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A Pragmatic Analysis of 'Repartee' in Sufi Discourse: A Case Study of Attār Nishapuri's Works

Zeinab. Akbari[1*] -Farhad. Sasani[2]

1: Assistant Professor, Department of Persian Language and Literature, Al-Zahra University, Tehran, Iran (Corresponding Author): ZAkbari@alzahra.ac.ir
2: Associate Professor, Department of Linguistics, Alzahra University, Tehran, Iran.

Abstract: Repartee, as a linguistic-cultural phenomenon, occupies a central role in Sufi discourse, serving as an interactive joint action within the turn-taking system of conversation. It functions as a strategic mechanism for challenging social norms, managing face, and conveying nuanced messages within Sufi contexts. This study employs a mixed-methods approach, utilizing Béal and mullan's (2013) four-dimensional model which comprises speaker / target / audience interplay, linguistic mechanisms, pragmatic functions, and interactional positioning to systematically extract and analyze 184 instances of repartee from Attār's Mathnawī. Findings reveal that, in the speaker/target/audience dimension, repartees are predominantly produced by socially subordinate speakers, with a marked listener-oriented focus. In the linguistic mechanisms dimension, repartees exhibit a sophisticated interplay of traditional rhetorical devices, e.g. puns, metaphors, and rhetorical reversals (qalb al-maṭlab) and discursive strategies, including conceptual reframing and incongruity, thereby enhancing their aesthetic and semantic complexity. Analysis of pragmatic functions indicates a dual role, whereby repartees both disrupt existing social hierarchies and reinforce social order through tension mitigation and indirect communication. Finally, the interactional positioning dimension demonstrates the predominance of reactive repartees in generating dynamic exchanges. This research advances our understanding of repartee in classical Persian texts, offering novel insights for cross-cultural studies of humor and interaction. They offer a robust foundation for future scholarly inquiry.
Keywords: Béal and Mullan, Interactional Pragmatics, Repartee, Sufi Discourse, Attar.

1. Introduction

Repartee rapid, often witty rejoinder is a pervasive rhetorical device in many oral and written traditions, but its status and functions in classical Persian mystical literature remain under-investigated. Scholarship in Western pragmatics and conversation analysis has emphasized repartee as an interactional phenomenon that is jointly produced, context-sensitive, and intimately bound to face and power dynamics (Béal & Mullan 2013; Attardo 1994; Dynel 2009). Parallel scholarship in Islamic rhetorical traditions has long recognized forms analogous to al-ajāwibah al-maskūtah (the silencing retort), yet systematic, empirically based pragmatic studies of repartee in Sufi texts are sparse. This study addresses that gap by applying an interactionally oriented four-dimensional framework to a systematically compiled corpus of repartee from Attār's oeuvre. Its principal aims are: (1) to map the orientation and participant roles associated with repartee in Sufi narratives; (2) to identify the linguistic devices and discursive strategies that realize repartee; (3) to classify its pragmatic functions vis-à-vis face, solidarity, and power; and (4) to situate repartee within conversational turn-taking patterns. Research questions include: How are repartees distributed across orientation and social status? Which linguistic and discursive mechanisms predominate? What pragmatic work do repartees perform in Sufi interactional narratives? How do interactional positions (initiator/ responder/ collaborator) modulate repartee's effects?

2. Materials & Methods

Corpus. The corpus comprises the complete extant poetic and prose works of Farīd al-Dīn 'Aṭṭār, from which 184 instances meeting operational criteria for repartee were identified. Operational inclusion required: (a) a dialogic sequence with at least two speaking turns; (b) an identifiable rejoinder whose force is partly delivered by timing, linguistic device, or contextual reframing; and (c) interpretive consensus across parallel readings.

Procedure. Data were imported into MAXQDA 2020. Coding proceeded in four sequential passes aligned to Béal & Mullan's dimensions: (1) orientation & participant social role; (2) linguistic devices vs. discursive strategies; (3) pragmatic functions; (4) interactional position in the turn-taking sequence. Codes were initially deductive (derived from the theoretical model) and iteratively refined by close reading and memoing; ambiguous cases were resolved by reference to primary textual contexts. Quantitative tallies (counts, percentages) were generated from coded segments; qualitative excerpts were used illustratively. Where necessary, philological notes (lexical variants, manuscript divergences) were

consulted; reference editions of Attār (Persian text) were used (cf. Attār, Complete Works, in Persian)

3. Research findings

Orientation & participant roles. Repartees are primarily listener-oriented (≈42%) or topic-oriented (≈39%), with fewer speaker-oriented rejoinders (≈19%). A majority (≈57%) were voiced by socially subordinate characters (e.g., mendicants, low-status artisans, 'fools'), 31% by social peers, and 12% by higher-status speakers. Notably, 98% of instances involve animate agents (humans, divine interlocutors, jinn), while five instances feature animals or inanimate objects as interlocutors, manifesting a rich imaginative range.

Linguistic mechanisms. Two principal pathways emerge: (i) linguistic play (≈109 instances) rooted in rhetorical devices such as paronomasia (jinas / pun), metaphor, antanaclasis, and qalb al-maṭlab (rhetorical reversal) supplying stylistic sophistication and amplitude of meaning; (ii) discursive strategies (≈63 instances) including conceptual reframing, intentional misunderstanding, and calculated incongruity which reconfigure addressee expectations and provoke interpretive work.

Pragmatic functions. Repartee splits into two macro-functions: (A) disruptive/transformative (≈111; 60.7%) undermining hierarchical claims, defending face in the face of insult, or enacting social critique; (B) conservative/cohesive (≈72; 39.3%) tension management, indirect transmission of serious messages, and reinforcement of communal norms.

Interactional dynamics. A majority occur as reactive rejoinders (139; 76%) second-position moves that dismantle prior claims or logic; 21 instances (11%) initiate sequences; 23 (13%) develop into extended collaborative repartee chains (escalatory group fantasy).

4. Discussion of Results & Conclusion

The analysis demonstrates repartee's dual identity in Sufi narrative: as rhetorical art and as social action. That low-status characters disproportionately perform repartee foregrounds its subversive capacity: repartee operates as a linguistic mechanism through which epistemic authority and moral critique can be staged by marginal voices. The coexistence of ornate rhetorical play and strategic reframing evidences a hybrid poetics — repartee occasions both aesthetic appreciation and interpretive labor. Functionally, the split between disruptive and cohesive uses shows that repartee mediates tensions inherent to Sufi teaching: it can both destabilize superficial social orders and pragmatically enable transmission of didactic, often paradoxical, spiritual truths. Interactionally, repartee's prevalence as a reactive, second-position move aligns with conversation-analytic findings on adjacency pairs and face

management (Sacks et al.; Brown & Levinson 1987), while extending such frameworks into literary domains. The study thereby bridges literary rhetoric and interactional pragmatics, suggesting repartee as a productive locus for cross-disciplinary inquiry. Limitations: single-author coding and reliance on edited texts; future work should include inter-coder reliability, comparative corpora (other Sufi authors), and reception studies.