

# A Research on the Linguistic Characteristics of Western Detective Fiction under the Cooperation Principle

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**Abstract:** Western detective fiction is different from other narrative styles with its distinctive linguistic characteristics as a new genre. Grice's Cooperation Principle as a general description of our expectations of normal communication, helps to explain how and what people talk about. Taking *The Killers* by Ernest Hemingway as an example, this research analyses the linguistic characteristics of western detective fiction based on the Cooperation Principle. Its discourse is not overly rhetorical and focuses on communication between characters with a strong sense of realism and immersion. The violation of the cooperation principle makes the discourse absurd and deductive. It hides the characters' purpose by changing the subject or making the language difficult to understand. This makes the language of the characters' language have more overtones, leaving more room for the readers' imagination and also makes the readers think more about the connotation of the story, which further promotes the development of the plot.

**Keywords:** The Cooperation Principle; Western Detective fiction; Linguistic Characteristics

## 1. Introduction

Western detective fiction has gained popularity with readers due to the horror and complexity of the cases presented in its content. This special genre exhibits distinct characteristics when narrating the plot and expressing the relationships between the characters. Typically, detective fiction involves the plot of murder crimes, and when the characters in a story discuss these crimes, their language becomes obscure and intriguing. Murder is a real event, but once its factual nature is stripped away and it is turned into a subject of discussion, it transforms into a discourse.<sup>[5]</sup> This type of discourse adds allure to detective fiction and renders its plot captivating and thrilling. Therefore, this research examines the discourse of detective fiction, explores its linguistic characteristics and the role played in plot development. The research also aims to provide a reference for literary evaluation and analysis.

## 2. An Introduction of Western Detective fiction

Western detective fiction is a type of popular literature in which a crime is introduced and investigated and the culprit is revealed<sup>[3]</sup>. Detective fiction is a general term of fiction whose plots involve the process of investigation. It is a genre established gradually in the 19th century with Edgar Allan Poe's related short stories as its prototype. Detective fiction was later popularized by Arthur Conan Doyle's famous stories, and by the mid-20th century it evolved into a new development form. The three subcategories of it are the hard-boiled detective fiction, the police procedural and the metaphysical detective fiction. It provides the readers with "the mild intellectual challenge of a puzzle, excitement, and confirmation of our cherished beliefs in goodness and order"<sup>[2]</sup>. In the course of less than two hundred years, this unique literary genre, originally attached to popular literature, has developed into various forms and branches.

## 3. An Introduction of *The Killers*

*The killers* is a story by the American writer Ernest Hemingway. *The killers* tells a story of two killers hired to a small restaurant to murder the boxer, Ole Andreson. The two killers tie up the cook and wait for the boxer to appear, but the plan fails because the boxer does not come. Nick, a clerk, rushes to the boxer's small apartment to inform him and only finds that the boxer is indifferent to the

impending disaster and is waiting to be caught without a fight. Shocked, Nick returns to the restaurant, and determines to leave the city.

#### 4. An Introduction of the Cooperation Principle

The Cooperation Principle, proposed by Grice, he explains the implicit internal forms of communication and the maxims that people consciously or unconsciously follow or violate. Grice <sup>[1]</sup> believes that dialogue activities have regularity and usually have relevant and reasonable communication information, otherwise it is difficult to carry on. Grice formulated the following four maxims.

##### 4.1. The Four Maxims

Among the four maxims, the first three maxims are about what we say, and the last one is about how we say it.

##### (1) The Maxim of Quantity

- a. Make your contribution more informative as it requires (for the current purpose of the exchange);
- b. Don't make your contribution more informative than is required.

##### (2) The Maxim of Quality

- a. Try to make your contribution one that is true;
- b. Don't say what you believe to be false;
- c. Do not say that for which you lack adequate evidence.

##### (3) The Maxim of Relation

Be relevant

##### (4) The Maxim of Manner

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

(Grice: 1975:47-48)

##### 4.2 The Violation of the Cooperation Principle

Grice proposed Conversational Implicature in 1967, which is to infer the inner meaning of a discourse from the literal meaning of the speaker under the criteria of violating the Cooperation Principle, thus leading to the emergence of conversational implicature. From the perspective of Grice, discourses can be divided into the propositional meaning and the conversational meaning. The first level is propositional meaning, which refers to the literal meaning of words and sentences, and the second level is conversational meaning, which refers to the deep meaning or subliminal meaning that the speaker intends to express in a specific context at the pragmatic level. In the actual conversation, the Cooperation Principle is not mandatory. People sometimes express what they want to say in an indirect way. The deep meaning or subliminal meaning that a person wants to express in a specific context is conveyed in an implied way. So, it means that people will violate it in actual conversation which results in other additional meaning via their dialogues. On the other hand, blindly following the Cooperation Principle will make the communicative language become rigid, monotonous and boring. Therefore, people violate the principle and make the language more attractive and more convincing. Detectives and detection: an obvious starting point included in almost all definitions is the presence of a detective character, professional or amateur. This figure is centrally involved in a plot, which "describes the effects of detection" <sup>[4]</sup>. Detective fiction focuses on what it means to be human and the complex motivation behind crime. Detective fiction engages readers in a special way and assigns them a more active role. Due to the unique narrative way, this research based on the Cooperation Principle analyzes the violation of the Cooperation Principle among the characters' dialogues in *The Killers* and

summarizes the linguistic characteristics of it.

## 5. Discussion of the Violation of the Cooperation Principle

### 5.1. The Violation of the Maxim of Quantity

E.g. (1):

Al: What do you do here nights?

Max: They eat the dinner. They all come here and eat the big dinner.

E.g. (2):

Al: *Another bright boy, Ain't he a bright boy, Max?*

Max: *The town's full of bright boys.*

In conversation (1), it takes between the two killers who know the reason they come here, but one still asks another why he is here tonight. The other replies that he has dinner and repeats “*eat the big dinner*” at second time. Information is more informative than required. The repetition uses the word “*big*” to describe and “*the*” refer to dinner in particular. Actually, the big dinner refers to their plan. Bright boy is what the two killers call Nick and George in conversation (2). They say that everyone in town is a bright boy. The tautology of this utterance emphasizes some implicature that the killers want to warn others. The propositional meaning seems to be in praise of others, but in fact, the implied meaning is like a warning. Tautology is a special violation of the maxim of quantity. Taking the “bright boy” as an example, from the meaning of this phrase, it's just a compliment. But actually, the killers repeatedly express it as a warning on a deeper level to tell the others to be wise and not to overreach themselves. The tautology highlights the connotation meaning it refers to, attracts readers' attention and triggers readers' reflection on the deep content.

The lack of informative information makes the narrative style of detective fiction more prominent, creates a mysterious and weird atmosphere and also makes the killer's purpose more obscure. The violation of the maxim of quantity in different aspects leaves more room for readers to image and more possibilities are set in the fiction.

E.g. (3):

George: What are you going to kill Ole Andreson for? What did he ever do to you?

Max: He never had a chance to do anything to us. He had never even seen us.

Al: And he's only going to see us once.

E.g. (4):

Andreson: What was it?

Nick: I was up at Henry's, and two fellows came in and tied up me and the cook, and they said they were going to kill you.

It sounded silly when he said it. Ole Andreson said nothing.

George just wants to know why the two killers murder Andreson in conversation (3). But one of the two killers, Max does not clearly explain the reason and his answer lacks of sufficient information. It makes readers more want to know why they come here to murder Andreson. Contribution is less informative than required. When the speaker provides a small amount of information, it can depict the speaker's personality, leave a sense of mystery for the audience, and let the audience have more imagination space. In conversation (4), after the two killers left, Nick runs to inform Andreson. Generally, when Nick tells him the thing, the conversation would normally go on, but Andreson keeps silent. The conversation comes to a screeching halt and violates the maxim of quantity for lacking sufficient information. The lack of information, on the one hand, reflects the indifference and numbness of Andreson to this fact. At the same time, it makes the language more mysterious and deductive, which arouses the interest of readers.

**5.2. The Violation of the Maxim of Quality**

E.g. (5):

George: *What's yours?*

Max: *I don't know. What do you want to eat, Al?*

Al: *I don't know. I don't know what I want to eat.*

E.g. (6):

Nike: *Don't you want me to go and see the police?*

Ole Andreson: *No, That wouldn't do any good.*

Nike: *Isn't there something I could do?*

Ole Andreson: *No. There ain't anything to do.*

In the conversation (5), when the two killers come into the restaurant, the clerk, George asks the two killers "*What's yours?*" One of the killers says that "*I don't know*" in order to dissemble the embarrassing situation and their true intention. Another killer replies "*I don't know, I don't know what I want to eat.*" Obviously, their answer lacks authenticity and cannot make sense. The conversation (6) takes in the end of the story. When the two killers leave the restaurant, Nick rushes off to tip off Andreson. To his shock, Andreson seems to have known about it, but he can only wait and be killed without doing anything to cope with. When asked whether he would go to the police for help and leave town, Andreson just replies that "*No, that wouldn't do any good.*"

The utterances of the two killers lack authenticity and they express them in a special impractical and unusual way. They violate the maxim of quality. From the utterance produced in an abnormal way makes readers assume that there must be some hidden truth and special reasons. From the perspective of the two killers, they do this in order to cover up their real intention. This makes the article more thought-provoking, so that people have a deeper understanding of the characters. The violation of maxim of quality is to express certain rhetorical effects. It makes the atmosphere of the plot become more intense at the same time, reflect the characters' personalities and arouse the interest of the readers and further develop the plot.

**5.3. The Violation of the Maxim of Relation**

When the speaker deliberately wants to change the subject to avoid embarrassment in the conversation, the maxim of relation will be violated.

E.g. (7):

Al: *Got anything to drink?*

George: *Silver beer, bevo, ginger-ale.*

Al: *I mean you got anything to drink?*

George: *Just those I said.*

Max: *This is a hot town. What do they call it?*

Al: *Summit.*

Al: *Ever hear of it?*

Max: *No.*

E.g. (8):

Nick: *It's an awful thing.*

Nick: *I wonder what he did?*

George: *Double-crossed somebody. That's what they kill them for.*

Nick: *I'm going to get out of this town.*

George: *Yes, That's a good thing to do.*

In conversation (7), the killer Al asks George for something to drink, but another killer interrupts their communication and talks about another unrelated topic. One reason why the killer Max interrupt another killer Al. One reason is it happened in the prohibition period. Another reason is because they first come here and don't know anything about the surrounding. The conversation (8) is the end of the fiction. when the protagonist Nick tip Andreson off and come back, he tells George all the ting and asks the reason why the killers want to kill him. But facing the indifference and inaction of Ole Andreson, Nick makes up his mind and says that he wants to leave the town. Andreson's unusual calmness and numbness hurts his good hear. George says that *"Yes, That's a good thing to do."* It just has little connection with the previous communication. Therefore, he violated the maxim of relation.

In the conversation above, the incoherent topic and single discourse also reflect the social appearance in the fiction enveloped in a kind of boring and silent atmosphere. Through the analyses, the most apparent feature is there is little connection between the former topic and the later topic. The jumping between unrelated topics makes readers confused and wonder so as to know the real reason. In some degree the fiction also becomes more meaningful and profound.

#### 5.4. The Violation of the Maxim of Manner

E.g. (9):

George: *What are you going to kill him for, then?*

Max: *We're killing him for a friend. Just to oblige a friend, bright boy.*

E.g. (10):

Max: *We all know that, bright boy Talk about something else. Ever go to the movies?*

George: *Once in a while.*

Max: *You ought to go to the movies more. The movies are fine for a bright boy like you.*

In conversation (9), George curiously asks Max what's the reason why they murder Andreson, however, the killer does not answer directly and only says that they are entrusted by a friend. In conversation (10), when Mac fails to get useful information about Andreson, the conversation content turns sharply. Max tells George that he should go to the movies which are better for bright people like him. It implies that George should mind his own business and don't ask any more about it. The ambiguity foreshadows the story and hints the plot.

The characters violate the maxim of manner and it makes their words obscure and ambiguous. The violation of maxim of manner hides the true intentions of characters, leaves more room for the readers' imagination and makes the theme of the fiction more prominent. There is no full content or explanation of what they really want to express, so readers can infer some implicature from their dialogue ambiguity. Sentence ambiguity makes the reader more aware of the meaning between the lines in the process of reading. Additionally, it promotes the development of the story and makes the connotation of the fiction deeper and more profound.

#### 6. Conclusion

Through the analysis of the dialogue in *The Killer*, this research reveals the linguistic characteristics of western detective fiction to us. Firstly, the linguistic characteristics in western detective fiction is that the language is oral expression without too much rhetoric and pays attention to the communication between characters and has a strong sense of authenticity and substitution. The discourse sometimes is redundant or incomplete in order to emphasize a subject or intention by violating the maxim of quantity. The indirect, redundant or less informative expression makes the language afford for thought and be suspenseful and further arouses readers' curiosity. Secondly, the discourse in western detective fiction is not only rhythmical and deductive but also absurd and although some words superficially make no sense and confusing, they are puns in certain situations. In addition, due to some specific and hidden purpose of the characters, which generally includes violent crime, murder and other purposes, the purpose of these characters cannot be directly stated. Among different characters, when their communication talks about these, in order to conceal its true purpose, thus violating the maxim of relation or manner, it hides its purpose by changing the topic or making the language difficult to understand. This makes the language of the characters have more overtones, leaving more imagination for the readers and also makes the readers further think about the connotation of the story so as to

further promote the development of the novel plot. Thirdly, the discourse is intriguing, exaggerated and emotional and also contains unrealistic utterance. The discourse applies some figures of speech including: exaggerations, similes and others. Characters say some unrealistic contents to convey feelings and specific purposes. The complex and contradictory relationships between different characters and the characters' characteristics and emotions will be reflected. Through violation of the maxim of quality, exaggerated language is used to express some characters' feelings or emotion, such as threat and intimidation. Some unrealistic utterances help the listener accurately understand the speaker's real intention, make the expression more vivid. Through the analysis of discourse in western detective fiction, we can find that the discourse flexibly uses dialogues to make detective fiction play the function of entertainment while making the discourse artistic. By stimulating readers' interest and mind, it meets the different psychological needs of different readers at different levels and greatly enhances the aesthetic value.

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