

Analysis of the Conversational Meaning of *The Great Gatsby* in Terms of the Principles of Cooperation

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Abstract: *The Great Gatsby*, as Fitzgerald's masterpiece, is a striking depiction of the American landscape with unique artistic techniques and a contemplation of the traditional theme of the "American dream". Being an excellent work of literature, it has been the subject of many studies by scholars from different perspectives. The application of pragmatic theory to the study of literary works was proposed by some linguists in the 1970s. Since then, pragmatic theories have been increasingly applied to the analysis of literary works. Nowadays, the principle of cooperation has become one of the most important principles in discourse analysis. In this paper, the dialogue of the characters in *The Great Gatsby* will be selected and studied using the four maxims of Cooperative Principle, namely, quality, quantity, relation, manner as a theoretical framework to unveil the hidden meanings in the characters' discourses, in order to deepen the understanding of the characters in the novel.

Keywords: *The Great Gatsby*; conversational meaning; principle of cooperation; the maxim of quality; the maxim of quantity; the maxim of relation; the maxim of manner

1. Introduction

The *Great Gatsby* tells the story of Gatsby's short life in pursuit of his dreams of money and love, which were all but destroyed. Speaking about the relationship between literature and linguistics, many scholars point out that pragmatics is a powerful weapon of linguistics for the study and analysis of the linguistic features of literature. As one of the main principles of pragmatics, the principle of cooperation plays an important role in the analysis of discourse and literature. This paper is an attempt to use the principle of cooperation in pragmatics to analyze the dialogue of the characters in *The Great Gatsby* in order to get a more detailed understanding of the theme of the text[1-2].

2. The Theory of the Principle of Cooperation

The cooperative principle is a concept developed by Paul Grice in his lecture "Logic and the Conversation". Grice argues that in all conversations both the speaker and the listener need to adhere to certain principles of conversation. In other words, both speaker and hearer should mutually cooperate with each other. The theory that Paul Grice presented actually attempts to bridge the gap between what participants in conversation say and what they mean. (Hossain, 2021)

Grice proposes the following four guidelines for the principles of cooperation: (1) The Maxim of Quality, don't say things you know to be false, don't say things you don't have evidence for; (2) The Maxim of Quantity, i.e., make what you say as detailed as required to meet the present purpose of the conversation; (3) The Maxim of Relation, make what you say relevant to the subject; (4) The Maxim of Manner, Avoid obscurity of expression; avoid ambiguity; be brief (avoid unnecessary prolixity); be orderly.(Zheng, 2019)

These four maxims help participants convey information correctly, understand the speaker's implicit meaning, and avoid misunderstandings. Whereas, in practice, there are times when both parties violate the principle of cooperation by asking the other party to go beyond the literal meaning of the sentence in order to understand the "meaning beyond the words" in a way that is consistent with the guidelines. The purpose of Grice to propose violations is to explore how interlocutors produce literal and implicit meanings by violating the cooperative rule, how conversational meanings are produced, and how their true meanings are expressed.

The conversations in the novel exert a vital influence in promoting the development of the plot and enhancing the reader's understanding of the theme. This paper analyses the conversational meanings of

typical discourses in *The Great Gatsby* based on the principles of cooperation, with the aim of exploring the personalities and inner worlds of various novel characters[3-4].

3. The Specific Application of the Principle of Cooperation in the Novel

In *The Great Gatsby*, characters repeatedly express conversational meanings by violating the principle of cooperation. In this study, several representative sets of dialogues are selected to analyze the conversational content in terms of violations of the principles of quality, quantity, relation and manner, which in turn reveal the inner sentiment of the characters.

3.1. Violation of the Maxim of Quality

If a speaker says words that are not true or have insufficient evidence, then he or she is in violation of the maxim of quality, which invites the other party to make sense of the speaker's true feelings or thoughts. There is a conversation between Gatsby and his love interest, Tom, which takes place when Gatsby visits Tom and Daisy for the first and only time. During the chat, they decide to go into town together for a bit of fun. Before departure, out of courtesy and goodwill, Gatsby says, "Shall we all go in my car?" (Fitzgerald, 2019:65) suggesting that they all go together in his car. But Tom, trying to show his dominance, offers, "Well, you take my coupe and let me drive your car to town. (65)" It is obvious that Gatsby is unsatisfied with Tom's suggestion, but he does not reject it outright; instead, his explanation is that there is not enough gas. However, Gatsby's words are spurious, as the car's gauges show that it is full, so he violates the quality principle by indirectly rejecting Tom's uncomfortable offer in order to maintain politeness and avoid conflicts. Simultaneously, the word "drug-store" is continually repeated in Tom's discourse, for example when he says: "And if it runs out, I can stop at a drug-store. You can buy anything at a drug-store nowadays. (65)" Tom takes advantage of Gatsby's past as a druggist by constantly attacking and mocking him. In contrast to Gatsby's humble origins, Tom enters the upper class with ease, having inherited his family's fortune. Hereditary wealth leads Tom to indulge in hypocrisy and arrogance. His speech and mannerisms all reflect his superiority as an old-fashioned bourgeois, which accounts for his disdain and contempt to Gatsby. Wealth has hardened Tom. He is careless, heedless, at a secure and indifferent distance from trouble, never facing the necessity to pay attention or minister to others. It is not that they are thoughtless but, rather, that they "think in money." (William E, 2020)

Furthermore, there is a conversation between Daisy and Nick. Nick has promised Gatsby that he can help him arrange a private meeting with his cousin Daisy. Nick calls Daisy to go to the appointment alone and not to bring Tom, to which Daisy does not reply "Yes, I won't", but asks "Who is Tom? (44)" Daisy is acting as if she does not know who Tom is, when in fact Tom is her husband. Daisy's answer does not correspond to reality and violates the maxim of quality, thus creating a conversational meaning. The real connotation she is trying to convey is that she does not want to and will not take Tom out on a date. This is an indication that Daisy is a hypocritical and faithless woman. She is not the perfect lover Gatsby dreams of.

3.2. Violation of the Maxim of Quantity

It may seem contrary to the principle of quantity for the speaker to say more or less, but in reality, by receiving too much or too little information, the listener understands the speaker's true intentions, either to express ridicule of others, or to try to hide something. (Gao & Liu, 2019) In the novel, there is a conversation between Gatsby and Nick when they first have lunch together. Gatsby anxiously asks Nick if he is angry about what happened in the car this morning, saying "I'm afraid I made you a little angry this morning in the car. (37)" Nick could have simply replied "Yes, I am angry" or "No, I am not angry". But his answer gives more information than is needed. Nick says: "I don't understand why you won't come out frankly and tell me what you want." He tells Gatsby that he doesn't like mystery and asks Gatsby why he doesn't ask himself and ask Miss Baker instead. Whereas, Gatsby's answer does not give enough information to explain this. He just says that Miss Baker is a good person. This embodies that Nick's words violate the principle of quantity in order to express his dissatisfaction and his desire for the truth. Likewise, Gatsby's answer also violates the principle of quantity because he does not want Nick to know his true intentions. This dialogue witnesses Nick's character of pursuing honesty and sincerity. Honesty and sincerity are one of Nick's hallmarks and underpins his reputation as a reliable narrator. His search for honest behavior and sincere feelings, as well as his keen insight into the falsity of personality and society, induce him to be weary of the decadent life in the East and eventually return to the West. But Nick also has two sides. In the face of his girlfriend Jordan's dishonest behavior and the truth of the

car accident, he chooses to remain silent, which allows some scholars to claim that he is a "hypocrite wearing a mask of hypocrisy", but in essence, this duality echoes the inner contradiction of human beings.

What's more, there is a dialogue between Nick and Gatsby in Chapter 5 of the novel, which takes place when Nick meets Gatsby on his way home. After a period of time, Nick begins to feel closer to Gatsby, but Gatsby's job and his background remain a mystery to Nick. Later, Jordan tells Nick about Gatsby's "past" with Daisy and that Gatsby's purpose in approaching him is to help him get back together with Daisy. Nick is disappointed and even a little resentful of Gatsby. In response to Gatsby's warm invitation, Nick says "It's late", clearly Nick has not provided enough information to refuse Gatsby's invitation, violating the maxim of quantity, which implies that Nick is not subjectively trying to refuse Gatsby's invitation, but is doing so for objective reasons to make the refusal seem subtle and polite[5-6].

3.3. Violation of the Maxim of Relation

The speaker's hope that the listener will understand the meaning of the conversation by saying something unrelated to the subject of the conversation is called a violation of the relation principle. The reasons for this may be that the speaker wants to end the conversation quickly to hide something, or to express a certain emotional attitude of the speaker. In *The Great Gatsby*, Nick tells Gatsby that he has made an appointment with Daisy to come to his house and have tea with Gatsby. Gatsby asks Nick in a very polite way what day would be convenient and not cause him any trouble. Nick says, "I don't want to put you to any trouble... How about the day after tomorrow? (43)" Gatsby thinks for a moment and says, "I want to get the grass cut." without specifying which day. Gatsby's response appears to have little relevance to the question. After all, it is immoral for Gatsby to have a secret meeting with Daisy, a married woman. Gatsby's conscience prevents him from answering Nick directly. In doing so, he violates the principle of relevance. Here Gatsby is in fact euphemistically agreeing to Nick's request. The lawn in front of Nick's house is the lawn that Gatsby wants to cut, since it is rather overgrown and ragged. This is a reflection of the importance Gatsby attaches to this meeting and his desire to make a good impression on Daisy. Seeing from Gatsby's reaction, we can reach that he is grateful for Nick's help and genuinely doesn't want to get Nick involved, which shows not only that Gatsby is a genuine gentleman, but also his inner nervousness at the prospect of meeting Daisy.

There is a dialogue in the novel between Tom, Nick and Daisy. Daisy has been talking about leisure activities, while Nick is more interested in livelihood issues such as crops, so Nick asks directly "Can you talk about crops or something? (7)", obviously violating the maxim of relation and making Daisy understand that he doesn't want to continue the previous conversation. From Nick's response, it is clear that Nick is a straightforward and non-materialistic person, in contrast to Daisy's vanity and materialism. Later, Tom suddenly interrupts their dialogue by saying "civilization is going to pieces", expressing his fear and concern about the decline of civilization, which is obviously inconsistent with the content of the conversation, therefore violating the maxim of relation. The superiority of being in the upper class leads Tom to keep talking about science, art, social news and other topics to show that he is profound, but in fact he definitely lacks in intellectuality, so his answer seems abrupt. This dialogue reflects the spiritual barrenness and corruption of people like Daisy and Tom, as well as Tom's arrogance, pretension and love of face.

3.4. Violation of the Maxim of Manner

The principle of manner requires both speakers to be as clear and concise as possible, but sometimes the speaker will say something deliberately ambiguous to convey the meaning of the conversation, requiring the listener to analyze and understand the speaker's intentions.(Han, 2016) In *The Great Gatsby*, there is a conversation between Daisy and Nick in which Gatsby and Daisy sneak out into the back garden when no one is looking, and Daisy says to Nick, "In case there's a fire or a flood... or any act of God.(56) " It is clear that Daisy is violating the maxim of manner. Her true intention is to get Nick to guard her backyard entrance because she fears that Tom might discover her affair with Gatsby. Instead of saying it directly, Daisy uses a more euphemistic and subtle way of referring to potential crises, such as fire or flooding, thus giving a hint to Nick. We can see here that Daisy is selfish, hypocritical, pretentious and money-grubbing, rather than the perfect lover Gatsby had in mind. Despite the fact that her marriage to Tom is in tatters, she is not prepared to give up her upper-class status and her life of comfort and pleasure. Her dull and hopeless married life leads her to seek solace in Gatsby, but in fact she doesn't love him that much, she only loves herself, which explains her later plot with Tom to blame Gatsby for the accident while they slip away, reflecting the indifference, hypocrisy and carelessness of the upper class[7].

Besides, when Tom asks Gatsby, "By the way, Mr. Gatsby, I understand you're an Oxford man. (70)" Gatsby replies, "Not exactly." Gatsby doesn't directly answer "Yes, I am" or "No, I'm not", he deliberately gives an ambiguous answer, which shows that Gatsby does not want to discuss the subject because it is not something that happened. In order to win Daisy's favor, Gatsby hides his humble origins and pretends to be a highly educated aristocrat. (Cui, 2021) However, Gatsby's demeanor is full of holes. By asking this question, Tom is actually reminding Gatsby that he already knows he is lying, reflecting Tom's sensitivity, selfishness and condescension.

4. Conclusion

This essay has analyzed the conversational meanings of the typical characters' conversations in *The Great Gatsby* using the principles of cooperation as a theoretical framework. At the same time, based on the analysis of the conversational meanings of the characters, the character traits of the novel are further analyzed, which enables readers to have a deeper understanding of the novel and confirms the feasibility and validity of applying pragmatics theory to literary works.

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