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*We pin [words] down to one meaning, their useful meaning, the meaning which makes us catch the train, the meaning which makes us pass the examination. And when words are pinned down they fold their wings and die.*

—Virginia Woolf, “Craftmanship”

*[W]hen people compare Shakespeare and Jane Austen, they may mean that the minds of both had consumed all impediments...and for that reason Jane Austen pervades every word that she wrote.*

—Virginia Woolf, *A Room of One's Own*

### Understanding Austen's Condensation

First published in 1813, Jane Austen's *Pride and Prejudice* is a beloved literary masterpiece about navigating status and negotiating survival in England. Virginia Woolf, noted for her fiction and her literary criticism, writes that *Pride and Prejudice* is a “precious gem” and a “perfect novel” (1242, 2162). Woolf, as partly captured in the above epigraphs, also reminds us that every word is important, as is allowing for the changing meanings of these words. Given the transformations that occur after two centuries, readers in 2022 encounter words in *Pride and Prejudice* for which current meanings diverge from meanings in Austen's time and those intended by her narrator and her characters. Etymological dictionaries such as the *Oxford English Dictionary (OED)* are thus important for better understanding Austen's text and possible meanings to original audiences.

Compared to our time, for example, words such as *husband* had much more specific meanings; words such as *handsome* were used in broader ways; and words such as *violent* were sometimes used in almost opposite ways. For instance, in Austen's time *husband* also had a definition of “male partner in a marriage” per *the OED* but with the further meaning and

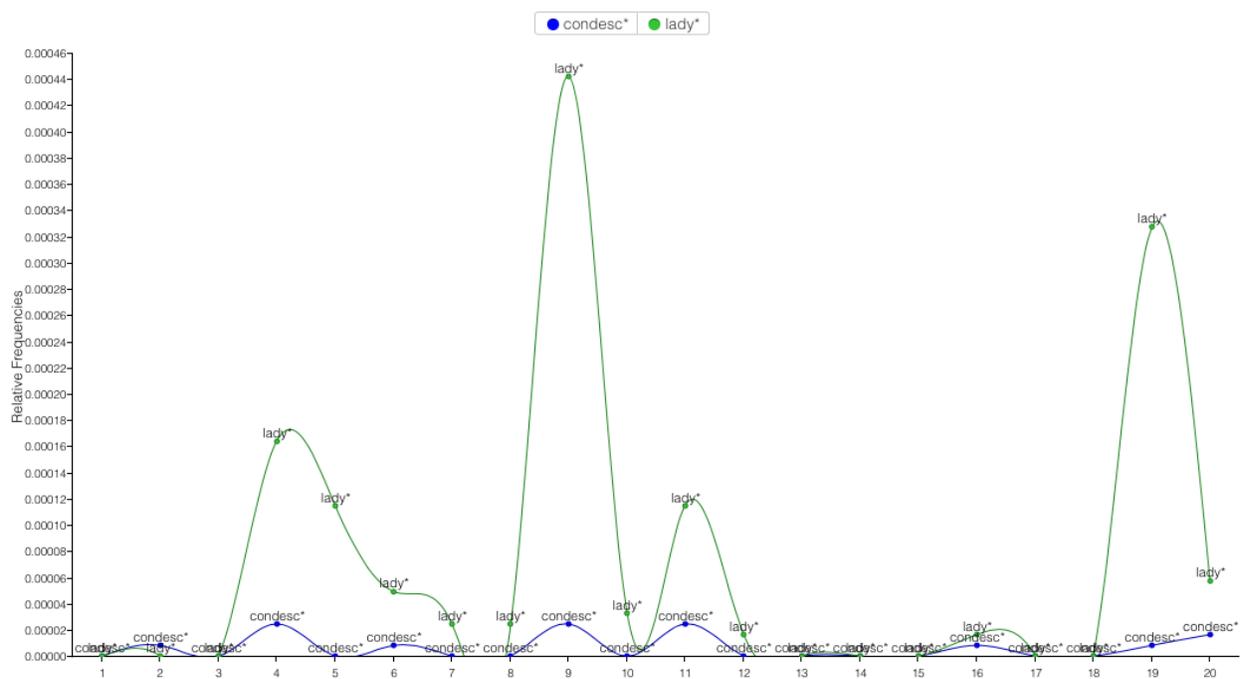
connotation of the marriage only conceivably involving a man/woman pair and the marriage providing crucial economic security for the woman and possibly her mother and any unmarried sisters. Likewise, *handsome* in Austen's stories refers to a variety of attributes and has meanings noted in the *OED* that include "conforming to what is expected or approved," "appropriate, fitting," "having an attractive form or appearance," "moderately large...generous," and "notable, significant." Such uses are illustrated in sentences from *Pride and Prejudice* such as "[t]he dinner was exceedingly *handsome*" and "[t]he rooms were lofty and *handsome*" (299, 342; emphases added). And while in 2022 descriptions of violent affection, violent delight, and violent love arouse alarm and might signify abuse, in Austen's novel such descriptions sometimes have more positive connotations (269, 375, 414).<sup>1</sup> The *OED* notes that *violent* in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries had meanings that included "accomplished using physical violence" but also "of an emotion or feeling: characterized by its intensity; powerful," "very great or strong; intense, overwhelming," and "very or excessively great, strong."

Of *Pride and Prejudice*'s 122,204 words—6,538 of these words are unique—the inclusion of *condescend* and its inflections fifteen times stands out the most when considering meanings now and then and impacts on the story (*Voyant Tools*). Specifically, in *Pride and Prejudice*, *condescension* appears seven times, *condescended* appears five times, and *condescend*, *condescends*, and *condescendingly* each appear once. (As a testament to Austen's variety in both story and diction, these words only occur ten additional times in *The Complete Works* which include over 780,000 words [*Voyant Tools*].) While in 2022, competent readers and speakers of English interpret *condescend* negatively and think of a *condescending* person as one

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<sup>1</sup> The historian in me also finds the following worthy of specific articulations: *Violence* now signifies, among other things, the unparalleled horrors of the twentieth century—the Holocaust, world wars, and fully realized industrialism. Such unconscious and unescapable backdrops alter how we read Austen. Further, when analyzing such fiction, it is useful to attempt remembering all that Austen could not yet know and could not yet conceive.

who looks down on others or who believes themselves to be superior, *condescend* in Austen’s had different and mostly opposite meanings. According to the *OED*, Austen’s original audiences understood her uses of *condescend* and its inflections to roughly mean “*figurative*: to come or bend down...from one’s position of dignity or pride,” “course of action,” “to depart from the privileges of superiority by a voluntary submission,” “to make concessions; to comply, consent,” “to come to an agreement,” and/or “to fix upon.”<sup>2</sup> Understanding then-contemporary definitions is especially impactful when it comes to understanding and appreciating Lady Catherine de Bourgh. Of the fifteen uses of *condescend* and its inflections, eleven pertain to Lady Catherine.



**Fig. 1.1.** Graph designed by the author using *Voyant Tools*. This program divides the entire text of *Pride and Prejudice* divided into twenty equal sections. (Twenty is, naturally, arbitrary but helps show the desired trends.) This particular graph charts any use of *condescend* and its inflections and any mention of Lady Catherine de Bourgh. The x-axis shows the twenty segments. The y-axis shows how many times the selected words occur as a percentage of all words in that section. Of note, the two terms generally increase and decrease at the same time.

<sup>2</sup> It should be noted that the *OED*’s entry for “condescend” has not been fully updated since its initial publication in 1891. Existing definitions do not include data after 1888 and include no hint of current uses.

Lady Catherine, a very wealthy and lucky property-owning widow, focuses on maintaining and elevating her status and lives with her daughter on their estate, Rosings Park. She helps support Mr. Collins, who is set to inherit the Bennet estate. She also unsuccessfully schemes to arrange a marriage between her daughter and Mr. Darcy, her nephew and a gentleman. Lady Catherine is indeed arrogant, cruel, and loud at times and is used to having her say with absolute and immediate obedience. She also shares her thoughts without hesitation or invitation. In a dramatic scene toward the conclusion of *Pride and Prejudice*, she is angry because she wrongly believes her nephew and Elizabeth Bennet are engaged (that happens a bit later!) and tries to use her power to intimidate Elizabeth from having any interaction with Mr. Darcy. Some key moments include Lady Catherine saying, “[Y]ou ought to know that I am not to be trifled with,” “Miss Bennet, do you know who I am? I have not been accustomed to such language as this,” and “I will not be interrupted. Hear me in silence” (402-3).

While such behavior might be labeled *condescending* in 2022, it does not meet the standards of civility, sense, and sensibility required for *condescension* in Austen’s era. In contrast, on certain occasions, Lady Catherine’s behavior is distinctly gracious. Other characters comment on her occasional and noteworthy humility five times. In addition to the individual perspectives from these characters, the less biased and omniscient narrator also underscores Lady Catherine’s notable but brief casualness or perhaps what can sometimes be called offers of temporary equality on six occasions.

Readers first learn about Lady Catherine’s sophisticated behavior during a dinner that includes herself, the Bennets, and Mr. Collins. The narrator says, “[W]ith a most important aspect [Mr. Collins] protested that he had never in his life witnessed such behavior in a person of such rank—such affability and *condescension*, as he had himself experienced from Lady

Catherine” (246; emphasis added). Only five sentences later, the narrator chimes in again: “She had even *condescended* to advice [Mr. Collins] to marry as soon as he could, provided he choose with discretion” (246; emphasis added). And then six paragraphs later, Mr. Collins notes that “[Lady Catherine] is perfectly amiable, and often *condescends* to drive by my humble abode” (247; emphasis added). With three near-consecutive associations of Lady Catherine and *condescend*, Austen clearly wants readers to remember both this word and that Lady Catherine is more than her status or her flaws. The all-knowing narrator compliments Lady Catherine and clearly uses *condescension* and *condescended* with only positive connotations and to mean a kind of graciousness. Readers also know from the narrator’s wording and recounting of Mr. Collins’s memory that such behavior for someone of noble status is noteworthy, surprising, and rare. While such word might give readers pause in 2022, Austen’s original audiences would have immediately understood the praise being delivered.

Similar uses occur elsewhere. Later in *Pride and Prejudice*, Mr. Collins notes with glee, “Twice has [Lady Catherine] *condescended* to give me her opinions (unasked too!) on the subject” (269; emphasis added). Mr. Collins later notes, “Yes, Miss Elizabeth, you will have the honour of seeing Lady Catherine...I need not say you will be delighted with her. She is all affability and *condescension*” (296; emphasis added). And the narrator follows up, “The power of displaying the grandeur of his patroness to his wondering visitors, and of letting them see her civility towards himself and his wife...was such an instance of Lady Catherine’s *condescension* as he knew not how to admire enough” (298; emphasis added). In this same chapter, the narrator further details a social gathering where Mr. Collins is also present: “Her Ladyship, with great *condescension* arose to receive them” (299; emphasis added). And the conclusion of another social gathering, the narrator informs readers, “When they parted, Lady Catherine, with great

*condescension*, wished them a good journey, and invited them to come to Hunsford again next year (327; emphasis added). The phrase “with great condescension” merits further pause and is a mark of distinction from Austen’s narrator. Between the narrator and the characters, Austen regularly reminds readers of Lady Catherine’s status but also of her frequent willingness to extend acts of kindness.

Communications from Mr. Collins provide the novel’s next examples of *condescend* and Lady Catherine. When Lydia, the youngest of five Bennet daughters, runs away, the family collaborates and shares concerns. Mr. Collins updates Mr. Bennet by letter: “[T]his false step in one daughter, will be injurious to the fortunes of all the others, for who, as lady Catherine herself *condescendingly* says, will connect themselves with such a family” (370; emphasis added). Another letter from Mr. Collins arrives when Lady Catherine wrongly believes Mr. Darcy and Elizabeth are engaged: “After mentioning the likelihood of this marriage to her ladyship last night, she immediately, with her usual *condescension*, expressed what she felt on the occasion...[and said] she would never give her consent to what she termed so disgraceful a match” (407; emphasis added). These examples especially show other sides of Lady Catherine, a side willing to deliver news, even unfavorable news, in ways that maintain respectability.

Closing remarks in *Pride and Prejudice*, in part, highlight Lady Catherine’s overall character, her ability to change and go beyond what is expected, and her ultimate classiness. The narrators says:

But at length, by Elizabeth’s persuasion, [Mr. Darcy] was prevailed on to overlook the offence, and seek a reconciliation; and, after a little farther resistance on the part of his aunt, her resentment gave way, either to her affection for him, or her curiosity to see how his wife conducted herself; and she *condescended* to wait on them. (421; emphasis added)

Throughout the novel but here especially readers—across time and place—should appreciate that Austen’s book does not use positive descriptors such as *violently* or *handsomely* when it comes to Lady Catherine’s interpersonal abilities. As ever, the specific word choices are important and were clearly selected with deliberate care. The text does not say “she waited on them with *violent* delight,” nor does it say “she waited on them *handsomely*.” Such parallel diction occurs elsewhere in the novel with other behaviors and other situations. But, *condescend* and its inflections are specifically necessary because of the hierarchical society represented—one where there is a kind of mandated, compulsory obedience to the prescribed mores—and provide information about Lady Catherine beyond what something akin to “she *handsomely* waited on them” could possibly convey. Austen’s inclusion of *condescend* and its variations is intentional.

Inflections of *condescend* appear only four additional times and all on special occasions in *Pride and Prejudice*. Once by Mr. Darcy in a brief conversation with Elizabeth’s oldest sister, once in Mr. Darcy’s letter to Elizabeth after his first proposal, once in a comment about Mr. Darcy by Elizabeth’s father after Elizabeth and Mr. Darcy are engaged, and once in a comment by Mr. Collins to Elizabeth (231, 319, 327, 415). The examples further speak to valued moments when a person of significant status eagerly or voluntarily interacts with those of lower standing, humbles themselves, or does something grand not required of them.

In conclusion, the two-century-separation from Austen’s era and our own only makes Virginia Woolf’s thoughts further resonate. Woolf writes, “[I]nstead of being urged as the last page is finished to start in search of something that contrasts and completes, we pause when we have read *Pride and Prejudice*” (4314). Austen’s story and language has endured and offers much to contemplate, even while words continue evolving, living and flapping their Woolfian wings (Woolf 3283). Because words have changing and often opposing definitions, careful study



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