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CONVERSATIONAL IMPLICATURE IN AGATHA CHRISTIE'S INTERROGATION DIALOGUES

G'ofurjonova Nurjahon Yorqinbek qizi
First-Year Master's Student
Uzbekistan State World Languages University
gofurjonovanurjahon@gmail.com
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Abstract

This paper investigates conversational implicature as a key linguopragmatic mechanism in the interrogation dialogues of Agatha Christie's detective fiction. The study analyzes how suspects and witnesses generate implied meaning to conceal information by flouting or violating the Cooperative Principle and four conversational maxims – Quality, Quantity, Relation and Manner as proposed by H.P.Grice. The findings show that the maxims of Quantity and Manner are frequently flouted to conceal information, yet the implicatures generated are skillfully detected by Poirot. The study contributes to literary pragmatics by demonstrating that detective fiction is a rich site for pragmatic analysis.

Keywords: implicature, Grice, Cooperative Principle, detective fiction, Agatha Christie, pragmatics, interrogation

Аннотация

В данной статье исследуется конверсационная импликатура как ключевой лингвопрагматический механизм в диалогах допросов детективной прозы Агаты Кристи. В исследовании анализируется, каким образом подозреваемые и свидетели порождают подразумеваемый смысл с целью сокрытия информации посредством нарушения или обхода Принципа кооперации и четырёх конверсационных максим — качества, количества, релевантности и способа, — предложенных Г. П. Грайсом. Результаты показывают, что максимы количества и способа нарушаются наиболее часто, однако порождённые импликатуры мастерски распознаются Пуаро. Исследование вносит вклад в область литературной прагматики, демонстрируя, что детективная проза является богатым материалом для прагматического анализа.

Ключевые слова: импликатура, Грайс, Принцип кооперации, детективная проза, Агата Кристи, прагматика, допрос, нарушение максим, конверсационные максимы

Annotatsiya

Ushbu maqolada Agata Kristi detektiv asarlaridagi tergov muloqotlari misolida so‘zlashuvdagi yashirin ma’no asosiy lingvopragmatik mexanizm sifatida tadqiq etiladi. Ishda gumonlanuvchi va guvohlarning G. P. Grays tomonidan ilgari surilgan Kooperatsiya tamoyili va uning to‘rtta kategoriyasi (sifat, miqdor, moslik hamda uslub maksimasi)ga amal qilmasligi natijasida yashirin ma’no (implikatura) qanday yuzaga kelishi tahlil qilinadi. Tadqiqot natijalari shuni ko‘rsatadiki, asarlarda miqdor va uslub maksimalarining buzilishi ko‘proq kuzatiladi, biroq yuzaga kelgan yashirin ma’nolar detektiv Erkyul Puaro tomonidan mohirlik bilan ochib beriladi. Mazkur maqola detektiv proza pragmatik tahlil uchun boy manba ekanini ko‘rsatib, adabiy pragmatika sohasini yangi qarashlar bilan boyitishga xizmat qiladi.

Kalit so'zlar: implikatura, Grays, Kooperatsiya tamoyili, detektiv proza, Agata Kristi, pragmatika, so'roq, maksimani buzish, konversatsion maksimalar

Introduction

Language in detective fiction serves not only to narrate events, but also to build suspense and imply hidden meanings, especially in dialogue. Agatha Christie, one of the most celebrated detective fiction writers, masterfully exploits this linguistic dimension in her interrogation scenes. In particular, the ways in which suspects flout conversational maxims to conceal information reveal how implied meaning drives plot resolution. This paper investigates how conversational implicature operates in Christie's interrogation dialogues through the lens of Grice's Cooperative Principle.

Theoretical framework

Grice (1975) proposed that human communication is governed by the Cooperative Principle, arguing that speakers naturally orient their contributions toward mutual communicative goals. Grice published his seminal paper, "Logic and Conversation," in which he introduced the principle that speakers are expected to make their conversational contributions based on what is required by the purpose and direction of the conversation (Grice, 1975, p. 45).

Under this principle, Grice identified four maxims. The first is the maxim of Quantity, which requires that speakers be as informative as needed without saying more than necessary. The maxim of Quality states that people should only say what they believe to be true and have evidence for. The maxim of Relation simply requires that contributions be relevant, while the maxim of Manner demands clarity — avoiding ambiguity, obscurity, and unnecessary wordiness.

Although Grice establishes these maxims, speakers do not always follow them. According to Grice, speakers can fail to observe maxims in different ways, most notably through flouting or violating them. Flouting — the more significant of the two — occurs when a speaker breaks a maxim so obviously that the listener notices and looks for a hidden meaning. In his famous example, when A asks how C is getting on at work, B replies: 'Oh quite well, I think; he likes his colleagues, and he hasn't been to prison yet.' Here, B flouts the maxim of Relation by introducing irrelevant information, implying that C may be untrustworthy. This mechanism of flouting can also be detected in the interrogative dialogues of Christie's works, in which the answers generate implicature that only Poirot can detect.

Literature review

Levinson (1983) further expanded Grice's framework by systematizing the theory - identifying key properties of implicature and applying it to different contexts, including formal interrogative settings. Importantly, Levinson demonstrated that implicatures are calculable, meaning that listeners can logically work out the implied meaning through reasoning. This is particularly relevant to the present study because the suspects generate calculable implicatures that Poirot decodes through the same inferential process Levinson presents.

Toolan (2001) argues that narrative text can go beyond surface-level storytelling by approaching it with systematic linguistic attention. His work suggests that fictional conversation operates by the same principles as real communication, which supports the application of pragmatic frameworks to literary dialogue.

Scaggs (2005) notes that detective fiction is built around the gap between appearance and reality. This is precisely the space where implicature operates – where what is said and what is meant diverge most significantly, and where the detective must intervene through close linguistic observation.

Sperber and Wilson (1986) further argue that communication is driven by the search for relevance, meaning that listeners actively infer the hidden meaning where the maxims are flouted. In detective fiction, for example, when the suspect gives a vague answer, the listener, in our case Poirot, searches for the most relevant interpretation, which is the implicature the suspect is trying to conceal.

Christie's interrogation scenes are particularly rich in conversational implicatures, as suspects consistently flout or violate Grice's maxims to conceal information while Poirot works to decode their implied meanings.

Violation of the Maxim of Quantity

The Maxim of Quantity requires speakers to provide neither more nor less information than is necessary. In Christie's work this is one of the most flouted maxims especially in interrogation scenes.

When Poirot and Race interview the maid, Louise, she provides a hypothetical answer instead of a direct statement about what she saw:

- What could I have seen or heard? I was on the deck below. Naturally, if I had been unable to sleep, if I had mounted the stairs, then perhaps I might have seen this assassin, this monster, enter or leave Madame's cabin, but as it is ...

In this excerpt, the maxim of Quantity was flouted and Poirot interprets this "significant indeterminate rigmarole of words" not as lack of knowledge, but as an implicature which was created by giving hypothetical conditions. Here Louise Bourget's indirectness implies that she saw who was the murderer.

Violation of the Maxim of Quality

In questioning about the "accident" at Abu Simbel, Pennington provides a false statement, claiming he was inside the temple and did not witness the boulder falling:

"And yet," mused Poirot, "there was someone on board who was interested in Madame's removal. She had a near escape before, you remember, at this very place, when that

boulder crashed down—ah! but you were not there, perhaps?"

"No. I was inside the temple at the time. I heard about it afterwards, of course. A very near escape. But possibly an accident, don't you think?"

Poirot is aware that this statement is false, having inspected the temple immediately before the interrogation, making this a clear violation of the Maxim of Quality.

Violation of the Maxim of Relation

The maxim of Relation requires speakers to be relevant to the topic in discussion. This maxim is often flouted when suspects avoid the actual question.

The example of flouting the maxim of Relation can be taken from "Evil Under the Sun", during the interrogation of clergyman Stephen Lane. When asked about factual matters concerning the night of the murder, Lane redirected the conversation speaking about the theological beliefs on existence of the evil on the Earth.

His response to the question asked by investigator is literally irrelevant to the case being investigated. By flouting the maxim of Relation, Lane creates an implicature that is connected to his obsessive focus on the victim. What appears to be a religious outburst is, pragmatically, a deliberate evasion of the question.

Violation of the Maxim of Manner

The maxim of Manner requires speakers to avoid vagueness and obscurity**.** Flouting this maxim causes confusion and misleads the investigation. This is mostly created with silence, vagueness or performed confusion.

In "Death on the Nile" when Rosalie Otterbourne is asked if she saw anyone on the night of the murder, she pauses about twenty seconds and says "I saw nobody". In this case, the prolonged silence and unusual tone violate the expectation of the clear response. Poirot does not accept her words at face value, as her behavior contradicts her literal statement. Her prolonged silence generates an implicature of concealment, suggesting she is lying to protect someone, later revealed to be Tim Allerton.

Conclusion

The study has demonstrated that conversational implicature plays a significant role in shaping the meaning in interrogation dialogues in the works of Agatha Christie. The analysis has shown that suspects and witnesses violate or flout Grice's conversational maxims to conceal crucial information for the case. Among these maxims, the flouting and violation of the maxims of Quantity and Manner are most common, achieved through giving excessive hypothetical details, or deliberately vague and ambiguous responses.

The study also highlights the role of Hercule Poirot whose analytical success relies on his ability to interpret implicature even in simple responses. This means that meaning in conversation does not depend solely on words but also on inference and context. These findings confirm that Christie's dialogues offer rich material for pragmatic analysis, given the consistent divergence between what characters say and what they mean. The study further contributes to literary pragmatics, as applying pragmatic theory such as implicature offers valuable insight into narrative structure and character interaction.

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