



The Language of Lament: A Pragmatic Analysis of the Expressions of Sorrow in Selected Shakespearean Tragedies

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ARTICLE INFO	ABSTRACT
Submission: August 31, 2026 Revised: September 12, 2026 Accepted: September 28, 2026 Available Online: October 07, 2026 Keywords: Pragmatics; speech act theory; politeness theory; deixis; Shakespeare; Hamlet; King Lear; Othello; sorrow; tragedy; emotional expression; literary discourse. Corresponding author: Inayat Ullah Email: inayatullah418@gmail.com	This paper examines how William Shakespeare employs language pragmatically to construct and communicate sorrow, grief, and emotional suffering in Hamlet, King Lear and Othello. The study investigates how sorrow is articulated through dialogue and how linguistic choices reflect psychological tensions and social conflicts. This study adopts a qualitative textual approach grounded in pragmatic analysis. Selected sorrowful dialogues serve as the primary data. The analysis integrates Speech Act Theory, Politeness Theory, and Deixis to examine acts such as lamentation, accusation, and emotional disclosure. Speech Act Theory identifies functional dimensions of sorrowful utterances, Politeness Theory explores interpersonal relations under emotional pressure, and Deixis analyses how speakers position themselves within emotional and social contexts. The findings demonstrate that sorrow in Shakespearean tragedies is not merely an emotional expression but a structured communicative act. In Hamlet, sorrow is internalized and reflective; in King Lear, it is intense and shaped by betrayal and loss of authority; in Othello, it is linked to relational dynamics influenced by jealousy and miscommunication. The study implies that Shakespeare's language operates at a pragmatic level to construct emotional meaning beyond thematic representation. It shows that sorrow functions as both a psychological experience and a social act shaped through language, contributing to a deeper understanding of emotional expression in dramatic discourse.

Introduction

Language is not merely a neutral medium for the exchange of information but also a powerful mean through which human emotions, intensions, and social relationships are constructed and communicated. In literary texts, language performs an even more significant role. It embodies emotional depth, interpersonal meanings, and cultural values in the presence of its literal sense. Sorrow occupies a central position due to its psychological intensity and its close association with loss, suffering, regret, and emotional nature.

Sorrow is not simply narrated in tragic literature rather it is expressed through speech. Characters express grief, despair, and lamentation through well-structured linguistic choices. It reflects their inner emotional situation and their relationships with others. Hence, it is important to analyse not only what is said, but how it is said and why it is said in tragic literature. Sorrow appears through soliloquies, dialogues, and emotionally filled interactions in William Shakespeare's tragedies.

This study makes a pragmatic analysis of the language of lament. Pragmatics studies that how meaning is shaped by context, speakers' purpose, and social interaction (Levinson, 1983). This study explores how sorrow is linguistically constructed through

speech acts, politeness strategies, and deictic expressions. It follows an integrated, theory-driven pragmatic approach using Speech Act Theory, Politeness Theory, and Deixis. Pragmatic analysis allows researchers to explore how emotions are conveyed implicitly through interactional choices. Sorrow appears through lamentation, silence, indirectness, repetition, and violations of normal conversational norms. According to Austin (1962) and Searle (1979), language functions as action and emotional expressions can be understood as expressive speech acts.

Shakespeare's tragedies are suitable for pragmatic analysis. Hamlet expresses sorrow as existential grief and moral confusion. King Lear shows sorrow from family downfall and loss of authority. Othello portrays sorrow shaped by jealousy, betrayal, and failure of trust. Sorrow is accompanied by social relationships, power loss, and interpersonal conflict.

Politeness Theory provides analysis into how emotional distress affects social behaviour. Sorrow results in exposure of face vulnerability, violation of politeness norms and parted alignment in interpersonal relationships. Deictic expressions help link sorrow in specific moments and relationships. Relatively limited attention has been given to the pragmatic construction of sorrow. Most studies focus on thematic or psychological interpretations. This research aims to fill this gap by pragmatic analysis of lamentation in Shakespeare's tragedies.

Statement of the Problem

Shakespearean tragedies have been studied from literary and psychological perspectives, but the linguistic construction of sorrow has not received sufficient attention. Sorrow is conveyed through pragmatic features such as speech acts, politeness strategies, and deictic expressions. Previous research has overlooked these mechanisms or examined them separately. There is also limited comparative research across Hamlet, King Lear, and Othello. Thus, this study is an effort to fill this gap by providing comparative pragmatic analysis of how sorrow is constructed and expressed in selected Shakespearean tragedies.

Research Objectives

This study is guided by the following primary objectives:

1. To identify and analyse pragmatic features in sorrow-related dialogues.
2. To interpret how these features express emotional intensity and relationships.
3. To examine variation of sorrow across the selected plays.

Research Questions

This research is driven by the following core questions:

1. What pragmatic features are used in sorrow-related dialogues?
2. How do these features construct sorrow?
3. How does sorrow vary across the plays?

Significance of the Research

This study has significance at both academic and methodological levels. In the academic domain, it contributes to Shakespearean studies by giving a linguistic and pragmatic perspective on the expression of sorrow. From a linguistic perspective, the research has significance due to the fact that it studies how pragmatic theories particularly speech act theory, politeness theory, and deixis can be effectively applied to literary texts. The study is also beneficial for students and researchers working in the fields of pragmatics, stylistics, and literary linguistics. Additionally, the findings of this research may be useful for teachers of literature and drama. They can aid in explaining how meaning is negotiated through language in emotionally triggered situations and can connect linguistic choices with character development, power relations, and moral positioning.

Literature Review

Pragmatics provides a systematic framework for analysing how meaning is conveyed through language in context, considering speaker purpose, social roles, and interpersonal interpretation (Levinson, 1983; Yule, 1996). It is particularly relevant to Shakespearean tragedies, where emotion is expressed not only through lexical choices but also through speech acts, politeness

strategies, and deictic markers (Austin, 1962; Brown & Levinson, 1987). Pragmatics thus bridges linguistic form and communicative function (Mey, 2001).

In literary tragedy, pragmatics helps examine how sorrow and grief are constructed through indirectness, repetition, metaphor, and deviations from conversational norms (Bednarek, 2008). Speech acts, politeness strategies, and deixis reveal how sorrow is communicated and interpreted by characters and audiences (Culpeper, 2011; Archer, 2012). Characters actively shape the meaning of grief; for example, Hamlet's lamentations express sorrow, criticize others, and influence social and moral judgment, while Lear's grief reflects both personal suffering and loss of authority (Greenblatt, 2005).

Emotion is both psychologically experienced and socially constructed through language (Wierzbicka, 1999). Sorrow encompasses grief, lamentation, regret, despair, and emotional pain and contributes to character development, narrative tension, and audience engagement (Barker, 2007). Its expression is inherently pragmatic because linguistic choices convey meanings beyond literal words (Bednarek, 2008).

In Shakespearean tragedies, sorrow is frequently expressed through expressive, directive, and declarative speech acts. Speech Act Theory explains how utterances function as actions and distinguish locutionary, illocutionary, and perlocutionary acts (Austin, 1962; Searle, 1969). Hamlet's soliloquies, Lear's lamentations, and Othello's expressions of betrayal demonstrate how speech acts communicate personal suffering, moral judgment, authority, and emotional conflict (Pratt, 1977; Culpeper, 2011).

Deixis further constructs sorrow by locating emotions in personal, temporal, spatial, and relational contexts. Hamlet's use of first-person pronouns and temporal expressions such as *now* and *this hour* intensifies the immediacy and personal nature of his grief (Culpeper, 2011; Wierzbicka, 1999; Leech, 2014). The integration of Speech Act Theory, Politeness Theory, and Deixis therefore provides a comprehensive framework for analysing the content, intensity, interpersonal management, and contextualization of sorrow.

Although literary criticism has extensively examined grief thematically, psychologically, and narratively (Greenblatt, 2005; Kastan, 1999), its pragmatic dimensions remain comparatively underexplored. Studies of Hamlet have emphasized existential reflection and rhetorical style, while research on King Lear has focused on familial conflict and social disorder. Similarly, studies of Othello have mainly examined jealousy, race, and betrayal, with less attention to the pragmatic processes through which sorrow is expressed and intensified (Pratt, 1977; Culpeper, 2011; Neely, 1985). Thus, there is a need for a systematic comparative pragmatic analysis of sorrow across Shakespearean tragedies through Speech Act Theory, Politeness Theory, and Deixis.

The present study addresses these limitations by providing a systematic, integrated, and comparative pragmatic analysis of sorrow in selected Shakespearean tragedies. By combining Speech Act Theory, Politeness Theory, and Deictic analysis, the study moves beyond descriptive accounts to examine how sorrow is linguistically constructed, functionally expressed, and contextually shaped in dramatic dialogue.

Methodology

The study adopts a qualitative, text-based analytical approach to examine the expressions of sorrow in selected Shakespearean tragedies. It applies a pragmatic framework using Speech Act Theory, Politeness Theory, and Deixis. It focuses on dialogues and soliloquies in Shakespearean tragedies. The data resources consist of all expressions of sorrow in Hamlet, King Lear, and Othello, including dialogues and soliloquies reflecting grief, despair, and emotional suffering. Five dialogues from each play are selected through purposive sampling, focusing only on those instances that are pragmatically rich and directly relevant to the expression of grief. Data collection in this research involves systematic extraction of dialogues and soliloquies.

Results and Discussion

Pragmatic Analysis of Sorrow in Hamlet

Hamlet presents the most profound and reliable and diverse portrayals of sorrow. Hamlet's grief is complex, multi layered and deeply internalized. Linguistically, this sorrow is conveyed through expressive speech acts, politeness strategies, and personal and temporal deixis. Some important dialogues of this play are given below:

Dialogue 1

Text (Hamlet, Act 1, Scene 2):

“O that this too too solid flesh would melt,
Thaw and resolve itself into a dew!”

Pragmatic Analysis:

This utterance functions as an expressive speech act, revealing despair. Politeness strategies are absent as it is self-addressed. Personal deixis (“this flesh”) anchors sorrow in Hamlet’s own being.

Dialogue 2

Text (Hamlet, Act 1, Scene 2):

“But I have that within which passes show;
These but the trappings and the suits of woe.

Pragmatic Analysis:

The utterance functions as expressive and assertive speech act. It uses negative politeness by avoiding direct confrontation. Deixis (“within” vs “show”) highlights inner vs outer grief.

Dialogue 3

Text (Hamlet, Act 2, Scene 2):

“O, what a rogue and peasant slave am I!”

Pragmatic Analysis:

It is an expressive speech act of self-directed grief. Politeness is absent as he attacks his own face. Personal deixis (“I”) emphasizes internal sorrow.

Dialogue 4

Text (Hamlet, Act 3, Scene 1):

“To be, or not to be: that is the question.”

Pragmatic Analysis:

It functions as expressive and assertive speech act. Politeness is absent due to introspection. Lack of personal deixis universalizes sorrow.

Dialogue 5

Text (Hamlet, Act 5, Scene 1):

“I loved Ophelia. Forty thousand brothers
Could not, with all their quantity of love,
Make up my sum.”

Pragmatic Analysis:

It is an expressive and assertive speech act. Politeness strategies are minimal as emotion is openly expressed. Deixis (“I”, “their”) contrasts personal and collective emotion.

Thus, the analysis demonstrates that sorrow is constructed through expressive speech acts, shifting politeness strategies and deictic anchoring. Shakespeare presents sorrow as internal, reflective, and at times outwardly directed. Hamlet's sorrow develops from private despair to a more composed understanding.

Pragmatic Analysis of Sorrow in King Lear

King Lear's sorrow is rooted in broken familial bonds, loss of authority, and emotional isolation. From a pragmatic angle, sorrow in King Lear is expressed through highly charged expressive speech acts, frequent face threatening utterances, and intense deictic anchoring. Some important dialogues of this play are given below:

Dialogue 1

Text (King Lear, Act 1, Scene 4):

"Does any here know me? This is not Lear."

Pragmatic Analysis:

This utterance functions as an expressive speech act, communicating emotional pain and identity confusion. Lear is not seeking information; rather, he expresses disbelief and sorrow over the loss of his position, revealing the collapse of his former self. From the perspective of Politeness Theory, Lear employs a bald on-record expression, disregarding face considerations due to emotional distress. Deictically, the use of personal deixis such as "me" and "Lear" highlights the fragmentation of identity.

Dialogue 2

Text (King Lear, Act 1, Scene 4):

"I did her wrong."

Pragmatic Analysis:

The utterance functions as an expressive speech act, conveying regret and remorse. Lear acknowledges his emotional and moral failure. From the perspective of Politeness Theory, politeness strategies are minimal because the utterance is self-directed and sincere. Deictically, temporal reference is implicit, linking past actions with present sorrow.

Dialogue 3

Text (King Lear, Act 2, Scene 4):

"O fool, I shall go mad!"

Pragmatic Analysis:

This utterance functions as an expressive speech act, conveying intense emotional distress and anxiety. From the perspective of Politeness Theory, politeness norms are abandoned due to emotional urgency. Deictically, the use of future orientation such as "shall" projects sorrow forward.

Dialogue 4

Text (King Lear, Act 2, Scene 4):

"I am a man more sinned against than sinning."

Pragmatic Analysis:

This utterance functions as an expressive speech act combined with an assertive element. From the perspective of Politeness Theory, Lear seeks to restore his positive face by presenting himself as innocent. Deictically, the comparative structure "more... than" emphasizes imbalance and perceived injustice.

Dialogue 5

Text (King Lear, Act 5, Scene 3):

“No, no, no life! Why should a dog, a horse, a rat, have life, and thou no breath at all?”

Pragmatic Analysis:

This utterance functions as an expressive speech act, conveying grief and hopelessness through intense and emotionally charged questioning. From the perspective of Politeness Theory, politeness norms are irrelevant, as Lear’s emotional state overrides all social considerations. Deictically, the comparative references such as “dog, horse, and rat” emphasize perceived injustice.

Thus, in *King Lear*, Shakespeare constructs sorrow as a linguistically mediated and dynamic phenomenon. It is presented as personal yet universal, shaped by context. The progression of Lear’s speech reflects different stages of emotional collapse.

Pragmatic Analysis of Sorrow in Othello

Othello presents sorrow arising from jealousy, betrayal and emotional wounds. Unlike Hamlet and King Lear, where grief often appears from existential or familial identity crises, the grief of Othello is intensely relational. It is shaped by Iago’s betrayal, and Desdemona’s perceived cheating. It is the unravelling of Othello’s self-perception. Some important dialogues are given below:

Dialogue 1

Text (Othello, Act 1, Scene 3):

“She loved me for the dangers I had passed, and I loved her that she did pity them.”

Pragmatic Analysis:

This utterance functions as an expressive speech act, communicating emotional attachment while also reflecting a tone of subdued melancholy. Politeness is implicitly maintained through an off-record strategy, allowing Othello to preserve relational harmony. Deictically, personal references such as “she” and “I” situate sorrow within a relational framework, emphasizing emotional connection. Temporal deixis, as in “had passed,” links past experiences to present emotional states, suggesting that sorrow is shaped by memory.

Dialogue 2

Text (Othello, Act 3, Scene 3):

“O, beware, my lord, of jealousy; it is the green-eyed monster which doth mock the meat it feeds on.”

Pragmatic Analysis:

The utterance employs an expressive speech act with an embedded manipulative and directive function, through which emotion is shaped and future sorrow is subtly foreshadowed. Politeness is used strategically, as Iago adopts a form of negative politeness to present himself as cautious and advisory rather than intrusive. This indirectness allows him to manipulate while maintaining the appearance of respect. Deictically, the metaphorical expression “green-eyed monster” functions as metaphorical deixis, externalizing internal anxiety and projecting it onto an imagined entity.

Dialogue 3

Text (Othello, Act 3, Scene 3):

“This honest creature doubtless sees and knows more, much more, than he unfolds.”

Pragmatic Analysis:

The utterance functions as an expressive speech act, conveying suspicion and the emergence of emotional pain. It reflects a developing loss of trust, indicating the beginning of relational breakdown. Politeness is minimal, as Othello’s focus shifts inward. His language reflects self-directed reflection and confusion, rather than concern for social interaction. Deictically, the repetition “more, much more” serves to intensify internalized sorrow, emphasizing immediacy and emotional proximity.

Dialogue 4

Text (Othello, Act 3, Scene 3):
 “And yet how nature erring from itself”

Pragmatic Analysis:

The utterance functions as an expressive speech act of lamentation, through which grief emerges from moral and relational downfall. The language reflects deep emotional disturbance connected with betrayal and loss of trust. Politeness strategies are abandoned, as the utterance is intensely personal and unmitigated. The absence of face considerations indicates that emotional pain overrides social norms. Deictically, the reflexive form “itself” anchors sorrow within a broader framework of natural and moral order, linking emotional agony to a perceived violation of ethical expectations.

Dialogue 5

Text (Othello, Act 3, Scene 3):

“O, I am slain! If thou be'st true, heaven truly knows it.”

Pragmatic Analysis:

The utterance functions as an expressive speech act, where grief becomes intense and dramatic. The speaker reflects on his previous unawareness, revealing a shift from ignorance to emotional realization. Politeness norms are minimal under emotional distress. The utterance includes a face-threatening element, as the speaker condemns the perceived wrongdoing of another, showing that emotional intensity overrides restraint. Deictically, the use of personal pronoun “I” emphasizes internalized grief, while “thou” identifies the external source of that grief. This contrast highlights the interaction between inner suffering and relational trigger.

Comparative Analysis of Sorrow in Selected Shakespearean Tragedies

Each play brings forth unique psychological and relational dimensions of sorrow. However, commonalities can be observed in how emotions are pragmatically made. The analysis draws upon three theoretical lenses. It includes Speech Act Theory, Politeness Theory and Deixis.

Table 1: Comparative Pragmatic Analysis of Sorrow

This table presents a comparative pragmatic analysis of sorrow expressed in Hamlet, King Lear, and Othello.

Analytical Category	Hamlet	King Lear	Othello	Research Findings / Emergent Patterns
Existential Grief	“O, that this too solid flesh would melt...”	“O, let me not be mad...”	“I kissed thee ere I killed thee...”	Sorrow appears as internalized. It is a philosophical reflection in Hamlet. Then it becomes relational and socially conditioned in Lear. It gets fatalistic and relational in the play Othello.
Relational / Familial Sorrow	“Frailty, thy name is woman!”	“I am a man / More sinned against than sinning”	“Soft, soft, farewell to thee...”	Sorrow is socially shared. Hamlet’s grief is moral and psychological. Lear’s grief is relational bond and loss of authoritative position, Othello’s is emotionally triggered, self-directed and fatal.

Table 2: Frequency and Intensity Comparison

This table analyses the abundancy and intensity of sorrow expressions.

Feature	Hamlet	King Lear	Othello	What this Suggests / Emerging Pattern
Monologues Reflecting Grief	“O, that this too too solid flesh would melt...”	Occasional monologues	“Then must you speak of one that loved not wisely...”	Hamlet’s sorrow is internalized and reflective. Lear externalizes forcefully; Othello’s sorrow peaks with relational estrangement and crises.
Emotional Outbursts	Rare	Very Frequent	Moderate	Lear’s grief is externally dramatized. Hamlet internalizes. Othello enjoins relational and performative grief.

Table 3: Thematic Comparison of Sorrow

This table explores the key themes of sorrow.

Theme	Hamlet	King Lear	Othello	Emerging Interpretation
Familial / Relational Sorrow	“Frailty, thy name is woman!”	Intense sorrow over daughters’ betrayal	Grief over supposed betrayal	Sorrow is social oriented. Hamlet’s is morally evaluative. Lear’s is relationally intense. Othello’s is tragic and intimate
Psychological / Emotional Sorrow	self-criticism, and depression	anger, despair	jealousy driven pain	Shakespeare links sorrow to psychological states. Hamlet intellectualized it. Lear is emotionally distorted; Othello is relationally panic

Table 4: Summary of Theoretical Findings

This table summarizes findings from Speech Act Theory, Politeness Theory, and Deixis.

Component	Hamlet	King Lear	Othello	Research Synthesized Findings
Speech Acts	“O, that this too too solid flesh would melt...”	“Blow, winds, and crack your cheeks!”	“O, my soul’s delight...”	Sorrow is realized through expressive speech acts. Hamlet’s is reflective, Lear’s is externalized, Othello’s is relationally intense
Politeness Strategies	often violates social politeness	mostly violates	socially linked grief	Politeness mediates sorrow differently. Hamlet internalized, Lear occasionally followed, Othello socially and relationally maintains

Thus, the comparative analysis across the three plays demonstrates that sorrow is not a uniform emotional category but a multidimensional and context-sensitive phenomenon, constructed through distinct pragmatic patterns in each play.

Conclusion

This study investigates the construction of sorrow in Shakespearean tragedies from a linguistic and pragmatic perspective, focusing on Hamlet, King Lear, and Othello. By applying an integrated framework of Speech Act Theory, Politeness Theory, and Deixis, the study moves beyond thematic interpretation to show how sorrow is performed, negotiated, and contextualized in discourse.

The analysis of Hamlet reveals that sorrow is predominantly introspective, existential, and morally reflective. Through expressive speech acts, Hamlet articulates grief as a process of internal questioning and ethical awareness. His fluctuating use of politeness strategies reflects tension between personal anguish and social expectations, while deictic references anchor sorrow within both personal experience and broader philosophical reflection.

In King Lear, sorrow is externalized, relational, and socially disruptive. Lear's grief is expressed through dramatic and interactional language, where expressive acts reveal the collapse of authority and identity. The breakdown of politeness strategies indicates that intense emotional distress overrides social norms, while deictic elements situate sorrow within familial betrayal, loss of power, and public exposure.

In Othello, sorrow is relational, situational, and ethically driven, emerging from jealousy, manipulation, and perceived betrayal. Expressive acts construct grief as both emotional and evaluative, often leading to moral distortion. Politeness strategies interact with emotional intensity, reflecting a struggle between social awareness and psychological collapse. Deictic references anchor sorrow within immediate relational and temporal contexts, highlighting its progressive and climactic nature.

The comparative analysis confirms that sorrow across the three plays is context-bound, psychologically varied, and pragmatically constructed. Shakespeare does not present grief as a fixed or uniform experience; rather, it evolves according to character, situation, and relational dynamics.

Summing up, this study demonstrates that sorrow in Shakespearean tragedies is a dynamic communicative act, shaped by expressive language, interpersonal relations, and contextual factors. It transforms sorrow from a purely thematic concern into a structured and analyzable linguistic phenomenon, offering a deeper understanding of how human emotion is represented in literary discourse. This approach strengthens the connection between linguistics and literature and provides a foundation for future research on the pragmatic construction of emotion in dramatic texts.

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