



University of Peshawar

Available on Gale & affiliated international databases



Journal of
**Humanities &
Social Sciences**

JHSS XXI, No. 1, 2013 (April)

**Antic Disposition:
Hamlet in the Light of Cooperative Principle**

Rubina Rahman, Sameera Abbas

Department of English & Applied Linguistics, University of Peshawar, Pakistan

Abstract

This paper is an attempt to analyse an extract from Shakespeare's "Hamlet" in terms of Grice's cooperative principle. The extract is selected from Act II/ii, ll.170-219, which consists of a conversation between Hamlet and Polonius. Discourse analysis is the analysis of language in use. A discourse analyst looks at language in its context and describes it in terms of its purpose and functions in human affairs. In other words the main focus of a discourse analyst is 'context, text and function' (Cutting, 2002:2). The cooperative principle enables the speaker and the listener to convey and interpret the implications of an apparently metaphorical utterance (Grice, 1975). Cutting (2002: 34-5) has discussed the four maxims of the cooperative principle as proposed by Grice (1975), which might be observed or flouted by participants according to their purpose. By flouting a maxim, the speaker conveys more than what is said through 'implicature'. The selected extract from Hamlet has been analysed using the principles of cooperation and implicature. Hamlet's speech in the selected extract can be treated as an explicit example of the violation of the four maxims of the cooperative principle. It is concluded that Hamlet accomplishes his purpose of putting on an "antic disposition" by flouting the four maxims of the cooperative principle.

Keywords: Grice's maxims, cooperative principle, implicature, Hamlet

Introduction

Discourse analysis is the analysis of language in use. A discourse analyst looks at language in its context and describes it in terms of its purpose and functions in human affairs. Discourse analysis has become the focus of conversation analysts. They analyse a conversational text whether written or verbal within the context and evaluate its functional value. According to Cutting the main focus of a discourse analyst is 'context, text and function' (2002:2).

In his explanation of the term 'context', Cutting, referring to Peccei (1999) and Yule (1996) believes that language in context implies:

... analyzing parts of meanings that can be explained by knowledge of the physical and social world and the socio-psychological factors influencing communication as well as the knowledge of the time and place in which the words are uttered or written. (2002:2).

The meaning of an utterance is dependent on the assumed shared knowledge of the context of the speaker and the listener. The analysis of text includes the study of coherence in utterances. Coherence is the quality that keeps a text unified and meaningful. This quality shows the relation that holds between words in long stretches of sentences in a text, referring backwards and forwards to other words in the texts (Cutting, 2002:2).

Finally, analysing function entails the investigation of the purpose or the goal behind an utterance. The purpose may be directly conveyed or it may be implied. The speech act theory deals with this particularly. It points out what utterances are supposed to do; promise, command, question or request. Indirect speech acts indicate the intention in an implied manner (Cutting, 2002:2).

The 'text' of a discourse can be analysed using H. P. Grice's Cooperative Principle. It was first proposed by Grice in 1975 in his famous paper 'Logic and Conversation'. Traugott and Pratt have explained the cooperative principle in the following words:

Indirect communication works only by virtue of a basic, shared assumption that when people speak and listen to each other, they normally do have the intention of accomplishing purposeful and effective communication in the context. This assumption is called the 'Cooperative Principle'... being a cooperative speaker means speaking with a viable communicative purpose vis-a-vis the hearer in the context, and speaking

in such a way that this purpose is recognizable to the hearer. Being a cooperative hearer means trusting that the speaker has a reasonable purpose in speaking, and doing the necessary work to discern that purpose. (1980:237)

In daily conversation, the cooperative principle plays a crucial role. Without it, effective communication would not be possible, because language is versatile and metaphorical. Grice states the cooperative principle as ‘Make your conversational contribution such as is required, at the stage at which it occurs, by the accepted purpose or the direction of the talk exchange in which you are engaged’ (1975:45). From this principle, he has drawn four maxims that have become the most potent tools for conversation analysis. These are summarized as:

The maxim of quantity: The speakers should be as informative as is required, that they should give neither too little nor too much information.

The maxim of quality: The speakers are expected to be sincere, to be saying something that he/she believes corresponds to reality.

The maxim of relation: The speakers are assumed to be saying something that is relevant to what he/she has said before.

The maxim of manner: The speaker needs to be brief and orderly, and avoid obscurity and ambiguity. (Cutting, 2002: 34-5)

Speakers may observe or flout the maxims according to their purpose. In a situation in which a speaker wants to be clearly understood by the hearer, he/she will strictly observe the maxims of the cooperative principle. His/her utterances will be truthful and literal rather than metaphorical, he/she will give the exact amount of information needed, he/she will be to the point and not ramble and his/her utterances will be exact, clear and unambiguous. On the other hand in daily conversation, people often do not directly voice what they actually mean to say. Language is often used in an indirect manner mostly for social or cultural reasons. The indirect speech is achieved by avoiding the four maxims of the cooperative principle and has been termed as implicature by Grice (1975). ‘Implicature is a technical term in the pragmatics coined by H. P. Grice (1975), which refers to what is *suggested* in an utterance, even though neither expressed nor *strictly implied* (that is, entailed) by the utterance’ (Blackburn, 1996: 189). According to Elizabeth Black (2006: 24) a speaker’s failure in observing the cooperative principle in his speech might take a number of forms. She has pointed out four different forms of such a failure:

Opting out: Making clear that the speaker is aware of the maxim, but is prevented for some reason from observing it.

Violating a maxim: often with an intention to mislead, this is often a quiet act, also known as lying.

A **clash** arises when a speaker cannot be fully cooperative. For instance, to fulfil one maxim (say, of quantity) might require the speaker to break another (of quality)...

Flouting occurs when the speaker makes it clear to the hearer that he/she is aware of the cooperative principle and the maxims, so that the audience is led to consider why the principle or the maxim was broken.

According to Thomas 'A flout occurs when a speaker blatantly fails to observe a maxim...there is a deliberate intention of generating an implicature' (1995:88). When speakers violate the maxims in their speech, they expect the hearer to discern the implied meaning. Speakers of a language may flout any of the above-mentioned maxims according to their purpose. In normal conversation speakers adhere to these maxims to a greater extent as Cooper observes 'We rarely fail to observe the maxims casually, for no reason, but we do fail to observe them intentionally for a variety of reasons' (1998:57). By flouting a maxim and indulging in implicature, the speaker conveys more than what is said.

Flouting the maxim of quantity would mean giving too little or too much information for a reasonable purpose and leaving the inference to the hearer. Flouting the maxim of quality would imply a metaphorical use of language, an exaggerated expression of feelings (hyperbole), irony, or banter. Irony and banter together form a pair. 'While irony is an apparently friendly way of being offensive, the type of verbal behavior known as "banter" is an offensive way of being friendly...' (Cutting, 2002:38).

The maxim of relation is flouted when the speaker does not make the connection between his words and the context clear in a verbal manner. The speaker assumes or expects the hearer to understand what the utterance did not say through 'implicature'.

A speaker may flout the maxim of manner if he wants to exclude a third party from the conversation or if he wants to confuse the hearer by being obscure. The cooperative principle can be used to analyse a discourse on the level of character-to-character interaction or it may be used to analyse the processing of the whole text, and may help in understanding the relationship between narrator and

characters. The qualitative difference between flouting and other cases of failure in the observance of maxims is that it does not reduce the quality of communication (Alvaro, 2011:36).

This paper focuses on a character-to-character interaction of the selected text. However, the implicature becomes obvious because of the extra knowledge that the audience holds and Polonius lacks.

Hamlet: An analysis through implicature

In this paper, Hamlet's conversation with Polonius is analysed from the perspective of last of the above-mentioned failures i.e. the "flouting" of the maxims. The paper argues that Hamlet's antic disposition is a proof that he flouts the maxims not because he is not aware of them but because he wants to befool Polonius and that it is a conscious act on his part. The text analysed is lines 170-219 in Scene II of Act II in the play Hamlet by Shakespeare. In these lines Polonius is trying to cross-examine Hamlet to ascertain his madness.

The extract from the text of 'Hamlet' is analysed, from point of view of implicature and the violation of the maxims. Hamlet's speech in the selected extract can be treated as an explicit example of the violation of the four maxims of the cooperative principle. Sometimes he flouts one maxim which evokes the violation of another maxim thus making the implicit meaning of the utterance even more complicated in its inference. Hamlet seems to be speaking in implicit terms for his own purpose and Polonius does not seem to discern his intentions, mainly because he is interpreting Hamlet's utterances for their literal meanings. Consider lines 173-175:

Pol. Do you know me, my lord?

Ham. Excellent well, you are a fishmonger.

Pol. Not I, my lord.

The maxim of quality proposes that speakers should say what they believe corresponds to the reality (Cutting: 2002: 34). Hamlet in his reply to Polonius's query, flouts this maxim. Instead of giving the expected answer he gives an unexpected reply, which on the surface seems to be irrelevant and senseless. His use of the word 'fishmonger' is metaphorical rather than literal. But Polonius fails to discern the implicature.

Apparently Hamlet intends to tell him that he is an infuriatingly inquisitive who interferes in other people's lives. Polonius an outsider to Hamlet's immediate family is irritating to Hamlet in the sense that he acts as the King's and the Queen's counsellor in their personal problems. It could be that Hamlet is referring to him as a panderer as he had overheard Polonius saying to the King before Hamlet came in:

“at such a time I'll lose my daughter to him”. (163)

If any of these are Hamlet's intentions, he is clearly flouting the maxim of quality. He is indicating Polonius's character in metaphorical terms rather than identifying him in terms of his name, as Polonius seems to expect.

When Polonius claims to be an honest person Hamlet's violates the maxim of manner in his reply

“Ay, sir. To be honest, as this world goes, is to be one man picked out of ten thousand”. (178)

He is obscure as to what he really intends to say. Instead of telling Polonius plainly that he does not think of him as an honest person, Hamlet replies that to be honest is very rare, to which Polonius foolishly agrees. It can be observed that Hamlet's purpose of ridiculing Polonius without being overtly offensive is fully accomplished with the help of violation of the maxims of the cooperative principle. The maxim of manner is flouted again in Line 192-194 when Hamlet tells Polonius about the 'matter' in the book that he is reading. He is deliberately obscure and delightfully misleads Polonius in his pomposity. Consider the passage from line 196 to 204:

Ham: Slanders, sir. For the satirical rogue says here that old men have grey beards, that their faces are wrinkled, their eyes purging thick amber and plum-tree gum, and that they have a plentiful lack of wit, together with most weak hams- all which, sir, though I most powerfully and potently believe, yet I hold it not honesty to have it thus set down. For yourself, sir, shall grow old as I am- if like a crab you could grow backward. (196-204)

When he says he cannot agree with the author's view, of old people being ugly and lacking wit, looking at Polonius, but only if Polonius could go back like a crab, it is obvious that Polonius could not go back in time. In indirect terms, he calls Polonius old and ugly and a fool without him being aware of it. By flouting the

maxim of manner he says it in such an obscure style that Polonius does not get a hint of what Hamlet actually meant.

Hamlet's next utterance is a good example of the flouting of the maxim of relation. The maxim of relation says that "...speakers are assumed to be saying something that is relevant to what has been said before" (Cutting, 2002: 35). Polonius is sure that Hamlet is mad because Hamlet's speech seems random, scattered, and irrelevant to him. On the surface, the utterances of Hamlet are unconnected. His conversation seems incoherent and disjointed. Polonius is not able to detect the implicit connection between Hamlet's utterances and the context. Hamlet's speech in the following exchange

Pol: That's very true, my lord.

Ham: "For if the sun breed maggots in a dead dog, being a god kissing carrion. Have you a daughter?" (180-2)

seems irrelevant and disjointed on the surface. Polonius fails to notice the connection between this utterance and the one uttered earlier in the same scene in which Hamlet calls Polonius a 'fish-monger' (Line174). Instead, he interprets it in connection with Hamlet's utterance immediately before it and thus fails to understand the implicit meaning in it.

Hamlet refers to the grave and death:

Pol: Will you walk out of the air, my lord?

Ham: into my grave? (207)

And again in lines 216-17:

Ham: you cannot, sir, take from me anything that I will not more willingly part from withal-except my life, except my life, except my life.

This can be analysed in terms of the violation of the maxim of relation. He may be implicitly referring to the danger he is in with reference to his uncle. However, since his utterances do not make the connection clear, Polonius takes his speech for a madman's speech and inversely appears a fool to Hamlet.

Hamlet indirectly makes Polonius seem more ridiculous by being literal in interpreting Polonius's speech. Consider lines 191-195:

Pol: . . . what do you read, my lord?

Ham: Words, words, words.

Pol: What is the matter, my lord?

Ham: Between who?

Pol: I mean the matter that you read, my lord.

By being literal in interpreting Polonius's speech Hamlet seems to be acting as an uncooperative hearer; 'word, words, words'; Hamlet flouts the maxim of quantity here along with the maxim of manner. He is being a miser with words. Literally Hamlet is reading words in a book, but he is expected to answer in terms of the message carried in the book, to which he does not comply. It appears that his intentions are to emphasize the emptiness of words if they are not understood properly. But rather than saying it in an elaborate and more comprehensive manner he only repeats a single word 'words'. It could have been a hint for Polonius that Hamlet's conversation seems erratic to him because he is not able to understand them fully in terms of their context and metaphorical implications.

The complexity in Hamlet's speech is strengthened because most often when he flouts one maxim another maxim is flouted by default. It can be observed in his utterance where he declares Polonius a "fish monger" (lines 173-4):

Pol: Do you know me, sir?

Ham: Excellent well. You are a fishmonger.

Here, by flouting the maxim of quality the violation of the maxim of quantity is also evoked.

Hamlet not only flouts the maxim of quality here by being insincere in his reply, he also flouts the maxim of quantity by default. He does not give a full account of the characteristic traits of Polonius, instead he points to them in a single phrase, 'a fish-monger'. He says too little to be understood directly. It can be noticed that Polonius does not get offended at all. Rather than considering the characteristic features of a fish-monger he simply considers the profession and thus fails to understand the implicature. If he had been a cooperative listener, he would have done the necessary work of putting Hamlet's utterances in a larger context and would have tried to recognize the reason behind Hamlet's speech.

Similarly he flouts the maxim of quality by default when he flouts the maxim of relation in the exchange discussed earlier about “the sun breeding maggots” in a “dead dog” (lines:181-2) He is being metaphorical rather than literal. But Polonius does not go deep beyond the surface meaning of his words. He does not bother himself with trying to figure out what Hamlet means by ‘the sun’ or ‘a dead dog’ or by ‘maggots’ (line: 181). Just as he does not understand the warning implicit in the utterance that follows:

Ham: Let her not walk i'th' sun. Conception is a blessing, but as your daughter may conceive – friend, look to't. (184-5)

He is literal to an extent that he thinks Hamlet is harping on his daughter, just because she is in his words when actually Hamlet is focusing on the fact that Polonius is a “fish-monger” to him.

Conclusion

Grice's maxims and the concept of implicature have been used as tool to understand a dramatic text. These have proved to be potent mechanism in understanding how the element of drama is created in the text. They have also helped to precisely focus on the technique through which inferences are understood or otherwise in the text to create the dramatic effect. The interpretations of the text differ for the audience and Polonius due to the added knowledge of the context and Hamlet's intention that the former possess and later lack. The differences in the inferences drawn create the dynamics of the drama as we know it.

The examination of the interplay between the literal and the implied sentence meaning reveal that by flouting the four maxims of the cooperative principle, Hamlet's purpose of putting on an “antic disposition” is fully accomplished. He succeeds in deceiving Polonius and establishing the fact that he is in actual reality turned mad by making his language seemingly obscure, scattered, deviant, and scarce in words. If had been literal, clear and appropriately elaborate in conveying the same intentions, his words would have created a lot of annoyance and the threads of the plot would have run contrary to the dramatist's intention. Polonius would have taken his words as a serious offense, Claudius would have found out Hamlet's views about the matrimony and about the murder of Hamlet's father and Ophelia might have been disillusioned with the idea of love altogether. The whole play might have ended differently.

References

- Alvaro, N.R. (2011). *The Role of Conversational Maxims, Implicature and Presupposition in the Creation of Humour: An Analysis of Woody Allen's Anything Else*. Unpublished Master's Dissertation, Department of English Philology, UCM, 15.08.2013.
- Blackburn, Simon (1996). *The Oxford Dictionary of Philosophy*. Oxford. OUP
- Black, Elizabeth (2006). *Pragmatic Stylistics*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press.
- Cooper, M. M. (1998). Implicature, Convention and *The Taming of the Shrew*. In J. Culpeper, M. Short, & Verdonk, P. (eds.) *Exploring the Language of Drama*. Interface Series, London: Routledge.
- Cutting, Joan (2002). *Pragmatics and Discourse*. London: Routledge.
- Grice, H.P. (1975). "Logic and conversation." In P. Cole and J. Morgan (eds.) *Pragmatics (syntax and semantics)*, 9, New York: Academic Press
- Shakespeare, W. (1982). *Hamlet*. Italy: Methuen & Co. Ltd.
- Stilwell, P. J. (1999). *Pragmatics*. London: Routledge.
- Thomas, J. (1995). *Meaning in Interaction: An Introduction to Pragmatics*. London & New York: Longman.
- Traugott, E.C. & Pratt, M.L. (1980). *Linguistics for Students of Literature*. New York: Hartcourt College.
- Yule, George (1996). *Pragmatics*. Oxford: OUP.