
**A RAT IN A MAZE:
 ANALYSIS OF VIOLATION AND FLOUTING OF MAXIMS IN
 MARGARET ATWOOD'S *THE HANDMAID'S TALE***

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Abstract:

*The influential work of H.P. Grice (1975) on Cooperative Principle has been extensively applied in both authentic and fictional contexts. Scholars in the field of pragmatics argued that non-observance of maxims lead into the creation of humor (Khosravizadeh and Sadehvandi, 2011; Jorfi and Dowlatabadi, 2015; Zeb, 2019; Kuang and Zhao, 2017) and character development (Pertiwi, 2013; Saradifa, 2020; Sembiring and Ghozalo, 2017). Built on this argument, the present study was conducted to confirm such claim by focusing on the instances of violating and flouting of maxims and the purpose it served in an intertwined context of reality and fiction in the television adaptation of Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale*. Findings revealed that characters deliberately violated and flouted the maxims in order to avoid conflict and to also highlight information, which are deemed indispensable in building the narrative. This study also found instances of violation and flouting of maxims as a product of suppression of women characters that mirror gender inequalities in many parts of the globe.*

Keywords: cooperative principle, Gricean maxims, flouting maxims, violating maxims

INTRODUCTION

Language possesses dynamic features that are vital in communicating a more intricate form of meaning. Humans have always used these dynamic features of language in order to establish meaning bounded by context known to interlocutors. However, in certain cases, interlocutors create intentional confusions or misunderstanding in conversations, while others maximize the peculiar elements of language for the addressee to uncover a special meaning behind words. As the success of a conversation is dependent on the interaction of the interlocutors (Awwad et al, 2019), addressees adhere to different subjective means to decipher meaning dependent on the context.

To convey and decipher the meaning through the medium of communication, interlocutors should follow certain strategies or what the language philosopher H. P. Grice has termed as Cooperative Principle (Khosravizadeh & Sadehvandi, 2011). Hadi (2013) argues that a basic underlying assumption we make when we speak to another individual is the attempt to cooperate to construct meaningful conversations. In doing so, interpretation of meaning goes beyond what is expressed in words to decipher the implied meaning. The Cooperative Principle proposed by Paul Grice (1975) consists of four maxims: quality, quantity, relevance, and manner, which theoretically are present in a conversation.

Davis (2019) summarized the different maxims as:

- a. **Maxim of Quality** is to make your contribution true; so do not convey what you believe false or unjustified.
- b. **The Maxim of Quantity** is being as informative as required.
- c. **Maxim of Relation** is about being relevant.
- d. **Maxim of Manner** is being perspicuous; avoiding obscurity and ambiguity, and striving for brevity and order.

In using language, may it be in authentic contexts or in fictional works, people fail to observe the maxims, be it deliberately or accidentally. Two of such failures to observe maxims are: violation and flouting of maxims (Jorfi, 2015).

Violation of maxims occurs when a speaker in a conversation intentionally tries to cause a certain level of confusion or misunderstanding to the addressee or when he or she wants to achieve a particular purpose in a discourse. Speakers are expected to violate a conversational maxim when they have knowledge that the hearers will not uncover the truth and will only know the expressed meaning of what is said (Amianna and Putranti, 2017). The following examples are taken from the research of Khosravizadeh and Sadehvandi (2011):

Father: *Did you study the whole day?*

Son (*who has been playing all day long*): *Yes, I've been studying the whole day.*

The example above violates the maxim of quality because the son intentionally lied to avoid any perceived punishment from his mother.

John: *Where have you gone? I searched everywhere for you for the past three months!*

Mike: *I wasn't around. Why make a big deal?*

The example above revealed that Mike gave an honest but insufficient answer, thus violating the maxim of quantity.

Teacher: *Why didn't you finish your homework?*

Student: *May I go out and drink some water? I feel so thirsty.*

In the example above, the student's response is by no means relevant to the question posed by the teacher, proving that it violates the maxim of relevance.

Sarah: *Did you have fun at the party last night?*

Anna: *There were various oriental foods on the table, many flowers all over the place, people hanging around talking with each other.*

This example above could be interpreted as Anna had a great time in the party, and she does not know where she should start her story, or it could also be interpreted as Anna did not enjoy the party, but she does not know how to complain about it. This example also violates multiple maxims such as the maxim of manner (Anna's response is ambiguous) and also the maxim of quantity (Anna being verbose in her response.)

On the other hand, flouting of maxims happens when a speaker intentionally exploits cooperative maxims in the assumption that the hearer can decipher the underlying meaning in the discourse. The speakers do not have the purpose to confuse or deceive the other speakers engaged in the discourse, but they expect the hearers to look for the meaning beyond the expressed meaning (Amianna and Putranti, 2017). The following examples are taken from the research of Khosravizadeh & Sadehvandi (2011):

Teacher (to a student who arrives late ten minutes past the class meeting): *Wow! You're such an early bird! Welcome to the class.*

Student: *Sorry sir! It will never happen again.*

This example reveals flouting of the maxim of quality because the teacher does not truthfully praise the student, and the student understands the underlying sarcasm behind the teacher's compliment.

Majid and Ali are chatting on the phone:

Ali: *Where are you now, Majid?*

Majid: *I'm in my clothes.*

Ali: *That I know. I mean, seriously, where are you man?!!!*

Majid: *Well, I am at work, but I'll be leaving in two hours.*

In this case, Majid flouts the maxim of quantity because the response was insufficient for Ali. However, Ali knows that Majid is only exhibiting a sense of humor in their conversation, making it a case of flouting not violating the maxim of quantity.

Bob: *What were you and Anna talking about? You were looking at me the whole time!*

Marry: *Oh, well... why don't we go get something to eat?*

Bob: *Are you trying to avoid this conversation? It must be about me! Why can't you tell me?*

Marry: *Well, you know... they're thinking that you stole that money.*

The flouting of the maxim of relevance in the example is revealed as Marry resorts to a suggestion so as to not hurt Bob's feelings. The rationale behind Mary's flouting of maxim can be found in her last statement.

Wife: *Darling... What's the story behind that new watch?*

Husband: *Oh, this watch you're talking about! I knew it... I told my superior that my wife would be asking questions when she sees it. Oh, darling you have no idea how much happy they are with my performance recently!*

In the last example, the flouting of manner is actualized as the husband's response consisted of too much information to assure his wife that the watch was only a gift, and also for jealousy to be avoided.

As per Jucker and Locher (2017), fictional language can no longer be viewed as artificial but rather a variety of language that deserves scrutiny. In support of this claim, researches in the recent decades centered on the study of violation and flouting of maxims have flourished. Scholars asserted that non-observance of maxims leads to the creation of humor, particularly in the genre of comedy. Khosravizadeh and Sadehvandi (2011) claimed that people frequently disobey maxims in order to achieve certain purposes citing social ranks as an element that can play a vital role in characters' flouting or violation of maxims. They claimed that a genuine character is in a higher position in terms of verbal behavior. They further asserted that comedies portray a reverse relationship between the verbal humor and social status of individuals. This is further supported by the studies of Jorfi and Dowlatabadi (2015), Zeb (2019), and Kuang and Zhao (2017) which revealed that violation and flouting of maxims contribute to humor creation. Their studies emphasized that the maxims which were violated or flouted by characters was intended for creating laughter. Amianna & Putranti (2017) also concluded that characters in

situation comedy intentionally mislead and deceive the hearers by generating misleading implicatures in a conversation. They also cited that characters in situation comedy purposively flout maxims as they expect the interlocutors to be able to look for the meaning different from, or in addition to, the intended meaning. The researchers also agreed that violation and flouting of conversational maxims in comedy result to humorous situations in the story.

Grice's Cooperative Principle Theory has also been widely examined in other media like films literature to prove that violations and flouting of maxims contribute to character development. Pertiwi (2013) analyzed *My Giant Treasury and Rhymes* and claimed that flouting of maxims has one basic function: to encourage the readers' imagination toward the tales. The researcher also claimed that this function is developed by six other functions which are to generate specific situations, develop the plot, enliven the characters' utterance, implicate a message, indirectly characterize characters, and also to create ambiguous setting. Saradifa (2020) also found that flouting and violation of maxims are used in fictional works for characters to express their feelings in dealing with an issue or a rumor happening in the narrative. Consequently, non-observance of maxims was also found to be used in giving more information, explanation, and clarification to other characters about a certain issue. Sembiring and Ghozalo (2017) supported the claim by examining flouted and violated maxims in *The Jungle Book* script in relation to character development. They concluded that characters deliberately resort to flouting and violating of maxims in order to avoid discomfort and misunderstanding and to also give more explanation. Affifatusholihah and Setyawan (2016) also argued that the flouting of maxims happens due different reasons: when the speakers say something irrelevant; something roguishness or lied to hide the truth in the form of rhetorical question; the information becomes more or too informative than what is required; and something obscurity of expression, ambiguity, or unnecessary prolixity.

Not only in fictional works, but studies of flouting and violation of maxims have also been conducted using authentic and real-life situations. For instance, Safitri, Seken, and Putra (2014) examined conversations between teachers and grade seven and eight students of Gandhi Memorial International School (GMIS) through observation and interview. The researchers found that while both teachers and students observed all Gricean maxims, the teachers engaged in flouting the maxims more than students, citing that teachers hoped that students find implied meaning behind instructions. On the other hand, students violated and infringed maxims

because of poor English-speaking ability. The same findings were echoed by E.S. (2015) after investigating how flouting maxim is formed in dialogs between a teacher and students in an EFL teaching and learning process. The researcher found that all speakers happened to be successful in observing maxims, with non-observance only reaching up to two percent. Different maxims like maxim of quantity, quality, and manner, however, were flouted by speakers. The researcher argued that flouting of maxims rooted from students' lack of linguistic and actional competence. Violation of maxims has also been discussed in studies using interviews, like psychological consultation. Sobhani and Saghebi (2014) analyzed language by means of conversational implicature and the occurrences of the violation of Cooperative Principle between a male psychotherapist and his patients during therapy sessions, and they concluded that the recognition of conversational implicature is essential for the understanding of the non-cooperative attitudes of the speakers and their violation of Cooperative Principle maxims. They also argued that the intended meaning of people is not entirely expressed within the words they use, but it is also dependent on the interpretation of the listener, citing context and implicated meaning as crucial elements. They further suggested that there are cases wherein the purpose of interlocutors is to miscommunicate especially in a complex sophisticated social context. Massanga and Msuya (2017) also claimed that non-observance of maxims is preferred by politicians when opting for a non-literal and indirect communication. The cultural study of Mehawesh and Jaradat (2015) explained different functions of the expression of *inshallah*, a common expression in daily interactions among Jordanians. The study revealed that the expression has various non-literal meanings used in many unrelated contexts which flout different maxims. This study also confirmed that several conventionalized non-literal meanings of *inshallah* also flout cooperative principles like threatening, wonder, yes/ok, irony, prohibition, and wishing. However, miscommunication is avoided as context helps the hearer to determine the intended meaning of the speaker.

As revealed, the theory of Grice has been widely used to understand the deeper use of language used by interlocutors, may it be in fictional work or real-life situations. The studies in comedy genre and literary works revealed how flouting and violating maxims contribute to humor and coherence of the narrative. On the other hand, studies using authentic contexts showed how flouting and violating maxims have become a tool for humans to alter conversations that favor the speaker. However, studies are still yet to be conducted as to how

flouting and violating maxims contribute to the dynamics of conversations in an intertwined context of reality and fiction. This research would help language practitioners in gaining deeper understanding as to how non-observance of maxims becomes a tool in building a narrative by confirming claims set by other researchers. It also aimed to establish an assertion that violation and flouting of maxims are used to mirror suppression of women, a phenomenon existing in many cultures around the world. These humble attempts would help advance the field of pragmatic analysis.

Objectives of the Study:

This study sought to better understand the dynamics features of language use by focusing on non-observance of maxims in a fictionalized setting based on true events. This research attempted to cover the following:

1. the violated and flouted maxims involving the main character with other characters in *The Handmaid's Tale* and
2. the purpose of the violation and flouting of maxims to the narrative of the story.

METHOD

Research Design and Tool

The study employed a qualitative research design to effectively examine conversations in the series. In analyzing instances of non-observance of maxims by characters, the researcher employed a pragmatic analysis. The researcher used pragmatic analysis of literary conversations as it has been argued by Zou (2010) that this tool helps reveal various aspects like psychological states, social world, and physical contexts of writers and fictional characters. By using the aforementioned research design and tool, it was expected to provide significant results that would help advance Grice's theory of maxims.

Subject

A product of Margaret Atwood's creative mind was the subject of this study. Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale* is a 1985 dystopian novel that talks about the life of Offred/June, a woman forced to work as a handmaid in a totalitarian government that took over the United States of America named Gilead. The most recent adaptation was the 2017 television

version produced by HULU, and it received critical acclaim. The television adaptation of *The Handmaid's Tale*, particularly the first episode of the series, was chosen by the researcher as the subject of the study as it reveals struggles of women in a fictional world. This episode serves as an introduction to the characters of the story. Atwood has been vocal about her inspirations for the novel, claiming that the horrors depicted in the novel were taken from different realities existing in different parts of the globe, coined as *speculative fiction*. The novel, written in 1985, remains relevant in the 21st century with the existence of even worse issues humanity faces, especially women in different parts of the world.

Data Collecting Technique

This first episode of *The Handmaid's Tale* entitled *June* was chosen by the researcher as the script for this episode can be easily downloaded for free as part of the public domain in the Television Academy website. The researcher then underwent three steps to collect data. First, the pioneering episode of the series was downloaded from the official site of Television Academy and the researcher also secured a copy of the first episode to simultaneously analyze the conversations in both writing and video material. Second, since there were minimal changes in the script in contrast with what was shown in the television adaptation, the final dialogues obtained for this study were selected from the video material. Last, the researcher then classified and organized the utterances by the characters into violation and flouting of maxims.

Data Analysis Technique

The researcher underwent four steps to conduct this study. First, the researcher referred to script of *The Handmaid's Tale* Season 1 Episode 1 which can be obtained for free in the Television Academy website (www.emmys.com). Second, the researcher analyzed the motion picture version and the script simultaneously to combine the elements of writing, acting, cinematography, and production value in establishing complex meaning involving the main character Offred/June and other characters. Third, the researcher then took note of all the flouting and violation of maxims committed by the main character Offred/June in conversation with other characters. Last, the researcher analyzed the highlighted violation and flouting of

maxims in the first episode in adherence to the theory of Grice (1975) and its impact and importance to the narrative of the story.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

It is worth noting that there are not many conversations that took place in the selected episode of the television program. For most parts, thoughts of the main character were presented through a voice over, and it could not be considered as discourse data. However, there are still notable violations and flouting of maxims that were identified, and these revealed valuable findings in relation to the character development and overall narrative. Analysis of the violated and flouted maxims is discussed below.

Result

Violation of Maxims

a. Quality

Nick: Good morning. (to Rita, another character involved in the conversation) Mrs. Waterford wanted you to remember to get oranges, if they still have any.

Rita: Yes, Sir. My pleasure. Any other special requests?

Offred/June: They had tuna at Loaves and Fishes yesterday. It looked good, you should get some.

Rita: Oranges and tuna. Sounds delicious.

The maxim of quality, as per Grice (1975), states that one should be truthful when engaged in a conversation. In this case, however, the oppressed character of Rita, a martha, expressed disgust to the life that she lived in by answering with sarcasm; thus, violating the maxim of quality. However, it should be noted that this deliberate violation of maxim of quality also highlights abuse and powerlessness of her character. This language mechanism, attained by the use of sarcasm, becomes the only tool that oppressed women could resort to in a manner that would not create conflict into their character.

b. Quantity

Nick: If you're going to All Flesh, avoid the chicken. I read they've got crazy levels of dioxin.

Offred/June: I'm going to Loaves and Fishes.

The scenario above is an example of violation of maxim of quantity, evidenced by a lack of information to the discourse started by the character of Nick. Nick is also a servant (a driver) who works for Commander Waterford, and handmaids are forbidden to have prolonged conversations with other servants. In this case, however, Offred/June intentionally violated the maxim of quantity for she feared that Nick could be a spy, so conversations with him should be short to avoid any complications. This proves that violation of maxim contributes to character development in a narrative.

Flouting of Maxims

a. Quality

Rita: *You gonna stand there all day? It'd be rude leaving your friend outside waiting.*

June/Offred: *Under his Eye.*

Since maxim of quality requires speakers to be truthful, the conversation above is considered as a violation. In the voice over, Offred/June revealed that the person waiting outside was not her friend, and that they barely talked to each other. However, due to the circumstances, she had no other option but to end the discourse with phrases that characters in the story were forced to employ. To note, handmaids and marthas, or basically women of almost the same level, are forced to use "Under his Eye" and other automated replies to mark an end to a conversation on a graceful note. (Martha is the term used for a social class of women who work as domestic servants).

The same case of violating the maxim of quality is observed in the example below, between June/Offred and another handmaid named Ofglen, but this time, a different automated reply was used by the main character:

Ofglen: *There's an eye in your house. Be careful.*

Offred/June: *Blessed be the fruit.*

NOTE: *Eye is the story's term for a spy.*

The main character was not truthful with her reply as the reality of the situation was, she was in complete danger. However, there was a limited time for handmaids to be seen with each other, and it was normally only during the time for going to markets or training for handmaids. The main character had no other choice but to end the conversation with a meaningless response.

b. Quantity

Serena Joy: *Get out.*

(Offred hesitates)

Are you deaf?

Offred/June: *The chances are better if I lay on my back afterwards...*

Serena Joy: *Just get out.*

According to Grice (1975), the maxim of quantity requires people engaged in a conversation to make the contribution as informative as is required and to not make the contribution more informative than is required. In the conversation above, Offred/June purposively flouted the maxim of quantity by supplying her answer with more information than she learned in her training for handmaids. It is their main duty to bear the child/children of the commander they are stationed in. This intentional flouting of maxim also reveals that her character remained true to the responsibilities assigned to her to avoid any unperceived conflict.

c. Relevance

Commander: *I'm Commander Waterford.*

Offred/June: *Peace be to you. May God make me truly worthy.*

The discourse happened in the first meeting of the main character and her superior, and the commander introduced himself to the new handmaid, Offred. In a normal conversation, when someone introduced themselves, the next course of action is to also do the same thing to establish rapport, and it is considered to be a sign of respect. However, in this scenario, June/Offred intentionally flouted the maxim of relevance because it was part of her new identity to resort to phrases fed to handmaids whenever they engage in conversations with people in a higher status than them. This instance also highlights powerlessness in her character as is not allowed to speak her mind.

d. Manner

Offred/June: *You don't know her name? You don't know her name, do you?*

Moira: *Just write your paper.*

As per Grice (1975), maxim of manner requires speakers to be clear and brief. The example above, however, is seen as a flouting of maxim of manner. Moira, a friend of the main character, resorted to resorting to flouting the maxim to avoid mockery. She deliberately attained this by providing an ambiguous answer to the question posed by Offred/June, which

also contributed to humor creation. Another case of flouting the aforementioned maxim happened between the same characters:

Offred/June: What did they do to her? (Referring to a character whose eye was plucked out)

Moira: If my right eye offends thee, pluck it out.

Instead of only answering the question, Moira gave the general rule to be observed by handmaids. Since Offred/June was new to the training for the handmaids, her old friend deliberately flouted the maxim to give a wider overview as to what happened to the unfortunate character. The intentional flouting of maxim of manner was also done to serve as a warning to the main character.

Discussion

Despite only having few cases of violation and flouting of maxims, the study still provided significant insights and contribution to the field of pragmatic analysis.

For violation of maxims, only maxims of quantity and quality were observed to be utilized in the script. For instance, violation of quality was utilized in conversations to achieve sarcasm and also to avoid any anticipated discomfort that might arise. These instances are congruent with the earlier claims of Jorfi and Dowlatabadi (2015), Zeb (2019), and Kuang and Zhao (2017) who argued that humor creation is achieved through violation and flouting of maxim. Deliberate violation of maxim of quantity also further supports the claim of Sembiring and Ghozalo (2017) who argued that characters intentionally resort to non-observance of maxims in order to avoid discomfort. No violations of maxims of relevance and manner were found which could be attributed to the fact that oppressed women characters in the story should give direct and relevant answers in conversations.

On the other hand, flouting of all four maxims of quality, quantity, relevance, and manner were all observed. This is mainly due to a restricted world the characters lived in. This is in line with the findings of Saradifa (2020) who claimed that flouting (and violation) of maxims are utilized in giving more information, explanation, and clarification to other characters. This serves as a vehicle in building a more complex narrative.

Suppression of women's voices can also be observed through instances of violation of maxims. Since women characters could not lend their true emotions as they were held captive by the totalitarian system, and deliberate violation of maxims became the only instrument to express repugnance. Powerlessness among these female characters was also shown through intentional flouting of maxims. It could be then gleaned that non-observance of maxims does not only contribute to the development of narrative and creation of humor; it could also be utilized to mirror gender inequalities.

CONCLUSION

Both instances of violation and flouting of maxims were revealed in the study, and it now creates a pattern among language scholars that non-observance of maxims is a narrative technique that helps build the story development. Consequently, the study found suppression among characters (particularly women) that mirrors a social reality, and it led them in either violating or flouting maxims. It was revealed that deliberate violation and flouting of maxims were not only utilized for humor creation, but also to highlight powerlessness and abuse in characters through various language mechanisms, a social reality claimed by the author Margaret Atwood.

In many instances, women in the narrative had no other choice but to resort in responses that did not truly render their true feelings, Lakoff (1973) was vocal against this abuse, claiming that marginality and powerlessness of women are depicted in the manner women are expected to speak, leading to strong expressions being avoided, and expression of uncertainty being favored. Gal (1989) also pointed out that the cultural practice of women being denied of speech should stop for they cannot make their experience known and thus cannot influence the course of their lives or of history. This suppression of women mirrors the cultural phenomenon that has been observed in many parts of the world, specifically in countries that adhere to a patriarchal system (Pokharel, 2008; Carbajal, 2018). Other researchers could focus on other fictional works that are based on true events to further highlight societal problems attained through mechanisms of language.

IMPLICATION

The study of non-observance of maxims is a valuable tool in meaningful teaching and learning of the English language or any target language. Since meaning is not only obtained through words but more importantly the context, it is suggested that ESL and EFL learners learn from examining sophisticated language use of interlocutors. Thus, findings of this research can help ELT practitioners in devising lessons that aim to promote deeper analysis of meaning in conversations. Moreover, as it was established that the use of violating and flouting of maxims is a tool used by the author to mirror struggles of women, this research can function as a springboard in language classes in discussions of gender inequalities.

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