

# THE APPLICATION OF PRAGMATICS TO TEACHING AND LEARNING ENGLISH LITERATURE: A STUDY OF THE STORY “THE INVISIBLE JAPANESE GENTLEMEN”

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## ABSTRACT

Regarding teaching and learning EFL literature, it is generally considered a tough practice since it requires an extensive knowledge of the English language, context and culture to grasp the content as well as the attitude, message conveyed in works of literature. As an attempt to facilitate the study of EFL literature, this paper aims at discussing an approach that EFL literary works can be analyzed in terms of particular theory of pragmatics such as implicature, the cooperative principle, the four conversational maxims, and speech act. In light of these theories, the conversations in the chosen short story “The Invisible Japanese Gentlemen” were found out to be filled with implied meanings and intentional violation of the cooperative principle, which significantly contributes to the understanding of the characters’ personality.

**Key words:** Conversational Maxims, Implicature, Literature, Pragmatics, Speech Acts

## 1 INTRODUCTION

Pragmatics, from the early moment of appearance, has proved to be an effective tool for interpreting literature. Indeed, pragmatics as an approach to studying the language’s relation to contextual background features is believed to be compatible with that in the study of literature. Accordingly, pragmatics has been applied to analyzing literary works, especially to interpreting characters’ utterances, discovering character’s personality, and preferably to unfolding the implied meaning of these works.

As we can see in daily communication, people rarely say what they really mean. Their utterances may convey far more different meanings from what their words actually say. It is no doubt that in conversation with others people may suffer from mutual misleading. How can listeners/readers interpret the actual meanings of speaker/writer’s utterance? Those different meanings are considered in pragmatics as implicature. In order to explain the mechanism by which people interpret conversational implicature, Paul Grice introduced the Cooperative Principle and four Conversational Maxims. He believed that through observing the principle and maxims above, people can figure out conversational implicature, and thus can be successful in communication. However, in real life, there are conversational situations in which a person is almost unable to communicate with and fully understand another human being. The conversations in literary works are not the exception. The failure of conversation between two main characters in the short

story “The invisible Japanese gentlemen” is a vivid illustration. In the light of pragmatics theory such as implicature, four conversational maxims and speech acts, readers can thoroughly grasp the inner feelings as well as the personality traits of these two characters.

## **2 THEORY BACKGROUND**

### **2.1 Summary of the story**

“The invisible Japanese gentlemen” was written by Graham Green, one of the most popular twentieth century English authors. He writes over thirty novels as well as a number of successful plays, short stories. A lot of his novels and stories display his acute observation of people and places, often involving an air of mystery and suspense.

The story takes place at Bentley's, a restaurant in London. The narrator is sitting at a table, seemingly alone, and observes a group of eight Japanese gentlemen having dinner together. Beyond them is a young British couple. The Japanese speak rarely to each other in their language, always smiling and bowing. Seven of them wear glasses. They provide a mildly farcical background to the main focus of the narrator's attention, the couple. Although they sit farthest away, the narrator overhears their conversation. The pretty young woman is a writer, having her first novel accepted for publication. She's describing her plans to her fiancé, how Mr. Dwight, her publisher, lauds her talent, and how she wants to travel the world, especially to France, so as to feed her inspiration. She also wants to marry her young fiancé the following week, being convinced that their financial future is settled thanks to the inevitable success of her first book, *The Chelsea Set*. Her fiancé is much more cautious and doubts that they should rely exclusively on the young woman's professional prospects and talent. His uncle could help him get into the wine trading business, a safer life choice than to be the husband of a traveling author. The young woman, aggressively self-assertive and bossy, is angry at her fiancé for being lukewarm about her projects. She, on the other hand, has no doubts about her powers of observation and her future success. At the end of the story, when the man asks about the abnormal appearance of these Japanese at the restaurant, the girl's response sarcastically shows that she does not even see them despite her possession of “powers of observation”.

### **2.2 Pragmatics theory**

#### *2.2.1. Implicature*

In 1967, Paul Grice firstly outlined his theory of implicature. Since then, implicature has become a technical term of pragmatics. It refers to what is suggested in an utterance, even though not expressed nor strictly implied by the utterance. Grice distinguished two different sorts of implicature: conventional implicature and conversational implicature. They both convey an additional level of meaning, beyond the semantics meaning of the words said. However, in the first one, the same implicature is conveyed, regardless of context, whereas in the second one, what is implied varies according to the context of utterance.

In fact, there are few examples of conventional implicature. Like lexical presupposition, conventional implicature is associated with specific words and results in additional conveyed meanings when those words are used. The four typical English words carrying conventional

implicature are “but, even, therefore, yet” (Levinson, 1983, p.127). Another form of conventional implicature is also known as a scalar implicature. This concerns the conventional uses of words like “all” or “some” in conversation.

In contrast to conventional implicature, conversational implicature is dependent on specific context for deducing the implied meaning. According to George Yule (2000, p.41- 42) when no special knowledge is required in the context to calculate the additional conveyed meaning, it is called a generalized conversational implicature. However, as he stated, most of the time, our conversations take place in very specific contexts in which locally recognized inferences are assumed. Such inferences are required to work out the conveyed meanings which result from particularized conversational implicature. Unlike conventional implicature, conversational implicature is deniable. Because this implicature is part of what is communicated and not said, speakers can always deny that they intended to communicate such meaning.

### *2.2.2 The Cooperative Principle and four Conversational Maxims*

In his article “Logic and conversation”, Grice (1975) proposed four Conversational Maxims that arise from the pragmatics of natural language. The Grice’s Maxims are a way to explain the link between utterances and what is understood from them. The Maxims are definitely based on the Cooperative Principle, which governs conversations in such a manner that “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. 45) and is so called because listeners and speakers must speak cooperatively and mutually accept one another to be understood in a particular way. The Cooperative Principle describes how effective communication in conversation is achieved in common social situations and is further broken down into the four Maxims of Quality, Quantity, Relevance and Manner as follows.

#### *1. Maxim of Quantity:*

Make your contribution as informative as is required (for the current purpose of the exchange).

Do not make your contribution more informative than is required.

#### *2. Maxim of Quality:*

Do not say what you believe to be false.

Do not say that for which you lack adequate evidence.

#### *3. Maxim of Relation:*

Be relevant.

#### *4. Maxim of Manner:*

Avoid obscurity of expression.

Avoid ambiguity.

Be brief (avoid unnecessary prolixity).

Be orderly.

*(Grice, 1975, pp. 46-47)*

In general, Grice's Maxims generate implicature. If the overt, surface meaning of a sentence does not seem to be consistent with the Grice's Maxims, and yet the circumstances lead us to think that the speaker is nonetheless obeying the Cooperative Principle, we tend to look for other meanings that could be implicated by the sentence. Grice did not, however, assume that all people should constantly follow these maxims. Instead, he found it interesting when these were "flouted" or "violated" (either purposefully or unintentionally) by speakers, which would imply some other, hidden meaning. The importance was in what was not said.

### 2.2.3 *Speech acts*

Another important concept relating utterance meaning to context is that of Speech Act, which was developed by J. L. Austin and J. R. Searle. Their starting point is that when people utter sentences they also perform actions of various kinds, such as declaring, asking, requesting, commanding, promising and so on. Sometimes the kind of act performed is made obvious by the presence of a "performative verb". However, this is not usually the case. Austin (1975) made a distinction of three related acts of an utterance as follows:

**Locutionary act:** The basic act of utterance or the act of producing a meaningful linguistic expression.

**Illocutionary act:** The force or intention behind the words.

**Perlocutionary act:** The effect of the illocutionary force on the hearer.

Later, in 1979 Searle further developed Austin's theory through classifying Speech Acts into five main types with following functions.

**Declarations:** Words change the world, Speaker (S) causes situation (X).

**Representatives:** Make words fit the world, S believes X.

**Expressives:** Make words fit the world, S feels X.

**Directives:** Make the world fit words, S wants X.

**Commissives:** Make the world fit words, S intends X.

According to Searle, whenever there is a direct relationship between a structure and a function, we have a **direct speech act**. In contrary, whenever there is an indirect relationship between a structure and a function, we have an **indirect speech act**.

## 3 THE APPLICATION OF PRAGMATICS ANALYSIS TO THE STORY

"The invisible Japanese gentlemen" depicts a perplexing human dilemma, in which the two main characters cannot communicate their ideas though they are face to face talking. In order to understand the interaction of these two characters, it is useful to apply the pragmatics theory introduced above to the analysis of their utterances.

When the narrator sits down at his table in the restaurant, he overhears the girl's utterance "So you see we could marry next week." which is shortly replied "Yes!" by her fiancé. Her statement,

which is also a directive, suggest the time for their wedding. However, after a pause of refilling their glasses, the man says “Of course, but Mother...” Though the narrator misses the following conversation, due to the conjunction “but”, which is a signal of conventional implicature, we can infer that there is something contrasting to her intention and that her suggestion is not accepted.

The young woman, then, mentions about the royalties from her about to be published novel “They are giving me an advance of five hundred pounds, and they’ve sold the paperback rights already”. This representative act implies that she may have a bright future with writing as her occupation. Her statement also has the illocutionary force that it is the appropriate time for them to get married because she already succeeds in her career and can support their life after marriage. Her partner’s response “but my uncle...” seems not to correspond with what she said. The man’s utterance is clearly to flout the Maxim of Relation. By saying this, the man may imply that he does not believe in her future as a novelist. Continuing with the shifted subject, the girl says “You know you don’t get on with him. This way we shall be quite independent.” Unwillingly, her fiancé replies “You will be independent”, which violates the Maxim of Quantity. Repeating her sentence but omitting him in the subject, the man indicates that he does not think as her way.

“The wine-trade wouldn’t really suit you, would it? I spoke to my publisher about you and there is a very good chance... if you began with some reading...”. The girl uses a tag question, a kind of speech act which combines assertion and interrogation, with the aim to invite her partner to confirm her belief. And she suggests that her publisher can assure his future in writing. The man’s immediate reply “But I don’t know a thing about books” is another conventional implicature which means that he refuses her so-called chance. Nevertheless, the girl is too eager with her plan to realize what he actually means. Thus, she offers him a help “I would help you at the start”. Finding another solution, he says “My mother says that writing is a good crutch...” By saying this, he implies that writing cannot support one’s life, and thus refuses her plan. The girl’s next response flouts the Maxim of Quantity by giving more information than needed “Five hundred pounds and half the paperback rights is a pretty solid crutch”. Her intentional flouting the maxim emphasizes that writing is a good source of income. To this stage, though the man does not approve of her high appreciation of writing, he seems not be able to show his disagreement due to a lack of arguments. Consequently, he chooses to flout the Maxim of Relation by giving not relevant information; that is, asking for comment about the wine they are drinking “This Chablis is good, isn’t it?” Up to now, readers may feel that the man is rather cowardly and soon to be defeated by his counterpart, who is self-centered and aggressive.

In the next part of conversation, the girl shows up how her publisher lauds her talent. “Darling you don’t listen, do you? My publisher. He said he hadn’t read a first novel in the last ten years which showed such powers of observation”. In response to that utterance, the man uses an expressive “That’s wonderful”. Then, he repeats “Wonderful”. The echo adjective used in this case seems to have a sarcastic tone. It may imply that the man actually knows how “excellent” his partner is.

It is obvious that the girl has little interest in anything else except her writing plan. In the following piece of conversation, she keeps dreaming about her future as a novelist. “My next novel is going to be about St. Tropez.” - “A fresh eye is terribly important. I thought we might settle down there for six months”, the girl says. Surprised by her decision, the man reminds her “There wouldn’t be much left of the advance by that time”. The representative implies that she cannot afford to live in St. Tropez. However, the girl is so keen on her plan to realize the fact. She replies “The advance is only an advance”- “And of course another advance will be due, darling, when the next book’s finished. A bigger one if The Chelsea Set sells well.” When the man is incapable of persuading his partner to give up her plan, he again flouts the Maxim of Relation by turning back to his uncle’s offer “My uncle would start me at twelve hundred”. The girl’s response “But darling, how could you come then to St. Tropez?” also violates the Maxim of Relation when it does not give relevant information to what he said. It is clear that she deliberately intends to violate the maxim because she does not care about anything but her plan.

At this point, the man has become discouraged. He uses a commissive also a threat to warn her “Perhaps we’d do better to marry when you come back”. He cannot imagine that his threat is no use to her when she responds “I might not come back if The Chelsea Set sells enough”. The man is totally surprised with her response that he can hardly say anything but an exclamation word “Oh!” This expressive act shows that the man cannot predict this situation and he cannot understand his partner.

Next, the girl says “You don’t really want to be married to a novelist, do you?” She again uses a tag question because she wants an assertion from him. The man’s answer “You are not one yet” which flouts the Maxim of Manner implicates that he still wants to get married to her.

When the bill is given, the girl says “This is my celebration”. With this declaration, she shows the illocutionary act that she will pay for the bill. The man’s response “What of?” indicates that he does not understand the girl’s intention.

Finally, when they are going to leave the restaurant, the man says “I wonder what all those Japanese are doing here?” To the surprise of him and also readers, the girl replies “Japanese? What Japanese, darling? Sometimes you are so evasive. I think you don’t want to marry me at all.” This is a twist ending which implies a sarcastic sense. While everyone can see the Japanese, who make an extremely remarkable impression in such a setting, she – the novelist with such “powers of observation” cannot see them. It may implicate that she has no power of observation at all.

#### **4 CONCLUSION**

In short, what the paper has done is the author’s first attempt to approach literary works from the perspective of pragmatics. The paper shows a potential relevance of pragmatics fields such as implicature and speech acts to our understanding of conversation in literature. Through pragmatics approach we can work out the underlying factors that influence each character’s utterance. The analyzing of literary works in such a pragmatic approach can significantly improve

the interpretative competence of learners. All things considered, it is recommended that pragmatics analysis deserves a prominent role in the teaching and learning of EFL literature.

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