

DO WOMEN FLOUT THE CONVERSATIONAL MAXIMS?

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Pragmatics is a branch of linguistics, and its popularity has grown wide in the recent years. Any study in pragmatics must deal with the different theories of pragmatics, among which the theory of cooperative principle is a basic one. When two or more persons are engaged in conversation-either they observe or they flout the conversational maxims. The present study would analyse flouting of conversational maxims by women characters with reference to Jane Austen's *Sense and Sensibility* (1811).

Humans when engaged in communication have their own ways of reacting to what they hear based on what they understand. Their knowledge of utterances received from the speaker shape their own utterances which are meant to produce specific meanings. The meanings of the speaker are shaped either to get information or to make others informed. The language people use has visible mark of differences; the differences in regard to the gender are also one of dominant factors of communication. The purpose of the present study is to find out the reasons and intentions of flouting the conversational maxims, in Jane Austen *Sense and Sensibility*, by the women characters. The study would try to bring out the different layers of understanding and meaning imbibed in the novel, particularly the utterances, with a pragmatic approach to it.

The Theory of Cooperative Principle

The theory of cooperative principle has provided interesting insights to the scholars in the fields of linguistics, pragmatics, and communication studies and urged them to look seriously into person-to-person interaction. It, also, has provided fresh insights to interpret and understand literary works. H. P. Grice stated "Make your conversational contribution such as is required, at the stage at which it occurs, by the accepted purpose or direction of the talk exchange in which you are engaged." (Grice, in Cole and Morgan, 1975: 45)

The maxims of conversation that Grice formulated are: Maxim of Quality, Maxim of Quantity, Maxim of Relevance, and Maxim of Manner.

Maxim of Quality:

Try to make your contribution one that is true.

- a) Do not say what you believe to be false.
- b) Do not say that for which you lack adequate evidence.

By this maxim, Grice means that speakers should always provide true and valid information.

Maxim of Quantity:

- a) Make your contribution as informative as is required.
- b) Do not make your contribution more informative than is required.

In this maxim, Grice means to say that in conversation people should always check the quantity of information that is required at a particular stage and in a particular context of communication to be cooperative.

Maxim of Relation:

Be relevant.

According to this maxim, speakers should provide information that is relevant to the topic of conversation. The information must be related to the subject matter of their communication in some way.

Maxim of Manner:

Be perspicuous.

- a) Avoid obscurity of expression.
- b) Avoid ambiguity.
- c) Be brief.
- d) Be orderly.

Analysis of violation of cooperative principle by female characters

The novel *Sense and Sensibility* by Jane Austen has numerous characters in it. There is a portrayal of a huge number of both male and female characters in the novel. The female characters and their conversations have very special place in the novels of Jane Austen, and *Sense and Sensibility* is no exception to it.

The conversational pieces of the following female characters are analysed in the section that follows. The female characters are: *Mrs. Jennings* (mother of Mrs. Palmer), *Mrs. Palmer* (daughter of Mrs. Jennings), *Marianne Dashwood* (younger sister of Elinor, and one of the two heroines of the novel), *Elinor Dashwood* (elder sister to Marianne, and one of the two heroines of the novel), *Lucy Steele* (a girl who has an engagement with Edward Ferrars but finally marries the younger brother of Edward, Robert Ferrars).

Violation of Cooperative Principle by Mrs. Jennings:

Example: I

‘Oh! Lord, I am sure your mother can spare you very well, and I *do* beg you will favour me with your company, for I’ve quite set my heart upon it. Don’t fancy that you will be any inconvenience to me, for I shan’t put myself at all out of my way for you...I shall speak a good word for you to all the young men, you may depend upon it.’ (*Maxim of Manner*)

Vol. II, Ch. III, p. 132

Mrs. Jennings stays with her daughter and son-in-law at Barton Park for some time. In the month of January she decides to move for her home in London. But she does not want to leave for London alone, she wants the Dashwood sisters to accompany her and stay at her home for some time. So she asks Elinor to accompany her. But Elinor very gently denies her proposal by saying that their mother would be alone at the time of Christmas because she knows that Marianne and she do not like Mrs. Jennings company. Mrs. Jennings surprises to receive this refusal and immediately repeats her invitation by saying the above piece of dialogue. Here Mrs. Jennings violates the maxim of manner by providing a lot of information than that is required to persuade the Dashwood sisters to make them accompany to her house.

She violates the maxim to persuade the Dashwood sisters. Through her long speech she tries to show the comfort of journey and safety of living with her so that Mrs. Dashwood would

not object on their going. She even tries to impress them by saying that she would speak good word to young man about them. Her violation even projects the true willingness of her heart to invite them to her house.

Example: II

‘How is she, Miss Dashwood? —Poor thing! She looks very bad.— No wonder. Aye, it is but too true. He is to be married very soon—a good-for-nothing fellow! I have no patience with him. Mrs. Taylor told me of it half an hour ago, and she was told it by a particular friend of Miss Grey herself, else I am sure I should not have believed it; and I was almost ready to sink as it was...The Parrys and Sandersons luckily are coming to-night you know, and that will amuse her.’ (*Maxim of Manner*)

Vol. II, Ch. VIII, p. 166-167

Elinor and Marianne stay at Mrs. Jennings house in London. They have a discussion regarding Willoughby where Marianne shows all the letters she has written to him, and feel very disappointed. She does not want to stay at Mrs. Jennings house any longer as she came there for Willoughby but he does not care for her any more. Elinor understands the situation and mental condition of her sister and advises her to lie down to relax but Marianne does not find any comfort. Mrs. Jennings is out of her house when the Dashwood sisters are engaged in conversation. When Mrs. Jennings returns she immediately inquires about how Marianne feels, as she knows the fate of Marianne. But Marianne does not want to talk to her and “turned away her face without attempting to answer.”(P.166)

Mrs. Jennings, who should have stopped the inquiry to Marianne as Marianne shows no concern to have any talk with her, goes inquiring Elinor about Marianne’s health and then without waiting for her reply went on and on saying things to make them believe that the information she got about Willoughby’s proposed marriage with Miss Grey is from trustworthy sources, and can not be false. She then tries to provide Marianne a little comfort by saying that she would “never want admirers.”

Mrs. Jennings violates the maxim of manner by keeping her part of dialogue for a long time though others do not provide a positive response. She violates the maxim to prove that her information is correct, and also to give some comfort to Marianne by praising her ‘pretty face’. She becomes aware of her violation and says ‘I won’t disturb her any longer’.

Example: III

‘Well, my dear, ‘tis a true saying about an ill wind, for it will be all the better for Colonel Brandon. He will have her at last; aye, that he will. Mind me, now, if they an’t married by Midsummer...Delaford is a nice place, I can tell you; exactly what I call a nice old fashioned place, full of comforts and conveniences; quite shut in with great garden walls that are covered with the best fruit-trees in the country: and such a mulberry tree in one corner!...One shoulder of mutton, you know, drives another down. If we can but put Willoughby out of her head!’ (*Maxim of Relevance*)

Vol. II, Ch. VIII, p. 170-171

The above conversation takes place between Mrs. Jennings and Elinor. They talk about Willoughby, who has left Marianne for a rich lady. Elinor does not know much about the lady so she wants to get some information from Mrs. Jennings about the lady. But Elinor tries to stop their conversation related to Willoughby for her sister’s sake and remains silent for sometime.

But Mrs. Jennings suddenly has a change of thought and tells Elinor that Marianne would finally marry Brandon, and she goes on describing the place where Brandon lives, i.e. Delaford. She violates the maxim of relevance; as she provides the information that is not relevant to the subject they are talking about. She suddenly describes Delaford and the beauty of the place.

The description of Mrs. Jennings about Delaford is relevant at an inner level. She describes Delaford in order to impress Elinor, so that she would also harbour some positive thoughts about a match between Mr. Brandon and Marianne.

Violation of Cooperative Principle by Mrs. Palmer:

Example: IV

‘I am so glad to see you!’ said she, seating herself between Elinor and Marianne, ‘for it is so bad a day I was afraid you might not come, which would be a shocking thing, as we go away again tomorrow. We must go, for the Westons come to us next week you know. It was quite a sudden thing our coming at all, and I knew nothing of it till the carriage was coming to the door, and then Mr. Palmer asked me if I would go with him to Barton. He is so droll! He never tells me any thing! I am so sorry we cannot stay longer; however we shall meet again in town very soon, I hope.’ (*Maxim of Manner*)

Vol. I, Ch. XX, p. 94-95

Sir John Middleton invites the Dashwood sisters to his residence to have a small party at Barton Park. Elinor and Marianne are not so willing to go to Barton Park but they go as it is a sign of maintaining good social relations. When they enter the drawing room of the park, Mrs. Palmer is very delighted and comes running on seeing the Dashwood sisters. She comes to them and starts saying different things at once without being asked by either Elinor or Marianne.

She expresses her happiness on seeing Elinor and Marianne, and also expresses the reason why she thought they would not come and she talks about her husband being ‘droll’ and asks to pardon Elinor and Marianne, as she could not stay longer at Barton Park.

She violates the maxim of manner by delivering a long piece of conversation. She goes on saying different things that are not concerned. She violates the maxim of manner to show her mixed feelings towards the Dashwood sisters. She first expresses her gladness in meeting them again, and they feel sorry that she could not stay in their company for too long, and for this she blames her husband whom she considers as ‘droll’.

Example: V

‘Is Mr. Willoughby much known in your part of Somersetshire?’ said Elinor. ‘Oh! Yes, extremely well; that is, I do not believe many people are acquainted with him, because Combe Magna is so far off; but they all think him extremely agreeable I assure you. Nobody is more liked than Mr. Willoughby wherever he goes, and so you may tell your sister. She is a monstrous lucky girl to get him, upon my honour; not but that he is much more lucky in getting her, because she is so very handsome agreeable, that nothing can be good enough for her. However I don’t think you both excessively pretty, and so does Mr. Palmer too I am sure, though we could not get him to own it last night.’ (*Maxim of relevance*)

Vol. I, Ch. XX, p. 100

Mrs. Palmer invites Elinor and Marianne to her house, which Elinor does not accept. Mrs. Palmer invites them again and again, which Elinor declines and she wants to change the subject to ‘put a stop to her entreaties’ (P.98). Elinor changes the subject by asking Mrs. Palmer about Willoughby’s character as she thinks that Mrs. Palmer might know him as both of them live in the same country.

When Elinor asks Mrs. Palmer whether Willoughby is much known in her part of Somersetshire, then Mrs. Palmer replies her in affirmative and changes her thought. Mrs. Palmer says that Willoughby is a very agreeable man, and then she says Marianne is really very lucky to get him, and then she praises Elinor. She said that she and Mr. Palmer think Elinor more ‘handsome’ than Marianne. Here, she violates the maxims of relevance by her change of thought; instead of providing information about Willoughby she praises Marianne’s luck and the beauty of both the sisters, which is not relevant to Elinor’s question.

Mrs. Palmer intentionally violates the maxim of relevance; firstly to get some sort of confirmation from Elinor about Marianne and Willoughby’s relation which Elinor denies and secondly to impress them so that she could accept her invitation to visit her home at Cleveland.

Violation of Cooperative Principle by Marianne Dashwood:

Example: VI

‘That is true,’ cried Marianne... ‘I had not thought of *that*. This weather will keep many sportsmen in the country.’... ‘It is charming weather for *them* indeed,’.... ‘How much they must enjoy it! But’... ‘it cannot be expected to last long. At this time of year, and after such a series of rain, we shall certainly have very little more of it. Frosts will soon set in, and in all probability with severity. In another day or two perhaps; this extreme mildness can hardly last longer—nay, perhaps it may freeze to-night!’

(Maxim of Manner)

Vol. II, Ch .V, p. 144

Elinor and Marianne are in London at the house of Mrs. Jennings. One morning, at breakfast Mrs. Jennings makes a certain remark about the weather and relates it to sportsman. She actually speaks such with regard to Sir John Middleton. But her talk reminds Marianne of Willoughby who is also a sportsman.

Marianne supports the view of Mrs. Jennings that it would be a sad thing for sportsman to lose a day’s pleasure of an ‘open weather’. Marianne then goes on expressing her thoughts regarding sportsman and ‘open weather’, but her way of using language in the context is ambiguous. By being ambiguous she violates the maxim of manner. The ambiguity of Marianne’s utterance is supported by Elinor who tries “to prevent Mrs. Jennings from seeing her sister’s thoughts as clearly as she did” (P.144)

Marianne expresses her view about sportsman in relation to Willoughby. The stress on ‘them’ refers to Willoughby. But she is ambiguous to present Mrs. Jennings to get her intended meaning clearly, as of whom she is talking.

Violation of the Cooperative Principle by Elinor Dashwood:

Example: VII

‘You would not have gone, however,’ said Elinor, ... ‘without receiving our good wishes, even if we had not been able to give them in person...Colonel Brandon, who was here only ten minutes ago, has desired me to say that, understanding you mean to take orders, he has

great pleasure in offering you the living of Delaford,...’ ‘Yes,’ continued Elinor, ‘...and likewise as a proof of his high esteem for your general character, and his particular approbation of your behaviour on the present occasion.’ (*Maxim of Manner*)

Vol. III, Ch. IV, p. 252

Edward is about to leave for Oxford, but before leaving he meets Elinor as he hears from Mrs. Jennings that Elinor wants to speak to him. Edward meets Elinor and asks her what she has to speak. The above dialogue is the utterance of Elinor where she informs him about “the living of Delaford” and Colonel Brandon’s offering it to him. She speaks to him about it in a rather lengthy way and violates the maxim of manner.

Elinor intentionally continues her speech for a long time. She wants to present the offer of Brandon in a manner that would not hurt the conscience of Edward, and that he should not think of any influence of Elinor on the offer, and by violating the maxim she tries to make Edward believe the ‘high esteem’ that Brandon has about his character.

Elinor violates the maxim intentionally that Edward would not feel her influence in Brandon’s offering him the ‘living’ at Delaford, but he really understands Elinor’s intention on continuing her talk for too long and tells her that he owes everything to her goodness.

Violation of Cooperative Principle by Lucy Steele:

Example: VIII

‘Edward’s loves for me,’ said Lucy, ‘has been pretty well put to the test, by our long, very long absence since we were first engaged, and it has stood the trial so well, that I should be unpardonable to doubt it now. I can safely say that he has never gave me one moment’s alarm on that account from the first.’ (*Maxim of Manner*)

Vol. II, Ch. II, p. 127

This is a piece from the long conversation between Elinor and Lucy. They are talking about Edward and his four years of long engagement with Lucy. Lucy discloses it to Elinor because she has confidence in her. Elinor wants to find more about Edward’s relation to Lucy, as she loves him. Lucy is very much sure that nothing could deprive her from Edward’s love but Elinor tells her that during four years of engagement there might be some circumstances that would deprive Lucy from Edward’s affection and make her situation pitiable. Lucy expresses her confidence in her relation to Edward. And while expressing the strength of her relation to Edward she goes on for long, which results in the violation of maxim of manner. Jane Austen herself supports her violation when she writes, ‘Lucy went on’ (P.127)

Lucy violates the maxim to make Elinor believe that Edward would never leave her as she has already put his love to test. She also expresses her jealous nature and her being ‘observant’ and ‘quick sighted’ so that Edward could not deceive her if he has any feeling for any other lady.

Conclusion

The analysis of the violation of the cooperative principle by female characters brings to light that females violate the maxim of cooperative principle for most of the instances. Among the female characters, Mrs Jennings and her daughter Mrs. Palmer violates the maxim of cooperative principle for most of the time.

- Mrs. Jennings violates the maxims because she is always eager to present her own thoughts and information that she gets from others.
- Mrs. Palmer violates the maxims because she always uses to provide more information than that was needed, and to show her great feelings of pleasure for the others.
- The two heroines of the novel Marianne and Elinor also violate the maxims of cooperative principle, but it is Marianne, who violates more as compared to Elinor who violates it occasionally.
- Marianne violates the maxims of cooperative principle to give an outlet to her imagination and romantic thoughts, and also to give voice to her taste of admiration of nature and beauty.
- Elinor violates the maxims to herself that is while being busy in speaking to herself in her thoughts so as to convince herself about her thoughts and views. Elinor violates the maxims the least among the women characters.
- Lucy violates the maxims mostly to support the view that the bond of relationship between Edward and her is very strong as it is a four years long attachment.

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