

Gricean Implicature in Usman Ali's "*The Last Metaphor*"

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Abstract

This paper takes pragmatic view of Usman Ali's play- The Last Metaphor (2014) by applying H.P. Grice's concept of implicature (1975). The purpose of this research is to discuss the issue of non-compliance to the maxims of conversation and argue that flouting can be a useful, deliberative plan of author to highlight critical issues in absurdist fiction. The study furthers that the dramatic and stylistic effects of language are achieved through flouting the conversational maxims (implicature). This also establishes that words and sentences of the text which apparently violate rules of syntax and grammar, do not necessarily flout the sense of meaning. This research takes a qualitative approach of instances where Grice's maxims are flouted for pragmatic significance. The study concludes with an interesting observation that adaptation to the maxims of conversation is not the only way to make language meaningful; the avoidance of these rules is equally helpful. Flouting enables the text to achieve metaphoric value through sarcasm, irony and exaggeration which make the text semantically rich and analytically debatable.

Key Words: pragmatics, Grice's Maxims, cooperative principle, flouting, implicature

Introduction

Pragmatics is the field of Linguistics which deals with the implied meaning of language through the significance of context in which the utterance has been produced. According to Cutting (2002), pragmatics is significant in providing explanation regarding those aspects of meaning which semantics fail to elaborate. Thomas (1995) differentiates the typologies of meaning which are the concern of pragmatics and semantics. He elaborates that pragmatics concerns itself with the speaker's intention and the context of utterance whereas semantics works on the literal meaning of words or phrases. Grice (1989) argues that in a conversation, people try to cooperate not only to share meaningful information but also to deliver their intentions with which the information is shared. In order to explain the cooperation between the interlocutors, H.P Grice (1975) propounded the notions of the Cooperative principle and Conversational Maxims. He provides rationalistic grounds for participants' cooperation in

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making conversation more meaningful and successful. He states: "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" (1975, p. 48). He presented the following famous four conversational maxims necessary to make a conversation meaningful.

1. Maxim of Quantity
Contribution should be made as informative as is required. The contribution should not be more or less than is needed by the conversational exchange in question.
2. Maxim of Quality
This includes the truth value of the information. What is believed to be false or which lacks adequate evidence should be avoided.
3. Maxim of Relation
Conversation should be made relevant to the context and situation.
4. Maxim of Manner
The expression should be orderly, avoiding any kind of obscurity and ambiguity.

With the help of the Cooperative principle and the general knowledge of the world, the listener/receiver understands and differentiates the pragmatic meaning (what is being implied) from what is being literally stated. (1975, p.47). Grice (1989) discusses the two types of inferences which can be drawn by the speaker and listener in a conversation. One is the direct manner in which the speaker's intention is clearly understood, another is inference made by violating the conversational maxims. Such type of inference is called implicature by Grice (1975) in other words the implied meaning of utterance constitutes implicature in Gricean pragmatics. Thomas (1995) discusses the conversational situations in which the maxims are disobeyed by the participants. They are opting out, infringing and flouting (violating). Opting out occurs when the speaker is not cooperative in taking care of the protocols (the conversational maxims) of conversation. Infringement is caused by the flawed linguistic knowledge of the speaker which may be genetic or situational as in case of a non-native speaker who is not proficient in the target language. Flouting or violation takes place when the speaker is not following the conversational maxims but expects the listener to comprehend the implied meaning.

Objectives of the Study

The study has the following objectives:

1. Flouting conversational maxims is a deliberate linguistic action to create an underlying, implicit message.

2. Absurdist fiction makes use of implicature to make sense of apparently nonsense situations.

Literature review

Zaheer (2021) discusses *The Last Metaphor* and other plays by Ali as literary medium for the portrayal of socio-political culture of Pakistan. She discusses this play as a development against the historical background of Pakistani Drama and Theater milieu. Alam, Khaliq and Jamil (2020) explore *The Last Metaphor* and other works by Ali through the perspective of poetics of anger. Through this research they evaluate the constructive use of anger by the dramatist to depict the social ills of Pakistani society. There are also few blurbs published on *The Last Metaphor* which critically evaluate the thematic and literary values of the play. Ahmed (2020) for instance discusses this play as an extension of Pakistani Anglophone Literature which philosophically represents the social evils facing man of the modern age. Fatima (2020) discusses the various visual imageries, themes and language of the play. Given that the play remains relatively ignored through the perspective of implicature, the current paper takes a pragmatic approach by examining the play through Gricean Implicature to study the importance of flouting conversational maxims in *The Last Metaphor*.

Note

There are certain phrases and words which the author has italicized in the text of the play. In order to avoid ambiguity and highlight or differentiate my emphasis on the same or other part of the text, underlining is used.

Methodology

This paper applies Grice's principle of 'Implicature' on a play *The Last Metaphor* (2014), written by Pakistani writer, Usman Ali. The paper makes qualitative textual analysis of the dialogues which flout the conversational maxims and are thus significant regarding implicature. The research explores the significance of flouting by the characters and discusses the resultant implied meaning which adds to the metaphorical value of the text.

Summary of the Play

The Last Metaphor is a three-act play. This is a story of a character named Jugnoo who by profession is a robber and has gone underground for being a suspect in murdering a famous doctor. He has also witnessed the execution of two brothers in public which he failed to prevent. The

whole play is about Jugnoo's narration of the story about a dead body (which he found and never buried) to his friend named Banka. Jugnoo keeps on guarding the dead body whose identity is only revealed at the end of the play. Banka has come to encourage Jugnoo to re-join the gang as he is their only 'leader'. He urges him by reminding various daring acts of robbery and murders which he committed in the past and that earned fame for their group. Jugnoo on the other hand is persistent to bemoan the rotting dead body which he tried to bury but the earth never accepted. He keeps on sprinkling perfume on the corpse to fix its bad odour and is adamant to dispose it off. The play concludes by the revelation of the corpse's identity which to the audiences' and readers' surprise, is of a dog. The play is a big satire on the modern social values where human life is taken for granted and no reverence and care is shown to the crown of creation which bespeaks of social sickness and degraded moral values.

Discussion

Consider the following scene where Banka asks Jugnoo about the identity of the shrouded dead body. Banka is upset by the obsession of Jugnoo for the corpse which he does not bury neither he lets others to do it.

“BANKA: Who is it?

JUGNOO: (*Pointing towards the body*) Ask him.

BANKA: The dead do not speak.

JUGNOO: Who told you?

BANKA: Everyone knows that.

JUGNOO: You believe what everyone knows.

BANKA: have you spoken to the dead?

JUGNOO: (*Looking at the body*) They speak to everyone.

...

BANKA: What do they say?

JUGNOO: Listen to them before their burials. BANKA. Listen to them before their burials. They speak I promise. They speak. I guarantee. They speak.” (Ali, 2014, p.3)

The underlined reply made by Jugnoo flouts the maxims of quantity, quality and manner. He repeats 'Listen to them before their burials' twice. He reiterates 'They speak' two times. He flouts the maxim of quantity to emphasize on the attention that is needed to listen to the dead and to understand what they have to speak to those who are alive. Syntactically speaking the quoted examples defying the maxim of quantity are sound but they do not make any sense to Banka (perhaps to audience

as well) because Jugnoo flouts maxim of quality. In this maxim the information which is deemed to be false or which cannot be supported by evidence should not be exchanged. Jugnoo is asking Banka to listen to the dead which is impossible because the dead do not speak. He re-emphasizes on the same by repeating 'They speak'. When he guarantees that the dead do speak, Jugnoo flouts the maxim of manner as if he is making Banka a part of his group, his team who can understand his language and the semantic value of his words. The reply is made strictly to Banka and the audience is out grouped.

“JUGNOO: Do you hear it?

BANKA: What?

JUGNOO: Ah! The sound of water in the fire.

BANKA: The sound of water?

JUGNOO: In the fire.

BANKA: Water falling in the sink?

JUGNOO: The sound is coming from the fire.

BANKA: It is coming from the sink.

JUGNOO: From the fire.

BANKA: From the sink.

JUGNOO: From the fire.

...

BANKA: From where?

JUGNOO: FIRE.

BANKA: From the sink.

JUGNOO: From the fire.

BANKA: (Sighing) Yes. From the fire.

JUGNOO: No. From the sink.” (Ali, 2014, pp. 4-5)

When the two look into fire, Jugnoo asks Banka if he can hear the sound of water in the fire. Again the maxim of relevance is flouted as logically speaking, fire cannot produce the sound of water. It thus becomes metaphorical which suggests that what Jugnoo implies is different from what he literally states. The two men then indulge in a seemingly useless debate of reiterating statements- Banka believing that the water sound is coming from sink and Jugnoo unalterably arguing that it is coming from fire. All this is deliberately done to create humour as at the end Banka gives up and admits that the sound is coming from fire and not sink. The comic effect is taken up when Jugnoo changes his view and seconds Banka's opinion at the precise moment when Banka has already given up his view.

“JUGNOO: ...The first act, the shirt is taken off.... The second act, the hands are tied and third act, they are slapped. The fourth act, the spit. The fifth act, the slap. At the end the audience claps.” (Ali, 2014, p. 12)

This is a kind of narrative within narrative recounted by flouting the maxims of conversation. Jugnoo narrates the story of two brothers being persecuted and insulted by police officials in public. The way they were beaten and insulted is narrated as if the steps of punishment were acts of a play. This effect is achieved when Jugnoo flouts the maxim of quantity. The detail is missed out as each sentence is terse especially the ones talking about the fourth and fifth acts- the spit and the slap. Jugnoo thus understates the public insult of the two brothers through monosyllables. The maxim of quality is flouted when Jugnoo relates the punishment scene with a performance at a theatre. The contexts and typology of the two actions are different however through implicature the comparison makes sense. In a theatre the audience are just silent spectators who do not interfere in the act being staged. In the same manner the street people did not meddle with the horrendous happening which ultimately resulted in the death of the two brothers.

The next scene is semantically complicated to be elaborated. In this extract, Jugnoo nostalgically narrates about the 'subject' whom he has seen most probably for the first time. The context of this extract shows that he is talking about the one who is dead now and is taken care of by Jugnoo.

“JUGNOO: (*Sitting on his knees*) He was crossing the road.

BANKA: No one swims.

JUGNOO: No fences on the edges of the road.

BANKA: You do not have to jump in the canal to be dead.

JUGNOO: I was looking at his eyes.

BANKA: No surprise. No one does.

JUGNOO: He had blond hair and a long neck.

BANKA: Dust and black leaves on the surface. Sun light falls and one can see through it. Foul and ill smelling. It does not change. Rain falls into it but it never overflows. At night one can hear it sleeping, snorting.

JUGNOO: He had just woken up from his sleep.

BANKA: It is stronger than the terrorists. Tougher than the police. More composed than the suicide bombers.

JUGNOO: Sun shot its first rays on him.

BANKA: It is waiting.

JUGNOO: He came out of the fog.

BANKA: The monster is very patient.

JUGNOO: Emerging out of a meadow.

BANKA: They live around the stream.

JUGNOO: Floor was grinded in the machine.

BANKA: Their children play near it.

JUGNOO: The bells of a milkman tinkle.

BANKA: More homes are being built around it.

JUGNOO: The tree was wet under which I stood.” (Ali, 2014, pp. 24-25)

Jugnoo keeps on referring to the subject as 'he', with blond hair and lock neck, who was walking on the road and Jugnoo looking at his eyes. Banka on the other hand refers to the same subject as 'it'. He calls it a 'monster' that is patiently waiting for the moment to come out and take over. For Banka this monster is "stronger than the terrorists. Tougher than the police. More composed than the suicide bombers." Banka flouts the maxim of manner and quantity. His description of the 'monster' is too abstract and intangible, the reader goes with the flow of Jugnoo's description of the dead as a living being most probably a human (for the reverence that he shows to its dead body). Banka is more poetical, and vague in his poetical description of the 'subject' where as Jugnoo is more relevant and terse in his description. The maxims of relevance and manner are deliberately flouted by both the characters to create an aura of mystery in the minds of the audience and the readers. This mystery is persistently built on throughout the play- first by not literally showing the dead body as it is shrouded and secondly through Implicature which cognitively and linguistically clouds the knowledge about the identity of the dead.

In another scene, Jugnoo plays a pun on his name. *Jugnoo* stands for firefly in Urdu language.

“JUGNOO: (*Pointing towards the fire*) what is it?

BANKA: Fire.

JUGNOO: What does it do?

BANKA: It burns.

JUGNOO: I do not agree with you!

BANKA: That does not matter.

JUGNOO: That does matter.

(*Silence.*)

BANKA: That does matter.

JUGNOO: That does not matter.

(*Pause*)

JUGNOO: (*Looking at BANKA*) You said something?

BANKA: Something?

(*Silence.*)

JUGNOO: I heard.

BANKA: Are you sure?

JUGNOO: Sure like him. (*Looks at the body*)

JUGNOO: Who named me? (*Pointing towards the fire*).

BANKA: Your mother I guess?

JUGNOO: Firefly. What a name!" (Ali, 2014, pp. 26-27)

When he asks Banka about the function of fire, the question is taken literally by Banka and therefore he replies that 'It burns.' As far as the literal interpretation is concerned the question is aptly answered by Banka but Jugnoo does not agree with Banka's reply. His disagreement suggests that Banka did not catch Jugnoo's implied meaning about the fire. Jugnoo defies the maxim of quality by not explaining the metaphorical sense of the word 'fire' hence Banka takes it literal. Jugnoo however elaborates the metaphor of fire to the pun played on his own name 'fire fly'. In the next line, when Jugnoo says that he heard Banka saying something, he shows his certainty by being as sure as the dead body. The conventional meaning of this gesture may have no meaning or sense but according to the principle of Implicature, it is perfectly sensible with reference to English phrasal expression 'dead sure.' Hence the literal dead body is a reference to the 'dead' of the phrasal expression which Jugnoo utilizes to enact the same phrase which is supposed to be metaphorical in the first place.

In the last scene of the play, the mystery of the dead as a metaphor is revealed. The whole theatrical setup and the back-drops are taken down and destroyed in the fire by Jugnoo. All this is not a mere act of insanity but an implication of something more serious and thought provoking.

"BANKA: (*He stands up.*)

JUGNOO: It is time.

JUGNOO: (*Takes off his mask.*)

BANKA: (*Pointing towards the mask*) What is that?

JUGNOO: Art. (*Throws the mask into the pit.*)

JUGNOO (cont.): (*Comes downstage.*) YOURS?

BANKA: (*Takes off his mask and gives it to JUGNOO.*)

JUGNOO: (*Holding it in his hands*)

BANKA: What is it?

JUGNOO: The system.

JUGNOO: (*JUGNOO brings the rest of the logs and throws them into the pit.*)

BANKA: ... What are these?

JUGNOO: Similes.

JUGNOO: (*He brings the empty bottle of petrol and throws it into the pit*)

BANKA: ... What is that?

JUGNOO: A symbol.

JUGNOO: (*Bring the empty coffee cups and thermos and throws them into the pit*)

BANKA: What are these?

JUGNOO: Images.

JUGNOO: ... Give me your rope.

...

BANKA: What is it?

JUGNOO: Narrative.

JUGNOO: (*Breaking the glass window.... Throws them into the pit*)

BANKA: ... What is that?

JUGNOO: SYSTEM.

...

JUGNOO: (*Brings the pillow and bed sheet... throws them into the pit*)

BANKA: What is that?

JUGNOO: Institutions.

JUGNOO: (*Takes out the pistol... and throws it into the pit of fire*)

BANKA: What is it?

JUGNOO: History.

...

JUGNOO: (*Comes towards the body*)

...

JUGNOO: (*Sits down and removes the white sheet from the body. The body of a dog is discovered. He puts the white cloth around his neck in the form of a scarf.*)

BANKA: Who is he?

JUGNOO: THE LAST METAPHOR. (*Long Silence*)

He was crushed while crossing the road. I did not want his body to rot on the road." (Ali, 2014, pp. 44-45)

All the questions asked by Banka are replied by Jugnoo in monosyllables. This leads to the implicature that these monosyllables do not merely constitute linguistic response but they also act as symbols. Thus, mask becomes a symbol of art, rope the symbol of narrative, pillows and bed sheet as institutions and logs as similes. Jugnoo does not explain any of them. As the details of these metaphors have been eliminated by Jugnoo, the maxim of quantity is flouted. The very title of the play *The Last Metaphor* is symbolized by the dead body of a dog which is literally the last metaphor in the catalogue of metaphors enumerated by Jugnoo. Through flouting of maxims of conversation various metaphors and phrases are created which pragmatically enriches the interpretation of the text. It is through implicature that the whole play becomes a satire on the

current social conditions of Pakistani society where humans (the two brothers in the play) are rescued neither by public nor by Jugnoo. He is rather emotionally and psychologically carried away by a dog's road accident and hence carries around the burden of its dead body. The dog as a metaphor symbolizes the death of humans in the current age as humans dying like dogs. This implication is very much rooted in Urdu language where *kuthay Ki moth merna* means to die like a dog. It evokes all the possible implicatures of painful death. The burden of the last metaphor-dog's corpse reminds one of Coleridge's "The Rime of Ancient Mariner" (1992, p.5), in which the mariner carries the burden of a dead albatross around his neck as a self-punishment for his guilt of shooting it. Jugnoo carrying around the dead body of that dog is suggestive of the same guilt of being a murderer and not being able to stop others from being murdered.

Conclusion

From the above analysis it can be concluded that to convey a meaning, fidelity to the rules of grammar, sentence structure and detail is not the only important rule. Especially for absurdist fiction where details are compromised as compared to novel, Implicature acts as a useful tool to say a lot in few words. On macrocosmic level, by flouting the maxims of conversation, the play portrays serious and comprehensive themes of brutality and corruption prevalent in Pakistani society. Likewise on microcosmic level, through implicature, the metaphor of the dead dog is associated with the death of humanity which is facing the man of modern age. The research interest of this paper may be limited to the pragmatic implications of literary discourse of the play however; flouting the conversational maxims is not only restricted to literary texts. It is equally applicable to daily conversation in order to emphasize or understate information.

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