions such as *it seems* carry both evidential and epistemic meanings alongside interpersonal implications.

Together, these studies support an analytical approach that accounts for linguistic encoding, information source, and evaluative positioning without treating every expression of certainty or attribution as evidence of bias.

2.4 Social Representations and Individual Inferences

Epistemic judgements draw on shared social knowledge. Social representations provide collective frameworks for classifying, interpreting, and evaluating behaviour (Moscovici, 1984). The socio-cognitive approach to discourse developed by van Dijk (2014, 2025) accounts for the interaction among discourse, socially distributed knowledge, and individual mental representations. Social assumptions, therefore, provide interpretive resources that individuals mobilise differently across contexts.

This link matters in the novel because perceived credibility depends on social standing, reputation, gender norms, and behavioural expectations. These representations shape individual inferences without determining them. Stockwell's (2020) cognitive-poetic framework similarly underscores the role of cognitive processes in literary interpretation and character construction. The present study, therefore, examines how socially situated assumptions inform individual evaluations and how narrative discourse exposes their limitations.

2.5 Belief Revision and the Evaluation of Evidence

Belief revision involves more than simply updating an existing belief in response to conflicting information (Özdemir & Özdemir, 2024). Beyond seeking, receiving, and integrating information, belief updating can introduce evaluation biases without producing belief change (Gollwitzer et al., 2024; Sommer et al., 2024). Empirical research also demonstrates that source credibility and reliability play decisive roles in knowledge revision (Johnson et al., 2024; Sanna & Lagnado, 2025). In this study, these findings serve as conceptual points of comparison rather than claims about the real-world cognition of fictional characters. *Pride and Prejudice* illustrates evidence evaluation and belief revision through Darcy's letter, Elizabeth's observations at Pemberley, and the revelations about Lydia and Wickham.

2.6 Integrative Analytical Framework and Research Gaps

Existing scholarship provides valuable foundations for examining epistemic vigilance, contextual inference, linguistic stance, social knowledge, and belief revision, although these dimensions are frequently investigated in isolation. The present study integrates them through five complementary analytical dimensions: Epistemic Encoding, Contextual Assumptions, Inferential Reasoning, Evaluative Positioning, and Belief Trajectory. Epistemic bias is treated as an operational analytical construct rather than a universally fixed category. This integrated framework examines how linguistic expressions, source credibility, socially available assumptions, and inferential processes interact in representing character judgements and their revision in *Pride and Prejudice*.

III. METHODOLOGY

3.1 Design

This study used a qualitative, interpretive textual design to examine how epistemic bias is represented, reinforced, challenged, and revised in Jane Austen's *Pride and Prejudice*. Because epistemic bias is not directly observable as a mental state, the analysis examines how it is textually constructed through characters' evaluations, reliance on testimony, assumptions, inferences, and responses to counter-evidence. The study integrates three complementary theoretical perspectives: Relevance Theory, epistemic vigilance, and discourse analysis. Relevance Theory (Sperber & Wilson, 1995) guided the examination of how utterances and events are interpreted in light of contextual assumptions. Epistemic vigilance (Sperber et al., 2010) provided a lens for analysing how characters accept, question, or reject communicated claims and their sources. Discourse-analytical principles guided the examination of linguistic choices, evaluative expressions, attributed accounts, and socially shared assumptions through which knowledge and credibility are represented. Together, these perspectives enabled the analysis of epistemic judgements across contextual, inferential, and linguistic levels.

This study motivated four research questions that addressed the linguistic construction of epistemic bias, the contextual assumptions and inferences involved in making epistemic judgements, the development and change of beliefs, and the role of the integrated analytical framework. Each question was examined through the five analytical matrices detailed in Section 3.4, with expressions of certainty and commitment in RQ1 coded through the Epistemic Encoding matrix.

Table 1: Alignment of Research Questions and Analytical Matrices

Research Question	Principal Analytical Matrices
RQ1: Linguistic Construction of Epistemic Bias	Epistemic Encoding; Evaluative Positioning
RQ2: Contextual and Inferential Maintenance of Prejudicial Judgements	Contextual Assumptions; Inferential Reasoning
RQ3: Discursive and Evidential Mechanisms of Belief Revision	Belief Trajectory; Inferential Reasoning; Evaluative Positioning
RQ4: Integrative Cognitive-Pragmatic and Discourse-Analytical Perspectives	Cross-matrix synthesis across all five matrices

3.2 Primary Text and Corpus Selection

The primary source was the 1894 George Allen edition of *Pride and Prejudice*. The corpus consisted of 148 discourse segments distributed across the three volumes of the novel: 42 segments in Volume I, 64 segments in Volume II, and 42 segments in Volume III. The corpus was compiled through iterative close reading, supplemented by keyword searches and contextual analysis. Passages were selected if they exhibited at least one epistemically relevant feature, such as an attributed claim, evaluative judgement, inference about intention, appeal to reputation, contextual assumption, or response to counter-evidence. Passages without a clear link to the research questions or analytical value were excluded. A distinction was maintained between epistemically relevant discourse and textual evidence of epistemic bias. Epistemic bias was identified when a represented judgement demonstrated an asymmetry in how information was accepted, weighed, or rejected, such that prior assumptions, social reputation, or expectations outweighed available evidence. Passages containing an inference or evaluation were included only when they informed the research questions or illustrated epistemic bias, contestation, or revision. The analytical corpus comprises these 148 segments rather than 148 confirmed instances of bias, encompassing representations of biased judgements alongside their contestation and revision.

3.3 Unit of Analysis

The discourse segment served as the unit of analysis, defined as a self-contained stretch of discourse containing an epistemically relevant claim, inference, evaluation, or shift in belief interpretable within its narrative context. Narratorial presentation and character dialogue were combined within a single segment when both contributed to the same epistemic process. Paragraph length did not determine segment boundaries; sentences advancing a single claim or line of reasoning were grouped together, whereas sentences introducing a distinct epistemic action or shift in reasoning were segmented separately. The analysis examined character discourse, narratorial presentation, and interpretations licensed by the narrative arrangement, treating these as textual representations rather than claims about empirical readers. Elizabeth Bennet's epistemic trajectory formed the primary analytical focus because the novel provides sustained evidence of how her judgements develop and change, while Darcy's self-reassessment was examined as a supplementary trajectory where relevant. Each segment received a unique code along with its volume and chapter location for traceability.

3.4 Theoretical and Analytical Frameworks

Five complementary analytical matrices were developed from the three theoretical perspectives. Contextual assumptions and inferential processes were examined through Relevance Theory; source credibility and claim evaluation were analysed through epistemic vigilance; and the linguistic and narrative construction of judgements was examined through discourse-analytical principles. Together, these perspectives support analysing epistemic judgements across contextual, inferential, and linguistic levels (Table 2).

Table 2: Analytical Matrices and Their Operational Focus

Analytical Matrix	Operational Focus
Epistemic Encoding	Linguistic and narrative representations of claims, knowledge, uncertainty, evidence, and information sources.
Contextual Assumptions	Background beliefs, social expectations, reputational knowledge, and situational assumptions informing interpretation.
Inferential Reasoning	Conclusions drawn from information, including judgements, attributed motives, and evaluations of competing explanations.
Evaluative Positioning	Representations of individuals, claims, motives, credibility, and conduct as favourable, unfavourable, reliable, or unreliable.
Belief Trajectory	The formation, reinforcement, contestation, and revision of beliefs as new information becomes available.

The matrices functioned as structured analytical instruments. A segment could be coded across multiple dimensions where supported by textual evidence, while unrepresented dimensions were recorded as absent or not applicable. The matrices organised textual evidence systematically, whereas the broader interpretive mechanisms reported in the Results emerged inductively through cross-matrix synthesis.

3.5 Coding Categories and Pilot Analysis

Table 3 presents the analytical categories and their operational definitions, which were refined through a preliminary coding exercise.

Table 3: Operational Definitions of Analytical Categories

Category	Operational Definition
Reputation-based inference	A judgement based primarily on an individual's established or attributed social reputation rather than direct examination of relevant evidence.
Confirmation-oriented reasoning	Selective acceptance, interpretation, or weighting of information in ways that support an existing belief while relevant counter-evidence is discounted or insufficiently examined.
Stereotype-supported inference	A conclusion shaped by a socially shared generalisation that influences the interpretation of an individual's conduct or character.
Evidence-based reasoning	A conclusion or reassessment demonstrably informed by relevant evidence, including newly available or previously overlooked information.
Attribution of intention	An interpretation assigning motives or purposes to another person based on conduct, reported information, or contextual assumptions.

A segment could be coded under multiple categories when textual evidence supported more than one analytical dimension. Reputation-based inference referred to the social source underlying a judgement, whereas confirmation-oriented reasoning concerned how information was evaluated in relation to an existing belief. A shift in opinion was not coded as bias unless it reflected an identifiable imbalance in how information was accepted, weighed, or rejected. A preliminary analysis of 22 segments, representing approximately 15% of the

corpus, was conducted to assess the clarity and applicability of the matrices and coding definitions, particularly the distinction between these two forms of reasoning. The refined definitions were subsequently applied consistently across the full corpus, including the pilot segments.

3.6 Analytical Procedure

The analysis proceeded in five stages. First, each of the 148 selected discourse segments was examined using the five analytical matrices, with multiple codes assigned where supported by textual evidence and unrepresented dimensions recorded as absent or not applicable. Second, inferences and evaluations were analysed to determine how judgements were shaped by reputation, prior assumptions, stereotypes, testimony, and available evidence. Third, passages were examined within their narrative sequence to trace how belief systems, primarily Elizabeth's and, where relevant, Darcy's, developed and were challenged. Fourth, relationships among linguistic representation, contextual assumptions, reasoning, evaluation, and belief development were identified through cross-matrix comparison. Fifth, interpretations were checked against the immediate narrative context, particularly where passages complicated or ran counter to emerging patterns. This procedure ensured that claims of epistemic bias rested on textual evidence rather than retrospectively on the eventual accuracy of characters' judgements or narrative outcomes.

3.7 Trustworthiness and Researcher Reflexivity

Inter-coder reliability was neither calculated nor claimed because the study employed a single-researcher analytical procedure. Procedural transparency was strengthened through explicit coding definitions, consistent segment coding, contextual verification, and delayed intra-coder recoding. After four weeks, 30 segments (20% of the corpus) were recoded. Seven required adjustments after re-reading the passage and coding definitions, whereas the remaining 23 indicated no substantive coding changes. This procedure served as a structured intra-coder review rather than a statistical test of reliability. Following this review, the refined definitions were applied consistently across the entire corpus, including the pilot and recoded segments. Researcher reflexivity was maintained by grounding interpretations in textual evidence, considering rival readings, and distinguishing character judgements from narratorial presentation. Analytical transparency was further supported through cross-matrix comparison and close attention to disconfirming passages. However, these steps did not eliminate the interpretive limits of single-coder qualitative analysis.

3.8 Ethical Considerations

Because the study analysed a published literary text and involved no human participants or personal data, participant consent and data-protection procedures were not applicable. Care was taken to cite the chosen edition consistently and to document all primary and secondary sources accurately.

IV. RESULTS

4.1 Corpus Overview and Analytical Organisation

The analysis examined 148 discourse segments selected from the three volumes of the 1894 George Allen edition of *Pride and Prejudice*. The primary analytical trajectory traced Elizabeth Bennet's evolving judgements of Darcy and Wickham, while Darcy's self-assessment was examined as a supplementary trajectory. Table 4 presents the distribution of segments across the three volumes.

Table 4: Distribution of the Analytical Corpus Across the Three Volumes

Volume	Discourse Segments	Percentage
Volume I	42	28.4%
Volume II	64	43.2%
Volume III	42	28.4%
Total	**148**	**100.0%**

The five analytical matrices, Epistemic Encoding, Contextual Assumptions, Inferential Reasoning, Evaluative Positioning, and Belief Trajectory, were used to examine expressions of certainty and commitment, information attribution, contextual interpretation, source evaluation, and belief maintenance or revision. Because these dimensions were not mutually exclusive, a single discourse segment frequently involved multiple epistemic

processes. The findings are organised around the four research questions (Sections 4.2–4.5) and identify recurring patterns in how linguistic choices, contextual assumptions, and evaluations of sources and evidence shaped character judgements.

4.2 Linguistic Construction of Epistemic Bias

With respect to RQ1, epistemic bias in *Pride and Prejudice* is linguistically constructed through the interplay of attributed information, evaluative positioning, and expressions of certainty. Evaluation, epistemic commitment, and attributed information intersected directly in Elizabeth's early appraisal of Darcy, as her negative view of him stemmed from her reaction to his conduct. Her negative evaluation became further entrenched through Wickham's attributed account, which aligned closely with her existing impression. Elizabeth's remark, "I could easily forgive his pride, if he had not mortified mine" (Austen, 1894, Chapter 5), indicates that her appraisal of Darcy was not detached or impartial, but tied to the personal offence she associated with his behaviour. The utterance foregrounds the influence of affective experience on subsequent interpretation.

This pattern became more consequential when Elizabeth encountered Wickham's account of Darcy. His narrative supplied an apparently coherent explanation for Darcy's behaviour and reinforced Elizabeth's existing negative impression. The resulting judgement was therefore shaped not merely by the content of the account, but also by its compatibility with an already established evaluation. Here, reputation-based inference and confirmation-oriented reasoning reinforced one another because Wickham's account aligned with Elizabeth's existing view of Darcy. The significance of the account thus lay not only in its propositional content, but also in how its source attribution and evaluative framing facilitated its acceptance. This pattern illustrates how linguistic positioning and information attribution support the textual representation of epistemic bias.

The analysis also distinguished expressions of epistemic certainty and commitment from the attribution of information to a source. For example, Elizabeth's statement "I am convinced" (Austen, 1894, Chapter 19) signals a high degree of epistemic commitment to a proposition. By contrast, Mrs Bennet's remark that "she told me all about it" (Austen, 1894, Chapter 1) identifies reported information as the basis of a claim. The first communicates speaker commitment, whereas the second foregrounds the source of the information. These examples demonstrate why epistemic modality and evidential attribution were analysed as related yet distinct features. They also indicate that emphatic or evaluative language did not, by itself, establish epistemic bias; rather, such expressions became analytically significant when examined alongside a character's access to evidence, the credibility assigned to a source, and the treatment of alternative explanations. Table 5 summarises the principal linguistic and interpretive patterns identified for RQ1.

Table 5: Linguistic and Interpretive Patterns Associated With Epistemic Positioning (RQ1)

Analytical Dimension	Observed Pattern	Illustrative Function
Epistemic commitment	Expressions of conviction and certainty	Presenting an interpretation as firmly established
Evaluative positioning	Judgements shaped by approval, offence, or disapproval	Connecting interpretation with personal evaluation
Source attribution	Reported information and references to other speakers	Establishing the stated basis of a claim
Reputation-based inference	Judgements derived from socially circulated accounts	Using an individual's reported reputation to evaluate character
Confirmation-oriented reasoning	Greater acceptance of information compatible with prior beliefs	Reinforcing an existing interpretation

4.3 Contextual Assumptions, Social Representations, and Pragmatic Inferences

Addressing RQ2, contextual assumptions, social representations, and pragmatic inferences sustain and reinforce prejudicial judgements by guiding how characters interpret conduct and testimony. Elizabeth's judgements emerged from the interaction between explicit utterances and active contextual assumptions. Wickham's narrative appeared plausible because it accorded with her earlier impression of Darcy. This pattern indicates how prior impressions can shape how individuals interpret claims. Alongside reputation and conduct, physical appearance and social demeanour shaped impressions: Darcy appeared wealthy, esteemed, and aloof, whereas Wickham seemed sociable and approachable. Although such cues were not reliable indicators of veracity, they operated as salient contextual premises. Contradictory evidence and alternative interpretations subsequently exposed the provisional nature of Elizabeth's earlier judgement. By reframing events Elizabeth had witnessed, Darcy's letter challenged her prior contextual assumptions and demonstrated how pragmatic inferences shift as new information emerges.

Overall, the findings identify two interacting dimensions: socially available representations that shape expectations about individuals, and inferential processes through which specific accounts are accepted, rejected, or reinterpreted. Table 6 summarises the contextual and inferential mechanisms identified for RQ2.

Table 6: Contextual Assumptions and Inferential Mechanisms (RQ2)

Contextual Resource	Inferential Consequence	Narrative Significance
Previous personal offence	Negative conduct is interpreted as evidence of character	Supports Elizabeth's initial judgement of Darcy
Wickham's favourable social presentation	His account appears credible and persuasive	Reinforces Elizabeth's negative view of Darcy
Established social reputation	Expectations influence the interpretation of conduct	Shapes character evaluations before complete evidence is available
Darcy's explanatory letter	Earlier assumptions become open to reconsideration	Initiates Elizabeth's substantial reassessment
Subsequent encounters and disclosures	Competing evidence modifies earlier interpretations	Supports a more qualified evaluation of Darcy and Wickham

4.4 Discourse Mechanisms and Evidential Encounters in Belief Revision

In response to RQ3, specific discourse mechanisms and evidential encounters either constrain or facilitate the revision of established beliefs across the narrative. The analysis identified a clear trajectory of belief formation, reinforcement, challenge, and revision. Elizabeth's initial unfavourable view of Darcy originated in their encounter at the Meryton assembly, and Wickham's account reinforced this impression because it aligned with her prior expectations. Rather than resting on a single cue or prior experience alone, this judgement emerged from the interaction of all three factors. A key turning point occurred when Elizabeth read Darcy's letter. The letter contradicted key parts of Wickham's account and exposed flaws in Elizabeth's prior reasoning. This realisation is captured in her remark, "Till this moment, I never knew myself" (Austen, 1894, Chapter 36). This statement reflects not merely a shift in attitude toward Darcy, but a recognition of how her own interpretive method had been coloured by pride, prejudice, and incomplete examination of evidence. Her visit to Pemberley and subsequent revelations about Lydia and Wickham provided further evidence for comparing the rival accounts. Thus, belief revision entailed not just changing one's mind, but re-examining the process by which the initial belief was formed. Darcy's self-reassessment provides a supplementary example of epistemic revision, as he recognises the discrepancy between his self-perception and the consequences of his conduct. His acknowledgement, "I have been a selfish being all my life, in practice, though not in principle" (Austen, 1894, Chapter 58), marks his recognition of the gap between his intentions and the effects of his behaviour on others. Table 7 summarises the stages of belief development and modification identified for RQ3.

Table 7: Principal Stages in the Formation and Revision of Character Beliefs (RQ3)

Stage	Elizabeth's Evaluation of Darcy and Wickham	Epistemic Process
Initial formation	Darcy is evaluated negatively; Wickham receives a favourable initial assessment	Personal experience and first impressions
Reinforcement	Wickham's account appears consistent with Elizabeth's existing view of Darcy	Reputation-based inference and confirmation-oriented reasoning
Challenge	Darcy's letter contradicts significant elements of the accepted account	Encounter with counter-evidence
Reconsideration	Elizabeth recognises the limitations of her earlier judgement	Reflexive evaluation and belief revision
Further evaluation	Pemberley encounters and subsequent disclosures provide additional evidence	Comparison of testimony with observed conduct and new information
Revised assessment	Elizabeth develops a more differentiated evaluation of both men	Evidence-based reasoning and qualified belief

Figure 1 presents an interpretive model of the discourse pattern identified across the corpus. It depicts recurring relationships among the analytical dimensions rather than a fixed sequence that every character or discourse segment follows.

4.5 Integrating Cognitive-Pragmatic and Discourse-Analytical Perspectives

Concerning RQ4, integrating cognitive-pragmatic and discourse-analytical perspectives illuminates how textual representations construct epistemic judgement and belief revision across multiple analytical levels. First, Relevance Theory helped explain how characters interpreted utterances given context and prior expectations; second, epistemic vigilance addressed how source credibility and claim plausibility were assessed; and third, a socio-cognitive perspective situated those interpretations within social reputation and shared norms. Discourse analysis linked these cognitive-pragmatic processes to the linguistic manifestation of certainty, commitment, attribution, and evaluation. Their integration clarified both why Wickham's account initially appeared credible and how subsequent evidential encounters prompted a reconsideration of Elizabeth's earlier judgement.

Importantly, not every misjudgement or change of mind in the corpus was classified as epistemic bias. The construct was applied only when textual evidence demonstrated an asymmetry in accepting, weighing, or rejecting information, specifically when prior beliefs or socially established expectations outweighed relevant counter-evidence. In other segments, character beliefs formed or shifted without evidence of bias, though not always on the basis of rigorous evidential appraisal.

4.6 Summary of Results

Across the 148 discourse segments, character judgements emerged from the interaction of linguistic, contextual, inferential, and evaluative processes. The findings indicate that information compatible with prior assumptions reinforces existing beliefs, whereas contradictory evidential encounters prompt a reassessment of both accepted claims and the assumptions used to evaluate them. The analysis, therefore, identifies belief revision as a reflexive process involving not only the incorporation of new evidence, but also the re-evaluation of the interpretive conditions underlying earlier judgements.

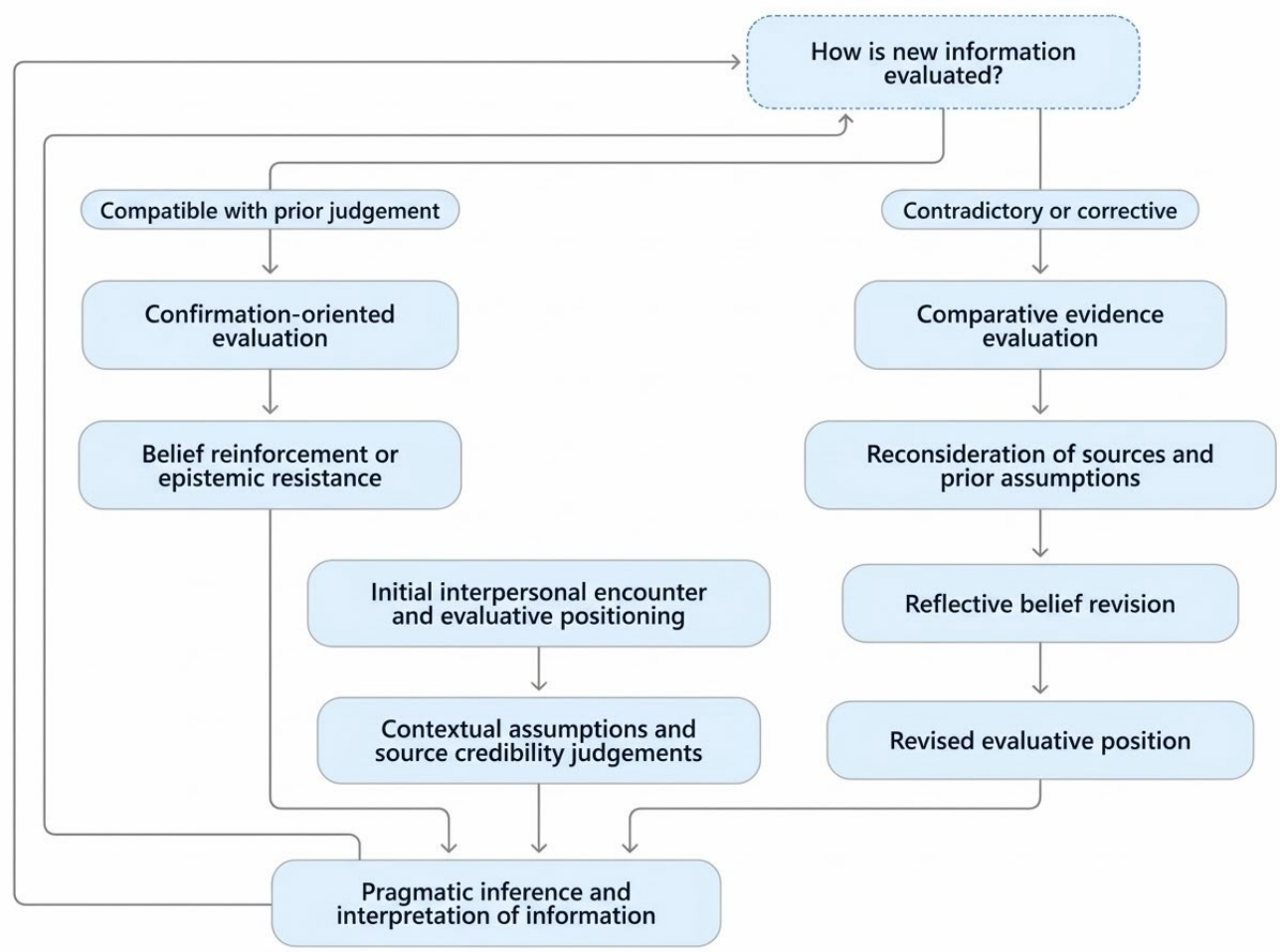

Fig.1: Epistemic Bias and Belief Revision Pattern of Discourse

V. DISCUSSION

5.1 RQ1: Linguistic Construction of Epistemic Bias

Returning to RQ1, the findings extend research on epistemic positioning by showing how attributed accounts, evaluative language, and certainty markers construct credibility and bias. Wickham's account persuaded Elizabeth not because it was truthful, but because it fit what she already believed about Darcy. Assumption-driven persuasion differs from evidence-based evaluation in that a plausible account can persuade without strong counter-evidence, whereas evidence alone does not guarantee belief revision. From this perspective, the findings support Nemesi's (2025) account of narrative cues and implicature in *Pride and Prejudice*.

5.2 RQ2: Contextual Assumptions, Social Representations, and Pragmatic Inferences

With regard to RQ2, the analysis demonstrates how contextual assumptions, social representations, and pragmatic inferences reinforce prejudicial judgements when prior expectations outweigh counter-evidence. Three intersecting resources, reputational knowledge, social representations, and character assumptions, shape how communicated claims are interpreted. From a relevance-theoretic perspective, such assumptions guide the selection and processing of contextually accessible premises (Wilson, 2023). However, reliance on reputation does not automatically constitute epistemic bias. Reputation-based inference concerns the social source underlying a judgement, whereas confirmation-oriented reasoning concerns the selective evaluation of information in relation to an existing belief (Pilgrim et al., 2024). Bias becomes analytically identifiable when prior expectations or reputational judgements produce an imbalance in accepting, weighing, or rejecting available evidence. This distinction aligns with epistemic vigilance, which emphasises assessing both communicated claims and the competence and trustworthiness of their sources (Mazzarella & Pouscoulous, 2021). The findings, therefore, locate epistemic bias in the selective evaluation of information rather than in the mere absence of complete evidence.

5.3 RQ3: Discourse Mechanisms and Evidential Encounters in Belief Revision

Addressing RQ3, the findings indicate that belief revision relies on discourse mechanisms and evidential encounters that prompt characters to evaluate new claims and, crucially, to reassess the interpretive assumptions behind prior judgements. This aligns with Sommer et al.'s (2024) account of belief updating across evidence search, acceptance, integration, and reasoning. Elizabeth's reassessment provides a narrative representation in which previously accepted testimony is reconsidered once source credibility and internal consistency are called into question, underscoring the role of epistemic vigilance in source evaluation (Sperber et al., 2010). Darcy's shift likewise involves re-examining judgement itself, extending beyond how others are evaluated to how self-perception aligns with one's actions. A key implication is that belief revision can require questioning the interpretive assumptions behind a judgement that previously appeared warranted.

5.4 RQ4: Integrating Cognitive-Pragmatic and Discourse-Analytical Perspectives

Finally, in relation to RQ4, combining Relevance Theory, epistemic vigilance, and discourse analysis clarifies how literary narrative represents epistemic judgement and belief revision across linguistic, contextual, and inferential levels (Mazzarella & Pouscoulous, 2021; Sperber et al., 2010; Wilson, 2023). Connecting these dimensions to the trajectory of character beliefs revealed interpretive patterns that remain less visible when linguistic markers or character appraisals are examined separately. The study's contribution is therefore both methodological and interpretive, providing a systematic framework for analysing how literary discourse represents knowledge construction, credibility assessment, and belief revision. At the same time, these findings concern textual representations and do not establish the experimentally measured cognitive processes of actual readers.

5.5 Implications

The study yields three principal implications. First, it extends literary discourse analysis by demonstrating how epistemic bias is textually constructed through the selective evaluation of evidence and the contextual assumptions underlying character judgements. Second, it illustrates the analytical value of treating linguistic positioning, source credibility, pragmatic inference, and belief revision as interrelated processes, building on scholarship on contextual inference and narrative meaning (Nemesi, 2025). Third, the findings suggest pedagogical applications in critical reading and epistemic literacy. Literary episodes can help students evaluate source credibility, examine their own and others' assumptions, distinguish evidence from reputation, and revise initial inferences, although such classroom applications require empirical evaluation before their effectiveness can be established.

5.6 Limitations

This study has four limitations. First, it examined a single novel and a selected corpus of 148 discourse segments; consequently, its findings should not be generalised to other literary works without further investigation. Second, the researcher-developed analytical matrices functioned as qualitative interpretive instruments rather than independently validated psychometric measures. Third, the single-researcher design precluded inter-coder reliability testing, although explicit coding definitions and delayed intra-coder review strengthened procedural transparency; such measures do not constitute independent verification (Tracy, 2010). Finally, the absence of reader-response data precludes claims about real readers' cognitive responses or beliefs, just as textual analysis cannot recover authorial intent or historical reception.

5.7 Recommendations for Future Research

Future studies could apply this framework to other Austen novels and to narratives from diverse historical and cultural traditions to test its broader applicability. The five analytical matrices could also be evaluated for coding consistency and interpretive utility across larger corpora and multi-researcher teams. Where appropriate to the research design, multiple coders and structured reconciliation of disagreements can strengthen analytical transparency (O'Connor & Joffe, 2020). In addition, empirical reader-response studies could examine how actual readers evaluate conflicting accounts, source credibility, and narrative disclosures. Such work would allow researchers to compare literary portrayals of belief revision with readers' evidence evaluation and belief updating while keeping textual representation distinct from reader cognition (Sommer et al., 2024).

VI. CONCLUSION

The present study investigated the formation, consolidation, disruption, and modification of epistemic judgements in Jane Austen's *Pride and Prejudice*. The analysis indicates that epistemic bias involves more than inaccurate information or prejudice; it emerges from the interplay of source credibility, contextual assumptions, evaluative positioning, and pragmatic inference. Its central contribution lies in distinguishing between acquiring corrective information and reconsidering the assumptions

through which information is evaluated. Belief revision was represented as both an evidential and a reflexive process: judgements changed not merely because new information became available, but because characters reconsidered source credibility, interpretive plausibility, and the influence of prior evaluations. The integrated analytical framework provides a systematic approach for examining these processes in literary discourse and provides a foundation for comparative research into the linguistic, contextual, and inferential construction of belief and credibility across other narrative contexts.

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