

Crice's Maxims and implicature role in creation of humor in Oscar Wilde an ideal husband and importance of being Earnest

Dhuha Ismail Khalil¹ and Prof. Ali Abdullah Mahmood²

¹M.A. student, College of Education for Humanities, Diyala University, Iraq. E-mail:

dhuhaasmal0@gmail.com

²Professor, Department of English, College of Education for Humanities, Diyala University,

Iraq. E-mail: dralimah.75@gmail.com

Abstract

Humor is a socio-cultural phenomenon that varies from one society to another and from one culture to another. It is a laughable thing, whether it is a situation or a word. This thesis focuses on the creation of humor in two English plays (*An Ideal Husband and Important of Being Earnest*) from pragmatic perspective. Implicature and Paul Grice's Cooperative Principle (CP); maxim of Quantity, maxim of Quality, maxim of Relation, and maxim of Manner, are the framework of this study. In this way, it is possible that the hidden meaning is creating Humor. Basically, this thesis attempts to shed light on the pragmatic aspects of humor in these plays. Pragmatically, Concerning Grice's maxims, it is found that humorous instances which are introduced by the author of these plays tend to disobey at least one of these maxims. So, the finding shows that implicature and non-observance of maxims have main role in creation humor in these plays.

Keywords: Crice's Maxims, humor, Oscar Wilde

Introduction

To recall the investigation of the context of "*An Ideal Husband*" and "*The Importance of Being Earnest*", Oscar Wilde provides stock storylines of domestic life that, after various crises, would culminate in the re-affirmation of familiar themes: marriage, loyalty, sacrifice, undying love, forgiveness, devotion, political corruption and onward. His style is to mock, parody, pun and ironize these themes with its more decadent and dandified characters. Such style is difficult to be interpreted since it is full of literary devices, which can be irony, metaphor, parody, pun, sarcasm, satire or simile. In addition to this difficulty, the distinction of the linguistic factors as humor triggers is complex in Wilde's style, a mixture of witty epigrams and salient elements such as flouting and/or violation of Grice's Maxims. However, given its complexity, Wilde's humor is still a linguistic phenomenon which can be dealt with from the pragmatic perspective, namely, Grice's Maxims and Conversational Implicature. The distinction between humorous and non-humorous conversations in the two selected plays of Oscar Wilde is difficult due to the stimuli that make people laugh, and this can hardly be generalized or formalized. For instance, cognitive aspects as well as cultural knowledge are some of the multi-factorial variables that should be analyzed in order to understand humor's properties. Of course, these non-linguistic factors are beyond the scope

of this study. Therefore, what is left are the linguistic factors, namely, Grice's Maxims, among others, which have been undergone the pragmatic analysis and assessment.

The present study is an attempt to prove the following hypotheses:

1. Grice's Maxims and Conversational Implicature play a role in the creation of humor in Oscar Wilde's "*An Ideal Husband*" and "*The Importance of Being Earnest*".
2. Maxim of Quality is the most frequent maxim in creating humor in Oscar Wilde's two selected plays.
3. Maxim of Quantity is the least in the frequency distribution of maxims in creating humor in Oscar Wilde's two selected plays.

Pragmatics and Humor

In pragmatic field, humor is seen as a violation of Grice's Cooperative Principle. In most cases where a violation occurs, humor occurs. Raskin (1985: 16) He says that humor may be forming through an inactive communication process. In brief, Humor is a violation of principles of communication suggested by pragmatic principles. Attardo (1994: 14) says that noticeably high percentage of humorous conversations is established with the violation of one or more of Grice's maxims of Cooperative Principle. That is, speakers may violate the maxims of Cooperative Principle on purpose in the process of conversation in order to arouse the hearers' laughter.

2.6.1 Grice's Maxims and his Conversational Implicatures

Communication is an interactive process in which speakers cooperate with each other, in order to provide standard and correct information. Accordingly, Grice offers four principles to communicate effectively in light of these principles (Thomas, 1995: 63). These principles are flexible in that they may not be adhered to. Grice (1989: 27) put outline to these maxims:

A. Maxim of Quantity : "Make your contribution as informative as required , do not make your contribution more informative than is required".

In this maxim speakers should give the appropriate amount of information through speaking process.

B. Maxim of Quality: "Do not say what you believe to be false. Do not say that for which you lack adequate evidence".

Speakers should tell the truth through speaking.

C. Maxim of Relevance: "be relevant".

This maxim requires the speaker to be relevant to the topic of conversation.

D. Maxim of Manner: avoid obscurity of expression, ambiguity, be brief and orderly.

This maxim is related to "how what is said is to be said". It requires the speaker to be clear and orderly when conversing in order to avoid ambiguity and obscurity.

Grice's goal of these principles is the effective exchange of information rather than influencing the actions of the addressee (Surian et al, 1996: 58- 59).

2.6.2 Violation of Grice's Cooperative Principle

Black (2006: 23-24) explains that people do not always adhere to principles and, instead, always violate them in a number of ways: violating, Infringing, violating, Opting, and suspending.

2.6.2.1 Violation of Grice's Maxims

Grice describes the violation as "the unostentatious non-observance of a maxim" (Grice 1989: 30). In this case, the speaker "will be liable to mislead" (ibid.). The speaker intends to deceive the listener without allowing any the implicature of the speech, such as when the speaker is lying and trying to hide the truth.

Flouting Grice's Maxims

Grice introduced the term "Floating" which describes the process by which an implicature is created through exploiting maxims. The case in which A float occurs is when a speaker blatantly don't observe a maxim, not to deceive or mislead, but in order to induce the listener to discover intended meaning which is beyond the semantic level, with the deliberate intent to generate an implicature (Setiawan,2013:4).

Infringing Grice's Maxims

Infringing is one of the ways in which one or more maxims are not observed. Grice describes that speakers are clashed with two maxims in infringing process, that is, it is unable to fulfill the principle of quantity without disrespecting the principle of quality (Grice 1989:30). Thomas (1995: 74) defining Infringing as the process in which the speaker lacks the ability to express his intent. As the case when a speaker has incomplete knowledge or performance of a language, like a young child or foreign language learner.

Opting Out Grice's Maxims

Speakers opt out from the maxim when he is "Unwilling to cooperate in the way the maxim requires"(Grice, 1975:71). Moreover, Thomas (1995:74) said that the "example of opting out occurs frequently in public life, when the speaker cannot, perhaps for legal or ethical reason, reply in the way normally expected. The speaker usually wishes to avoid generating a false implicature or appearing uncooperative". Thomas also submitted that giving out the requested information could harm a third part.

Suspending Grice's Maxims

The last type of not observing the maxims, that differ and have rarely occurred than other the maxims , called "suspending". this a maxim is related to cultural and social norms.

Suspending occurs when something is not quite right or unacceptable words (like taboo words) are said. Therefore, cultural differences have an important role in this maxim. (Thomas, 1995:76-78).

Humor in Oscar Wilde's Plays

Oscar Wilde's comedies of manners are also known as "Society Plays". They are the late 19th -century manifestations of Menander's ancient Greek comedies and the Roman comedies of Plautus and Terrence (Dellamora, 1994: 121). Such type of plays became the dominant form of theatrical comedy. There are a number of direct links between Restoration comedies and Wilde's comedies of manners since both concern themselves with the aristocracy, convoluted plots, foppish characters, and they are generally satirical in nature (Beckson, 1997: 12). The following explanation best characterizes this type of comedy:

These plays explore a universe where all values are bound up with appearances, where honor is synonymous with reputation and truth identified with a glib tongue and a steady eye. The veil of conventions shields the action from anarchy and despair. By their success or failure at society's intricate play, characters separate into true wits or gulls. They learn to live with the precarious balance of forces which govern the way of their worlds (*The Routledge Dictionary of Literary Terms*, 2006: 136).

Between 1879 and 1894, Wilde wrote nine plays. The most famous plays on which his fame as a dramatist depends are four comedies – *Lady Windermere's Fan*, *A Woman of No Importance*, *An Ideal Husband* and *The Importance of Being Earnest*. These plays continue to attract readers and audience even a century after Wilde's death. A brief account of these plays is the following:

(1) *Lady Windermere's Fan* (1892)

It is a witty four-act satire on the relationships and gender double-standards of the upper-class Victorian society. (38 pages)

(2) *A Woman of No Importance* (1893)

It is a satiric play about hypocrisy and double standards of the Victorian upper classes. Wilde uses dark comedy in this play. (39 pages)

(3) *An Ideal Husband* (1895)

It is a witty social satire filled with poignant humor as well as romance, intrigue and scandal. It is a kind of criticism to the Victorian society. (54 pages)

(4) *The Importance of Being Earnest* (1895)

It is a classic romantic comedy about love, deception and mistaken identity. It is a whimsical satire of Victorian society. (38 pages)

Wilde uses humor in his plays as a mirror to reflect the inner sides of the human beings. The moral lessons sent by this playwright are covered by humor in his comedy plays. He also uses

witty dialogues on the tongues of his characters, and this is undoubtedly the great comedic fun that distinguishes his comedic plays and gives them special funny. The most famous plays which represent this style are: *An Ideal Husband* and *The Importance of Being Earnest* (<https://www.britannica.com/>). This is one of the reasons behind selecting these two plays as the topic of this thesis

A Pragmatic Analysis of Creation of Humor in Oscar Wilde's "An Ideal Husband" and "The Importance of Being Earnest"

An Ideal Husband

[**The Setting:** Act I. *The Octagon Room in Sir Robert Chiltern's House in Grosvenor Square / London. The room is brilliantly lighted and full of guests. At the top of the staircase stands LADY CHELTERN, a woman of grave Greek beauty, about twenty-seven years of age. She receives the guests as they come up. MRS. MARCHMONT and LADY BASILDON, two very pretty women, are seated together on a Louis Seize sofa. The time is evening.*]

Excerpt (1)

MRS. MARCHMONT. *I come here to be educated.*

LADY BASILDON. *Ah! I hate being educated!*

MRS. MARCHMONT. *So do I. It puts one almost on a level with the commercial classes, doesn't it? But dear Gertrude Chiltern is always telling me that I should have some serious purpose in life. So I come here to try to find one.*

LADY BASILDON. [*Looking round through her lorgnette.*] *I don't see anybody here to-night whom one could possibly call a serious purpose. The man who took me in to dinner talked to me about his wife the whole time.* (Wilde, 2021: 2).

Wilde begins his play with two dandies: Mrs. Olivia Basildon and her best friend Mrs. Marchmont (both are friends of Lady Chiltern). They set the tone with their clever banter. Wilde's theatrical notes say, "they are types of exquisite fragility" (Wilde, 2021:1). In this scene, Lady Basildon and her friend show their attitude towards the fashionable London parties to which they get bored. She says that they are "horribly tedious!"

In this dialogue, Mrs. Marchmont criticizes the Victorian society implicitly in that 'being educated', a person is from the upper class. Here, satire brings comic relief on the part of the audience, in particular and to the play, in general as well as criticism of Victorian society and its values, which Wilde dislikes much. Wilde mocks the arrogance and pretentiousness of the higher class. She also plays with words, a kind of pun. The word "one" has two meanings: the explicit meaning is "a serious purpose", and the implicit meaning is "a man". The use of this literary device reveals the character's cleverness in dealing with certain topics. It also suggests Wilde's own opinions towards the English society at that period of time. Here, Mrs. Marchmont flouts the Maxim of Manner (*be perspicuous: avoid ambiguity*) in order to achieve a literary effect (pun), and thus enhances Lady Basildon to look for the embedded

meaning, that is the implicature. Here, Lady Basildon and Mrs. Marchmont ironically sympathize with each other over their overly perfect husbands, which mocks the idea of a perfect marriage. Of course, Oscar Wilde creates a comedic tone by using this pun, and the result of such flouting is humorous effect on the part of the audience. One should acknowledge that there is also an implicature of satire behind this dialogue, making fun of the upper class. It reflects a deep social conflict among the Victorian social ranks.

Excerpt (2)

LORD CAVERSHAM. *Good evening, Lady Chiltern! Has my good-for-nothing young son been here?*

LADY CHILTERN. [*Smiling.*] *I don't think Lord Goring has arrived yet.*

MABEL CHILTERN. [*Coming up to Lord Caversham.*] *Why do you call Lord Goring good-for-nothing?*

LORD CAVERSHAM. *Because he leads such an idle life.*

MABEL CHILTERN. *How can you say such a thing? Why, he rides in the Row at ten o'clock in the morning, goes to the Opera three times a week, changes his clothes at least five times a day, and dines out every night of the season. You don't call that leading an idle life, do you? (Wilde, 2021: 2-3)*

This excerpt reflects other social aspects of Victorian society where Wilde criticizes the phenomenon of reprimanding children by their parents. Such criticism targets the idealism sought by this society. Lord Caversham wants his son to lead an ideal life instead of an idle one. An idea which results in violation of Maxim of Quality, i.e. no ideal life exists. In contrast, Mabel Chiltern sees Lord Goring as an ideal person due to the standards of Victorian society. Here, Mabel violates Maxims of Quantity and Relation in that she gives a lot of information about Lord Goring for the first, and such information is irrelevant and unnecessary for the second. However, the implicature behind Mabel's long description is shallowness of Victorian society (satire) which imposes its choices and restrictions on individuals. Of course, such trivial customs of a daily life of an individual of this society evokes humor on the part of the audience. In contrary, the implicature behind Lord Caversham's speech is sarcasm on the behavior of his son as an individual representative.

The Importance of Being Earnest

[**The Setting:** *Morning-room in ALGERNON's flat in Half Moon Street-London. The room is luxuriously and artistically furnished. The sound of a piano is heard in the adjoining room. LANE is arranging afternoon tea on the table, and after the music has ceased, ALGERNON enters. The time is afternoon.*]

Excerpt (1)

ALGERNON. *Did you hear what I was playing, Lane?*

LANE. *I did not think it is polite to listen, sir.*

ALGERNON. *I'm sorry for that, for your sake. I don't play accurately – anyone can play accurately – but I play with a wonderful expression. As far as the piano is concerned, sentiment is my forte. I keep science for Life.*

LANE. *Yes, sir.* (Wilde,2005: 5)

After announcing himself with a piano fanfare, Algernon makes his stage entrance and addresses his servant (Lane). Algernon incorporates his inaccurate playing into his public persona. He tries out his lines on Lane, who doesn't seem particularly impressed. Algernon serves as an archetype of the indolent young aristocrat, an indispensable character in a melodramatic play. In this excerpt, Lane violates the Maxim of Quantity in answering Algernon's question. Lane gives a more informative response. Instead of answering such question by saying "No", he explains the reason which prevents him from listening to Algernon's music. This reply is intentionally done by the servant to avoid embarrassment in front of his master, and such reply is cleverly chosen as a polite excuse, a kind of implicature. Moreover, this reply might be interpreted as a pun, in that Lane plays with the word "listen": the explicit meaning is 'to listen to Algernon's music which is clarified by the context of the utterance, and the intended meaning is 'to listen to what is said by his master' in general circumstances. Another pun is hidden in Algernon's justification of not playing the piano "accurately", in a talk with Lane. The pun occurs here in the word "forte". It stands both, for 'human strength' (implicature) and 'a loud playing' in the context of music. With this pun, Algernon wants to tell everyone, how great he is. He knows how to use words to compliment himself, without making it too obvious. In both cases, Lane and Algernon flout the Maxim of Quality when they play with words for the sake of achieving the implicatures behind their utterances. Naturally, this flouting clears the way for Wilde to use 'pun' to create humor, a tool he looks for to criticize the Victorian era.

Excerpt (2)

ALGERNON. *Oh! ...by the way, Lane, I see from your book that on Thursday night, when Lord Shoreman and Mr. Worthing were dining with me, eight bottles of champagne are entered as having been consumed.*

LANE. *Yes, sir; eight bottles and a pint.* (Wilde, 2005: 6)

Whenever the theme of social norms of politeness, sincerity and responsibility is dealt with by one of the characters of this play, the other character responds indifferently to the implicature behind the speaker's utterance. As a result, the hearer responds with an intention which either shifts the topic or contradicts the expectation of the speaker and that of the audience. In this context, Lane's response is irrelevant to Algernon's question. Algernon has the intention of accusing Lane of the missing of 'eight bottles of champagne'. Instead of denying, apologizing or being quiet, Lane asserts the accusation by giving more details to his master. Lane appears to be indifferent to the implicature intended by Algernon. His response is against the expectation of both Algernon and the audience. Lane intends to escape from responsibility by challenging his master's accusation. In this case, he violates the Maxim of

Relation which results in contradiction between what is said and what is meant. This arises humor on the part of the audience. It is also set by Wilde to criticize the Victorian society which classifies people due to social ranks.

Conclusions

It is worthy of stating that the hypothesis of this thesis is proved throughout pragmatic analysis of the whole humorous excerpts of the selected plays. Any specialist in linguistic research can find how the hypothetical spots have been dealt with in the various text analysis. However, the present study comes up with the following conclusions that reinforce the hypotheses in the thesis:

1. Based on the findings, the researcher finds that humor arises when the characters of these plays say the opposite of what they believe to be true to generate linguistic forms such as paradox, irony, metaphor, sarcasm, hyperbole and pun through non- observing of Grice's maxims. It worthy to show that to create humor the characters are ,in the selected plays, flouting and violating all types of maxims and there is conversational implicature behind these violating and flouting.

2. From the of the pragmatic perspective, the present study tries to evaluate how well the Gricean Maxims and conversational implicature has been effected in the humorous texts in the two plays. Based on CP, it is found out that the humor which is embedded in selected plays is created by flouting and the violation of Gricean maxims. It can be shown that the presence of a humorous text contradicts any of Grice's maxims (especially Quality and Quantity) . Thus, the characters deliberately disobey these maxims in order to create humor. It can be seen that non-observance occurs frequently by flouting of the maxim, since the speakers want to induce the listener to discover intended meaning which is beyond the semantic level, with the deliberate intent to generate an implicature.

3. Among all the Gricean maxims, The Maxim of Quality is most flouted among the other Maxims because the character tries to create humor through linguistic forms, in order to give implicatures behind the frank words. Also, it is violated by the characters when they are lying or having not adequate evidence.

4. During the plays, Wilde's style is revealed to be a silly comic style that relies on breaking Gricean maxims and including an implicature of something serious.

5. Relying on the Excerpts, it can be seen that humor is the result of a flouting and violation of more than one maxim, such as Quality and Relation.

6. Based on the findings, The conversational implicature is mainly formed when Gricean maxims are flouting.

7. In these selected plays, the researcher concluded that the writer uses humor, which is usually associated with moral and social meanings, and not just a joke.

References

1. Attardo, Salvatore. 1994. "Violation in conversational maxims and cooperation: The case of jokes."
2. Attardo, Salvatore/Victor Raskin, Script Theory Revisited: Joke Similarity and Joke Representation Model, HUMOR – International Journal of Humor Research 4:3/4 (1991), 293 – 347
3. Beckson, Karl. (Ed.) (1997). *The Critical Heritage*. London: Routledge.
4. Black, E. 2006. *Pragmatics Stylistics*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press Ltd.
5. Dellamora, Richard. (1994). "Oscar Wilde, Social Purity and An Ideal Husband." In Kaplan, H. (Ed.), *Modern Drama*, 37.1, pp. 120-136 New York: University of Ontario,.
6. Grice, H.P. 1975. —Logic and conversation. In Cole, et al.
7. Grice, Paul. (1989). *Studies in the way of words*. Harvard: Harvard University Press.
8. Raskin, V. (1985). *Semantic mechanisms of humor* (Vol. 24, Synthese language library). Dordrecht: Reidel.
9. Setiawan, S.H. 2013. *An Analysis Of Flouting Maxim In The Movie The Dark Knight Rise Based On Grice's Cooperative Principle*. Central Java: Muhammadiyah University of Purworejo, Teacher Training And Educational Sciences Department.
10. Surian, Luca, Simon Baron-Cohen and Heather Van der Lely. "Are Children with Autism Deaf to Gricean Maxims?" *Cognitive neuropsychiatry*. Psychology Press(UK): Taylor & Francis Ltd. 1(1), (1996): 55-71.
11. Thomas, Jenny. (1995). *Meaning Interaction: An Introduction to Pragmatic*. Harlow: Pearson Education. London: Longman.