

## Some Instances of Violation and Flouting of the Maxim of Quantity by the Main Characters (Barry & Tim) in Dinner for Schmucks

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**Abstract.** The focus of this study is to analyze the extent to which the maxim of quantity is either violated or flouted by the two main characters, in a movie entitled “*Dinner for Schmucks*”. In addition, it seeks to find if there is any occasion in which one party opts out of the conversation. *Dinner for Schmucks* is an American movie which is the second version of A French film *Le Diner de Cons*; (dinner game). The reason for selecting this movie is that it has a comedy genre and as it is common in most comedies, one of the characters favorably and expectedly has the most loquacious trait, and there is a great chance that he/she repeatedly either violates or flouts the conversational maxims. Therefore, it is noteworthy to take a close look at conversational exchanges in such movies. The findings of this study indicate that in five occasions the characters violated the maxim of quantity. Based on the findings of the study, it can be concluded that although cooperative principle describes the best practices in communication in order to facilitate the process of conversation to be smoother for both the listener and speaker, people frequently disobey these maxims in order to achieve certain purposes. In *Dinner for Schmucks*, as demonstrated in the study, Barry; an ordinary man who viewed the world with optimism and simplicity, either violates or flout the maxim of quantity more than Tim, an educated man from upper- middle class, does. In most of the instances, Barry was talkative, redundant, and occasionally uninformative, and these factors were in line with his genuine character in the movie. The constant violation of the maxim of quantity by Barry seems to place the character in a higher position in terms of verbal humor. It can also be stated that comedies, mostly, portray a reverse relationship between the verbal humor and social status of individuals. This can justify Tim’s single flouting of the maxim of quantity.

**Keywords:** Gricean maxims, Cooperative Principle, maxim of quantity, violation of maxims, flouting of maxims

### 1. Introduction

Perhaps, the most salient part of human communication is epitomized in a conversation. The conversation, itself, as a reciprocal act, retains specific rules and regulations. For the most part, it incorporates topic nomination, turn-taking, negotiation of meaning, etc (Markee & Kasper, 2004). However, to convey the meaning through the medium of communication, interlocutor should follow certain strategies or what the language philosopher H. P. Grice (1975) has termed as Cooperative Principle (CP). The principle consists of four maxims: quality, quantity, relevance, and manner, which represents how people are anticipated to perform in a conversation, in general. In other words, the CP imposes certain restrictions on participants to adjust their speech in correspondence with the maxims.

#### 1.1. Violation of Maxims

Violation, according to Grice (1975), takes place when speakers intentionally refrain to apply certain maxims in their conversation to cause misunderstanding on their participants’ part or to achieve some other purposes. The following are examples of violation in the four aforementioned maxims:

- Mother: Did you study all day long?

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- Son who has been playing all day long: Yes, I've been studying till now!

In this exchange, the boy is not truthful and violates the maxim of quality. He lies to avoid unpleasant consequences such as; punishment or to be forced to study for the rest of the day.

- John: Where have you been? I searched everywhere for you during the past three months!
- Mike: I wasn't around. So, what's the big deal?

John poses a question, which he needs to be answered by Mike. What Mike says in return does not lack the truth, however is still insufficient. This can be due to the fact that Mike prefers to refrain from providing John with the answer. John's sentence implies that Mike has not been around otherwise he did not have to search everywhere. John does not say as much as it is necessary to make his contribution cooperative. Hence, he leaves his listener unsatisfied.

- Teacher: Why didn't you do your homework?
- Student: May I go and get some water? I'm so thirsty.

In the above exchange, the student's answer is by no means relevant to the teacher's question. One reason for this answer can be the fact that the student is trying to evade the interrogation posed by the teacher.

- Sarah: Did you enjoy the party last night?
- Anna: There was plenty of oriental food on the table, lots of flowers all over the place, people hanging around chatting with each other...

Sara asked a very simple question, however what she receives from Anna is a protracted description of what was going on in the party. Two interpretations can be made from Anna's description: 1. Anna had such a good time in the party that she is obviously too excited and has no idea where to begin. 2. Anna had such a terrible time and she does not know how to complain about it.

In addition, the aforementioned example can also be a case of a multiple violation. A multiple violation occurs when the speaker violates more than one maxim simultaneously. In this example, Anna is not only ambiguous (violating the maxim of manner) but also verbose (violating the maxim of quantity) at the same time.

## 1.2. Flouting of maxims

Unlike the violation of maxims, which takes place to cause misunderstanding on the part of the listener, the flouting of maxims takes place when individuals deliberately cease to apply the maxims to persuade their listeners to infer the hidden meaning behind the utterances; that is, the speakers employ implicature (S. C. Levinson, 1983). In the case of flouting (exploitation) of cooperative maxims, the speaker desires the greatest understanding in his/her recipient because it is expected that the interlocutor is able to uncover the hidden meaning behind the utterances. People may flout the maxim of quality so as to deliver implicitly a sarcastic tone in what they state. As in:

Teacher to a student who arrives late more than ten minutes to the class meeting:

- Wow! You're such a punctual fellow! Welcome to the class.
- Student: Sorry sir! It won't happen again.

It is obvious from what the teacher says that he is teasing the student and his purpose is, by no means, praising him. He exploits the maxim of quality (being truthful) to be sarcastic. Likewise, the student seems to notice the purpose behind the teacher's compliment and offers an apology in return. Furthermore, individuals can flout the maxim of quantity to be humorous. As in the most frequently found expression among Iranian youngsters:

Majid and Ali are talking on the phone:

- Ali: Where are you, Majid?
- Majid: I'm in my clothes.

Majid tells the truth because it is expected that people are always in some clothes, yet he flouts the maxim of quantity because the information is insufficient for Ali. While it is not what Ali really tries to find out, he still knows that Majid tries to convey a sense of humor, and the rest of the conversation continue similar to the following statements:

- Ali: That I know. I mean, seriously, where are you man?!!!
- Majid: Well, at work, but I'll be finished in two hours.

Or, they may flout the maxim of relevance to avoid hurting the recipient's feelings:

- Bob: What were you and Anna talking about? You were looking at me all the time!
- Marry: Oh, well... why don't we go get something to drink?

Marry answers Bob question with a suggestion in an obvious attempt to evade it perhaps to avoid hurting Bob's feelings. Hence, she flouts the maxim of relevance. As the rest of the conversation continues, one can notice the reason for this flouting:

- Bob: Are you avoiding this conversation? There has to be something going on about me! Why aren't you brave enough to tell me?
- Marry: Well, you know... they think that you are the one who stole that money.

Some individuals can exploit the maxim of manner, as well:

- Wife: Darling..... What's the story with that new watch on your wrist?
- Husband: Oh, this watch you're talking about! I knew it... I told my boss that my wife would be curious when she sees it. Oh, honey you have no idea how much they're satisfied with my performance, lately!

The husband would be better off if he told his wife from the beginning of the conversation that his boss awarded him a prize. However, he flouts the maxim of manner to assure his wife that the watch was a gift from a person that she also knew and there is no need for jealousy.

## 2. The present study

Tupan and Natalia (2008) in their investigation of multiple violations of characters in *Desperate Housewives* TV series, exploited Grice's cooperative principle and criteria of lying developed by Christoffersen 2005 (cited in Tupan and Natalia, 2008) to investigate the purpose of violating maxims by different characters. The findings of their study revealed that the purpose of violating maxims was, mainly, to eliminate the chance of speakers to respond. Similarly, other researchers (e.g: Kalliomaki, 2005 & xiao-hong, 2007) further examined conversational exchanges in different movies and came up with interesting results. In the light of the aforementioned studies, the present paper is a descriptive quantitative analysis of a movie entitled *Dinner for Schmucks*. The objective is to explore the extent to which the maxim of quantity is either violated or flouted by two characters of this movie. In addition, it sought to find if there is any occasion in which one party opts out of the conversation.

### 2.1. Movie analysis

#### 2.1.1. Plot

*Dinner for Schmucks* is an American movie and the second version of A French film *Le Diner de Cons* (dinner game). The American movie is the account of Timothy Conrad (the main character of the story starring Paul Rudd) who seeks a promotion from his boss to marry the girl he loves. Tim is promised a higher position upon attending the so-called "party for winners" only if he brings along an eccentric person with some peculiarities. Tim, later, realizes the evil intention behind the ceremony, which is mocking the most talented guest and explains everything to his fiancée. Thus, she asks Tim not to attend it. The following day, Tim hits a man named Barry Speck (starring Steve Carell) with his car. When Barry offers to give Tim some money so that he can compensate for hitting his car, Tim decides to invite the man to the party, irrespective of the promise he has made to her fiancée. At the end of the movie, Tim becomes ashamed of the

way he has been treating Barry. He confesses everything before the guests and acknowledges that Barry is an exceptional person who should be treated with respect.

### 2.1.2. Why dinner for Schmucks?

The reason for selecting this movie for the purpose of analysis was its comedy genre. From the author's perspective, as it is common in most comedies, one person is favorably and expectedly to have the most loquacious character and there is a great chance that he/she repeatedly either violates or flouts the conversational maxims. Thus, it is worthwhile to take a close look at conversational exchanges in this type of movies.

## 3. Methodology

This study provides a descriptive account of selected utterances by the two main characters of *Dinner for Schmucks*, namely, Tim Conrad and Barry Speck. The researcher sorted the utterances and collected those in which the maxim of quantity is either flouted or violated. The criterion for this collection is based on two subcategories of the Gricean maxim of quantity (the quantity of information to be provided).

- Make your contribution as informative as is required (for the current purpose of exchange).
- Do not make your contribution more informative than is required. (Grice, 2002, p. 26-27)

Based on these two criteria as well as a review of the current literature (Carston, 2005; Sawada, 2009), it was supposed that redundancy, circumlocution, and talkativeness are among the factors that either violate or flout the maxim of quantity.

## 4. Findings

### 4.1. Violation of the maxim of quantity by Barry and Tim

The findings of this study indicated that there are five occasions in which the maxim of quantity is violated by Tim and Barry, with Barry violating the maxim four times and Tim only once. The below excerpt from the movie is an example of a violation of the maxim of quantity by Barry:

Setting: after Tim's hitting Barry with his car

- Tim: You said you are fine, but what would it take to keep the lawyers out?
- Barry: Five...Five dollars!
- Tim (with surprise): I don't...what? What do you mean?
- Barry: Ten dollars!
- Tim: Seriously, what? Come on!
- Barry: How much do you want? One hundred dollars!
- Tim: I don't want anything!

Barry does not understand the whole purpose of Tim's question; that is, the bribe Tim proposes to him. Scared of Tim's question, Barry finds himself guilty for hitting Tim's elegant Porsche and thinks of bribing him so as not to face judicial persecution. Thus, he starts offering Tim some money, which in turn, puzzles Tim. Hence, Barry violates the maxim of quantity by asking several short questions, such as, "five dollars?" "Ten dollars?" that are not as uninformative and momentarily makes Tim think that it is big sum that Barry is after. Tim's violation of the maxim of quantity, on the other hand, occurs when he asks Barry to accompany him to a ceremony after he finds out that Barry has the peculiar character he is searching for (which Barry accepts unquestionably). Hence, Tim is being truthful because there is a dinner party on the following day, but he still is not as informative as is necessary to make Barry aware of the whole purpose behind the party. Thus, from researchers' perspective, he violates the maxim of quantity (See the following excerpt from the movie).

- Tim: You know, Barry, this was a very strange way to meet, but I think everything happens for a reason.
- Barry: Wow! Wow! Did you just make that up?
- Tim: Yeah!

- Barry (repeating Tim's utterance): 'Everything happens for a reason!' I like that.
- Tim: Thanks, Anyway! Tomorrow, I'm having dinner with some friends.
- Barry: Are you? Oh, that's incredible. Congratulations!
- Tim: I was wondering. Would you like to join us?

#### 4.2. Flouting of the maxim of quantity by Barry and Tim

The following excerpt from the movie indicates one of the occasions in which the maxim of quantity is flouted by Tim:

Setting: Tim's house: Barry and Tim are sitting at the table. Time is upset because Barry has met Julie in the hallway and mistakenly told her everything about Tim's story with another girl and now Julie has left Tim.

- Tim (resentfully): I think you need to get out of my house in the next thirty seconds before I just, I beat you to death with the chair you're sitting in.
- Barry: What?
- Tim: You have to go. I want you to go!
- Barry: Who's gonna help you with Julie?!
- Tim (repeating Barry's utterance): Who's gonna help me with Julie?! Oh, you didn't just say that, did you?

In this excerpt, Tim is being both talkative and redundant. A good reason is that he is probably extremely angry at Barry because of what he has done to him. The next excerpt is also one of the occasions in which Barry flouts the maxim of quantity:

Setting: Tim arrives at the party and is surprised to find Barry there.

- Tim: Why ... Why are you here?!
- Barry: Because that's what friend's do. I know, I know, I chose some words carelessly! I know that you were in a dark place, but I also know that you need to show your boss that you are friend of the winner.

In the above exchange, Barry could have simply told Tim that he is there to help him and win the contest so that Tim could gain the promotion, but his purpose of supplying more explanation is to cheer Tim. Barry is being too talkative in the last lines of the exchange, but he does not cause any misunderstanding for Tim as his addressee.

### 5. Conclusion

The study was set to reveal the instances of the violation or flouting of the maxim of quantity by two main characters of *Dinner for Schmucks*. In addition, the researcher was eager to find out whether there was any occasion in which one party opts out of the conversation. Based on the findings of the study, it can be concluded that although cooperative principle describes best practices in a conversation in order to facilitate the process of conversation to be smoother for both the listener and the speaker, people frequently disobey these maxims in order to achieve certain purposes. In *Dinner for Schmucks*, as demonstrated in the study, Barry, an ordinary man with a simplistic view of all life, violates the maxim of quantity, mostly through redundancy, talkativeness, and circumlocution, more than does Tim, an educated serious-minded character from the upper-middle class. In most of the instances, as anticipated earlier in this study, Barry was talkative, redundant, and occasionally uninformative, and these factors were in line with his genuine character in the movie. The constant violation of the maxim of quantity by Barry seems to place the character in a higher position in terms of verbal humor. It can also be stated that comedies, mostly, portray a reverse relationship between the verbal humor and social status of individuals. This can justify Tim's single flouting of the maxim of quantity.

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