

DISCOURSE AND PRAGMATICS IN DORIS LESSING'S 'A WOMAN ON A ROOF': A STUDY OF CONVERSATIONAL IMPLICATURES

Wang Liang and Zhang Wei

School of Foreign Languages, Southeast University, Nanjing, China

Abstract:

This study employs Paul Grice's Theory of Conversational Implicatures to conduct a pragmatic analysis of character dialogues in Doris Lessing's short story, "A Woman on a Roof." By examining the implicit meanings conveyed when characters breach communicative norms, this research uncovers how these cues contribute to character development and narrative in the story, shedding light on Lessing's literary objectives. The story depicts a woman sunbathing on a rooftop while three repairmen vie for her attention, revealing attitudes shaped by desire, frustration, and societal gender expectations. While existing scholarship has explored themes of voyeurism, gender dynamics, and female empowerment, this linguistic approach offers fresh insights into the narrative.

Keywords: Conversational Implicatures, Pragmatic Analysis, Doris Lessing, Character Dialogue
Gender Roles

Introduction

Conversation plays a fundamental role in conveying thoughts, sharing information, and establishing connections with others. However, beyond the explicit information exchanged, dialogue often contains rich implied meanings that enrich our understanding of the expected information. Paul Grice's Theory of Conversational Implicatures^[1] provides a framework to analyze these implicit meanings conveyed when conversational norms are breached. This study applies Grice's theory to conduct a pragmatic analysis of character dialogues in Doris Lessing's short story *A Woman on a Roof*^[2]. By examining the implicit information revealed when characters violate communicative maxims, this research illuminates how these cues shape the characters and narrative of the story, providing insight into Lessing's literary objectives.

A Woman on the Roof depicts a woman sunbathing in a bikini while three repairmen on a nearby rooftop attempt to gain her attention. Their reactions reveal attitudes shaped by desire, frustration, and societal expectations regarding gender roles. Previous scholarship explores themes of voyeurism, gender dynamics, and female empowerment through literary and feminist frameworks^{[3][4][5][6][7][8]}. However, few studies adopt a linguistic approach. This research enriches existing analyses by utilizing Grice's framework to uncover the pragmatic meanings within character dialogues.

We analyze five pivotal conversations involving the female protagonist and three male characters. By identifying flouted maxims and resultant implicatures, we reveal the characters' implied attitudes, motivations, and power dynamics. Our analysis elucidates how Lessing employs conversational implicatures to develop nuanced characters and expound upon complex themes regarding gender and sexuality. This research demonstrates the value of pragmatic analysis in elucidating the artistry and meaning of literary texts.

1. Theory of Conversational Implicatures

In 1967, the philosopher Paul Grice^[1] put forward the theory of Conversational Implicatures, which laid a theoretical foundation for modern pragmatics research. The original intention of the theory is to distinguish the semantic logic followed by both sides of the dialogue in natural language dialogue from the rigorous reasoning logic followed in formal mathematical logic, and to seek a rigorous theoretical framework to analyze the underlying pragmatic logic in natural language dialogue.

The basic assumption of this theory is the “Principle of Cooperation”, which means that in the process of verbal communication, both parties in the dialogue will voluntarily contribute relevant information in a cooperative manner at each stage of communication, thereby successfully achieving the expected communicative purpose of both parties. Based on the principle of cooperation, Grice proposed that in the process of verbal communication, both sides of the conversation should follow four specific conversational guidelines:

- (a) Maxim of quantity: what is said should provide the appropriate amount of information needed for the current purpose of the conversation; The amount of information provided should not be too much to exceed the required information, nor should it be too little to meet the current purpose of communication.
- (b) Maximum of quality: The information provided is true; false information is not allowed, nor is the information without sufficient evidence allowed.
- (c) Maximum of relevance/relationship: The information provided should be closely related to current communication; anything irrelevant is prohibited.
- (d) Maxim of Manner: The information provided should be expressed in an appropriate manner; avoid obscure or ambiguous expressions; be concise and to the point orderly.

In the process of communication, both parties in the conversation usually unconsciously follow these four communication guidelines. For example, in the following conversation, we can quickly identify the inappropriateness of the conversation. During the conversation, both parties completely ignore what the other party is saying and the content they reply to is irrelevant. In other words, speakers have not followed the principle of cooperation and have violated the principle of association. This kind of dialogue cannot be encountered in daily life because daily conversations follow the principle of cooperation.

(1)A: What a nice day today!

B: Austin is the capital of Texas.

A: The soup is too salty.

B: He went home after work.

However, Grice pointed out that in actual communication activities, it is a common phenomenon for interlocutors to violate the above communication norms. This kind of speech act that violates the communication rules is often deliberately done by the speaker, in order to express some meaning that cannot or is not suitable for being directly expressed. The speaker hides this semantic meaning in their speech and implies it in a way that violates communication norms. For example, in the following conversation, after learning that B had eaten all of his biscuits, A's answer “you are so considerate” clearly need to be understood as irony in this context, that is, A believes that B is not considerate enough. Here, A speaks the opposite, thus violating the principle of quality.

(2)A: Where were the cookies I bought?

B: I ate all in the afternoon.

A: You are so considerate.

The implicit semantics indirectly expressed through violating communication rules are called “conversational implicature”. In communication scenarios, when the speaker violates communication rules to imply a certain conversational meaning, the listener will infer backwards to understand the conversational meaning implied by the speaker due to the violation of communication rules. In the above conversation (2), B can determine that “you are so considerate” did not express A’s true thoughts, thus inferring that A thinks he is not considerate enough.

It is worth noting that in Grice’s theory, both sides in communication always assume that they adhere to the principle of cooperation throughout the entire communication process. Even when a certain communication criterion is violated, both parties are able to convey and understand the conversational meaning because they hold the assumption that each other adheres to the principle of cooperation. In other words, in communication scenarios, when communication guidelines are violated, it can be inferred that the speaker is not expressing literal meaning, but rather expressing implicit conversational meaning because the listener knows that they have defaulted to the cooperative principle; if there is no implicit conversational meaning but only a pure violation of communication norms, then this would be a violation of the cooperative principle, making current information exchange meaningless, as shown in dialogue (1). Similarly, speakers are aware of the principle of tacit cooperation between each other in order to indirectly express conversational implicature by violating communication norms, and believe that the listener can infer the implied conversational implicature.

3. A Gricean Analysis of Conversations in A Woman on a Roof

Grice’s theory of conversational implicatures suggests that in a conversation, speakers have certain expectations and obligations to follow four maxims: the maxim of quantity, quality, relevance, and manner. Flouting any of these maxims may lead to implicatures, which are inferences drawn from the violation of these maxims. This section provides an original analysis of five conversations in the novel A Woman on a Roof using the theory of Conversational Implicatures followed by a discussion of the findings.

3.1 Analysis of Selected Conversations

Dialogue 1

“She’s stark naked,” said Stanley, sounding annoyed.

Harry, the oldest, a man of about forty-five, said: “Looks like it.”

Young Tom, seventeen, said nothing, but he was excited and grinning.

Stanley said: “Someone’ll report her if she doesn’t watch out.”

“She thinks no one can see,” said Tom, craning his head all ways to see more.

This conversation occurred when the three workers, Harry, Stanley, and Tom, first saw the “woman” on the roof who was sunbathing. The three of them had been struggling with the hot weather and squeezed into the shade cast by the chimney. When they noticed the woman, her appearance instantly caught their attention, and they became “annoyed”, “excited” and “grinning”.

In this conversation, Stanley flouted the maxim of manner by sounding annoyed when he said “She’s stark naked.” By not being straightforward in his communication and using a tone of annoyance, Stanley implicated that he disapproved of the situation. This suggests that Stanley might be uncomfortable or ashamed of the situation.

Harry flouted the maxim of quality by saying “Looks like it” instead of confirming or denying Stanley’s statement. By not providing a clear answer, Harry implicated that he was not certain of what he saw or was withholding information. This suggests that Harry might be unsure or skeptical about the situation.

Young Tom did not explicitly flout any of the maxims, but his behavior suggests that he is excited and curious about the situation. By craning his head to see more, Tom implies that he is interested in looking at the woman on the roof.

Dialogue 2

They clambered back to him and he said to Stanley: "What about your missus?" Stanley was newly married, about three months.

Stanley said, jeering: "What about my missus?"—preserving his independence.

Tom said nothing, but his mind was full of the nearly naked woman.

After meeting the sexy lady, Stanley and Tom kept thinking about her and longed to see her longer. After Harry went to get a blanket to shade the sun, he found that newly married Stanley was still attracted to the woman. He asked him, "What about your missus?" But Stanley answered Harry in his original words.

In this conversation, both Stanley and Tom flouted a maxim. Note that in this situation, the topic between Tom and Stanley had been the naked woman, however, Tom suddenly started to talk about Stanley's missus, which was not relevant for the current situation. Thus Tom flouted the maxim of relevance since the maxim of relevance requires that speakers only say things that are pertinent to the ongoing conversation. By talking about Stanley's missus, Tom was implicating that Stanley should not get attracted to the naked woman.

When Stanley responded to the question about his missus with a jeering and sarcastic tone, rather than providing a straightforward answer, he flouted the maxim of manner which requires that speaker expresses himself clearly and avoids being ambiguous or obscure. This implies that he might not want to talk about his missus, or that there might be something awkward or uncomfortable about the topic.

At the end of the dialogue, Tom said nothing about the newly introduced topic of Stanley's missus but had his mind full of the nearly naked woman. This is also a case of flouting the maxim of relevance. This flouting suggests that Tom was more interested in the woman on the roof than in the topic of conversation (i.e., Stanley's missus).

Dialogue 3

"Bitch," said Stanley.

"She should ask us over," said Tom, snickering.

Harry recovered himself and reminded Stanley: "If she's married, her old man wouldn't like that."

"Christ," said Stanley virtuously, "if my wife lay about like that, for everyone to see, I'd soon stop her."

Harry said, smiling: "How do you know, perhaps she's sunning herself at this very moment?"

"Not a chance, not on our roof," The safety of his wife put Stanley into a good humor, and they went to work.

This dialogue happened the next day on the same roof. When the woman appeared, she had turned "brown" from "scarlet-and-white", naked except for her bikini pants, bathed in the sunlight. Seeing this scene and whistled, the three of them "let out whistles and yells" in order to gain the woman's attention; however, the woman remained indifferent. Stanley became so angry and embarrassed that he insulted her as a "Bitch"; Tom's fanatical admiration made him think that "She should ask us over"; while Harry, on the other hand, proposed the perspective of a woman's husband, which in turn sparked Stanley's statement to his wife that it was "Not a chance, not on our roof".

In this conversation, first of all, Stanley flouted the maxim of manner when he commented on the woman by saying "Bitch", which is a derogatory language. By saying so, Stanley was expressing his disapproval or frustration with the woman on the roof. The implicature drawn from this flouting is that Stanley has a negative attitude towards women who behave in a way that he considers inappropriate or scandalous.

Tom flouted the maxim of relevance by saying, “She should ask us over,” while snickering, since this response had nothing to do with Stanley’s previous comment “Bitch”. This response suggests that Tom found humor in the situation and implies that he saw the woman’s behavior as an invitation or an opportunity for something more intimate or enjoyable. An implicature we may draw from this flouting is that Tom had a disrespectful or objectifying view of women.

Harry flouted the maxim of relevance when he counters Stanley’s comment by saying, “If she’s married, her old man wouldn’t like that.” since this response is not directly related to Stanley’s comment of the woman. This response shows that Harry was more concerned about the potential consequences for the woman and her relationship rather than focusing on his own personal desires or judgments. The implicature drawn from this flouting is that Harry held a more empathetic or considerate attitude towards the woman’s situation.

By saying “Christ, if my wife lay about like that, for everyone to see, I’d soon stop her.”, Stanley was expressing a strong sense of possessiveness or control over his wife and disapproving of any behavior that could be seen as inappropriate or attention-seeking. Admittedly, it is not quite obvious which maxim was flouted in this utterance. But I think it is reasonable to say that Stanley flouted the maxim of manner since he was using his wife as an example to talk about his opinions of women, which was somewhat unusual and inappropriate in this situation. The implicature drawn from this flouting is that Stanley held traditional, conservative views on women’s behavior and expected them to conform to societal norms.

Harry flouted the maxim of relevance when he responded to Stanley by saying, “How do you know, perhaps she’s sunning herself at this very moment?” This response challenged Stanley’s assumption about his wife’s behavior, showing that Harry was teasing Stanley. The implicature drawn from this flouting is that Harry took a more lighthearted or playful approach to the situation.

Stanley’s final response flouted the maxim of manner. Faced with Harry’s teasing and questioning, Stanley used ellipses to answer “Not a chance, not on our roof,” and the complete sentence should be “My wife could never bask in the sun on the roof like that woman on our roof.” This flouting of the maxim implied Stanley’s absolute control over his wife.

Dialogue 4

“I’ve got a good mind to report her to the police,” said Stanley, and Harry said: “What’s eating you? What harm’s she doing?”

“I tell you, if she was my wife!”

“But she isn’t, is she?” Tom knew that Harry, like himself, was uneasy at Stanley’s reaction. He was normally a sharp young man, quick at his work, making a lot of jokes, good company.

“Perhaps it will be cooler tomorrow,” said Harry.

As time passed, the sexy lady on the roof continued to sunbathe as usual, ignoring the provocations of the three repairmen. Older Harry was already experienced enough to see the relationship between men and women clearly; Young Tom became increasingly obsessed with that beauty. However, newlymarried Stanley became even more irritable towards her indifference. Therefore, when Stanley said “report her to the police” to express his dissatisfaction, Harry chose to say a fair word: “What harm’s she doing”; Tom also leaned towards his admirer —the “woman”.

In this conversation, Harry flouted the maxim of manner. When Stanley was so agitated that he wanted to report the woman to the police, Harry used a rhetorical question to reply, “What’s eating you? What harm’s she doing?” What

is literally expressed by this rhetorical question is that Harry did not understand why Stanley was so bothered by the woman's presence and wanted more information about the potential harm caused by her actions. However, what the rhetorical question really conveys is, "She didn't do anything wrong, you don't have to be upset." This obscure expression thus has such an implicature that Harry was skeptical or did not see any immediate negative consequences arising from the woman being on the roof.

At the end of the dialogue, Harry flouted the maxim of relevance by attempting to divert the conversation to a different topic, saying, "Perhaps it will be cooler tomorrow." This flouting implies that Harry wanted to shift the focus away from the woman on the roof and engage in a more casual, lighthearted discussion. The implicature drawn from this flouting is that Harry was trying to ease the tension or discomfort caused by Stanley's intense reaction.

Dialogue 5

"What do you want?" she asked.

"I... I came to... make your acquaintance," he stammered, grinning, pleading with her.

They looked at each other, the slight, scarlet-faced excited boy, and the serious, nearly naked woman. Then, without a word, she lay down on her brown blanket, ignoring him.

"You like the sun, do you?" he enquired of her glistening back.

Not a word.

At the end of the story, Tom, who had always admired the woman, finally mustered the courage to come to her side and express his feelings. He "stood grinning, foolish, claiming the tenderness he expected from her." But the woman "stared at him in silence."

In this conversation, the woman flouted the maxim of quantity. She first responded to Tom with a simple, direct inquiry "What do you want?", which implies that she expected Tom to be more specific and provide additional information about his intentions. Later she chose not to respond verbally and instead lay down on her blanket, ignoring Tom. This flouting of the maxim of quantity implies that she did not wish to engage in conversation with Tom or acknowledge his attempts to interact with her.

Tom flouted the maxim of relevance by making a comment about the woman's preference for the sun, saying, "You like the sun, do you?" This flouting implies that Tom was trying to initiate a conversation by making an observation about the woman's behavior. The implicature drawn from this flouting is that Tom was grasping for any opportunity to connect with the woman, even if it means commenting on something unrelated to their current situation.

3.2. Discussion

The novel *A Woman on the Roof* explores themes of desire, voyeurism, gender dynamics, and societal expectations. Grice's theory of conversational implicature provides a framework to analyze the dialogues in the novel and understand how the characters' flouting of conversational maxims reflects and contributes to these themes.

Throughout the dialogues, the characters flout different conversational maxims, leading to implicatures that shed light on their attitudes and motivations. Stanley, for instance, frequently flouts the maxim of manner by using derogatory language and expressing disapproval towards the woman on the roof. This suggests that he holds conservative views on women's behavior and expects them to conform to societal norms. His possessiveness and desire to control his wife are evident when he states that he would stop her from behaving like the woman on the roof. Stanley's flouting of the maxim of manner highlights the theme of gender dynamics and societal expectations, emphasizing his discomfort with women who defy traditional roles and challenge his sense of control.

Tom, on the other hand, flouts the maxim of relevance by repeatedly diverting the conversation to the topic of the woman's presence. His fascination and objectification of the woman are apparent through his comments and behavior. Tom's flouting of the maxim of relevance underscores the theme of voyeurism and desire, illustrating his relentless preoccupation with the woman's nudity and his disregard for other topics of conversation. It also reveals his lack of respect for women as individuals, reducing them to objects of his desire.

Harry, in contrast to Stanley and Tom, often challenges their attitudes and actions. He frequently flouts the maxim of relevance by steering the conversation towards more lighthearted or considerate topics. Harry's empathetic responses and attempts to ease tension demonstrate his awareness of the potential harm caused by objectifying or judging the woman on the roof. His flouting of the maxim of relevance reflects his more balanced perspective and highlights the theme of empathy and understanding.

The woman on the roof herself plays a crucial role in the dialogues by flouting the maxim of quantity. Her minimal verbal responses and deliberate silence indicate her disinterest in engaging with the men and their objectifying gaze. By refusing to provide them with the expected information or validation, she asserts her agency and challenges their entitlement. Her flouting of the maxim of quantity reinforces the themes of gender dynamics and power dynamics, as she rejects the male characters' attempts to impose their desires and expectations upon her.

Grice's theory of conversational implicature deepens our understanding of the novel by revealing the characters' underlying attitudes, motivations, and power dynamics. It exposes the discrepancies between their spoken words and implied meanings, highlighting their biases, desires, and societal constraints. The theory allows us to analyze the characters' behaviors beyond their literal actions and words, providing insight into their relationships, conflicts, and personal struggles.

Moreover, Grice's theory helps us examine the broader themes of the novel within the context of communication and social dynamics. By identifying the implicatures arising from the characters' flouting of conversational maxims, we gain a richer understanding of the power dynamics, gender roles, and societal expectations at play. The theory illuminates the complexities of human interaction, exposing the gaps between what is said and what is meant, and how these gaps shape our perceptions, relationships, and interpretations.

In conclusion, Grice's theory of conversational implicature enhances our understanding of the novel *A Woman on the Roof* by providing a framework to analyze the characters' dialogues and the themes they reflect. The characters' flouting of conversational maxims reveals their attitudes, desires, and societal constraints, shedding light on themes such as desire, voyeurism, gender dynamics, and societal expectations. By exploring the implied meanings and subtext behind their words, Grice's theory helps us understand these themes more deeply.

4. Conclusion

This study demonstrates the value of utilizing Grice's framework of conversational implicatures to elucidate the nuanced meanings within literary dialogues. By conducting a pragmatic analysis of conversations in Doris Lessing's *A Woman on a Roof*, we reveal the subtle attitudes, motivations, and power dynamics of the characters based on implicatures arising from flouted conversational maxims.

Our analysis elucidates how Lessing employs conversational implicatures to subtly convey the characters' perspectives and desires regarding gender roles, sexuality, and societal expectations. We find that the male characters frequently flout maxims to express frustration with the female protagonist's defiance of norms, convey underlying attitudes of women as objects of desire, and assert positions of control – illuminating the work's themes

of voyeurism, objectification, and patriarchal norms. Meanwhile, the female character's terse responses flout maxims to reject engagement and male advances, underscoring her empowerment and independence.

This study demonstrates how implicatures arising from flouted maxims reveal deeper insights into characters' motivations, views, and the thematic concepts explored by authors. By uncovering these nuanced pragmatic meanings within literary dialogues, Grice's framework enriches interpretations of narrative elements and enhances appreciation of the artistry of prose fiction. Further pragmatic analysis can elucidate subtle character development, relationships, and authorial intent within the complex interplay of language, context, and implied meanings in literature. This study contributes to advancing pragmatics as a valuable paradigm in literary scholarship.

References

- Grice H P. Logic and conversation. In P. Cole & J. Morgan (ed.), *Syntax and Semantics*, 3: Speech Acts, New York: Academic Press, 1975: 41–58.
- Lessing D. A Woman on a Roof. In X. J. Kennedy (ed.), *An introduction to fiction* (4th ed.). London: Scott, Foresman and Company, 1963: 42–50.
- Abdul Q, M Rahman, & H G Nisar. A Feminist Stylistic Analysis of Characterisation in Doris Lessing's A Woman on a Roof[J]. *Data from Global Regional Review*, 2019, 4(3): 309–316.
- Uçar A S, A silent resistance: Objectification and a clash of empowerment in Doris Lessing's "A Woman on a Roof"[J]. *DTCF Dergisi*, 2018, 58:1128–1137.
- Chen Beibei. Construction and deconstruction: An analysis on the Gaze in Doris Lessing's A Woman on a Roof [J]. *Journal of Jiangsu University of Technology*, 2019, 25(5):25–30.
- Lu Yiyi. Silent resistance from women's bodily language: An ecofeminist analysis of Doris Lessing's A Woman on a Roof. *Journal of Southeast University (Philosophy and Social Science, special issue)*, 2016, 18:128–135.
- Liu Yumei. Textual analysis on A Woman on a Roof: A multiple perspective. *Journal of Guangxi Normal University (Philosophy and Social Sciences Edition)*, 2011, 47(6):64–67.
- Yuan Quan. When Tom peeps at the smiling medusa: A foucauldian analysis of power relations in Doris Lessing's A Woman on a Roof. *Journal of Xi'an International Studies University*, 2011, 19(2): 50– 54.