

# A Study of Conversational Implicature in *The Kite Runner* from the Perspective of Violating the Cooperative Principle

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## **Abstract:**

Cooperative Principle is the core theory of pragmatics and plays a vital role in the normal progression of human language communication, especially in people's conversation. The novel "*The Kite Runner*" contains rich dialogues, as well as many dialogues that violate the Cooperative Principle, which vividly portray the characters' personalities, emotions and conflicts. This paper attempts to analyze the dialogues that violated the Cooperation Principle occurred in *The Kite Runner* and interpret its conversation implicature, which is hopeful to reveal the protagonist's distinctive character, explore the essence and bring insight to the novel.

**Keywords:** *The Kite Runner*, Violation of Cooperative Principle, Conversational Implicature, Personal Character

## 1. Introduction

Language plays a great part in human beings and it is the bridge of communication. As an crucial theory in linguistics, pragmatics that related to the usage of language have been studied for a long time at home and abroad and its theories have been applied in various filed, especially in the field of people's conversation in daily life, film, television show, literary works and so forth.

*The Kite Runner* is the first novel of the American Afghan writer Khaled Hosseini. It surrounds the cruel and beautiful story between rich young master Amir and his servant Hassan, both of them fed from the same breast and shared brotherly relations, while a tragic event happened to Hassan made Amir felt guilty and painful, therefore he forced Hassan away. After adulthood, Amir still could not forgive his betrayal, so he decided to make atonement. He resolutely embarked on the road to save Hassan's son. It is a vivid novel, which outlines the human nature and salvation with warm and delicate strokes. Once published, it shocked people's minds, quickly gained recognition and widespread praise from readers all over the world.

Due to its irreproducible classic, researches on this work have been endless, while seldom scholars have analyzed it from the perspective of linguistics. In fact, language is the soul of the novel. *The Kite Runner* contains rich dialogues, many of them violate the CP and its maxims, which express subtle illocutionary meanings, especially for revealing the character's personality, promoting the development of the plot, and showing the theme of the novel. Therefore, it is necessary and significant to analyze the dialogues in the novel that violates the Cooperation Principle, and explore the deep conversational implicature through the surface of conversation.

## 2. Literature Review

### 2.1 Cooperative Principle

American famous language philosopher Grice first put forward the "Cooperative Principle" in a lecture on "Logic and Conversation" in 1967. Grice claims that human beings communicate with each other in a logical and rational way, and cooperation is embedded into people's conversations (Atefeh Hadi,2012), and in order to achieve a specific goal, in all language communication there is a tacit between speaker and listener, a principle that both parties should abide by. This general principle is called Cooperative Principle (CP), is about regularity in conversation, which reads "Make your conversational contribution such as required, at the stage at which it occurs, by the accepted purpose or direction of the talk exchange in which you are engaged." Grice later developed Cooperative Principle into four categories: quantity maxims, quality maxims, relation maxims and manner maxims.

### 2.2 Conversational Implicature

In Grice's view, under normal circumstances, the observance of the CP and its maxims is conducive to the smooth progress of conversation and the effective transmission of information. However, in actual verbal communication, people do not always follow the CP and its maxims, and sometimes even intentionally violate it and tell lie, Grice refers to this kind speech act as

"Conversational Implicature" which explains how the listener understands the deeper illocutionary meaning of the speaker through the surface meaning of the speaker's discourse. Interestingly, deliberate violation of the CP does not necessarily cause communication barriers, but will produce special pragmatic meaning which has far-reaching significance for revealing the illocutionary meaning in conversation. For instance, Goffman (2008: 17) says that the speaker do not abide by Grice's maxims in order to save face.

### 2.3 Summary

All in all, there is an endless stream of researches on Cooperative Principle and Conversational Implicature. In the early years, scholars devoted themselves to the introduction and discussion of the theory itself. Currently, scholars have been good at combining the Cooperative Principle and Conversational Implicature with actual corpus to analyze the implied meaning behind language, including but not limited to the analysis of commercial advertisements, online languages, English letters, literary works, television films and so forth.

Moreover, although there have been substantial researches on *The Kite Runner*, most concentrated on "kite" image, cultural metaphors, ethnic relations, growth novels, individual identity, symbolism and humanity redemption etc., only few interpret the novel from the linguistics level, like Bi Lijuan(2015) and Jiang Jie(2019). Given that the rich dialogues in the novel are worth exploring, this paper intends to systematically analyze the dialogues which violate the CP and its four maxims in the novel through a pragmatic level. It is expected to reveal the main characters' internal emotion, conflict and personality reflected in the dialogues.

## 3. Results and Discussion

### 3.1 Violation of the Maxim of Quantity in *The Kite Runner*

The Maxim of Quantity refers that make your contribution as informative as is required and do not make your contribution more informative than is required. The following are some episodes which violate the maxim of quantity in the novel:

(1) Amir and Baba went to Kalka Lake, he talked to Dad from time to time, but Baba didn't answer, just grunted, he was preparing his speech for the next day.

In this episode, the answer of Amir's Baba evidently violated the Maxim of Quantity, his answer did not contain the information needed for the conversation, as if Amir had always been talking to himself. On the surface, Baba's answer shows that he doesn't want to talk to Amir, but only wants to be busy with his own. At a deep level, this reflects the theme line that runs through the full novel, that is, Amir's father has been relatively indifferent to Amir, so that Amir did a series of things to please his father's favor and love, which made Amir and Hassan's friendship broke down at last. Later, Amir spent his life to make up for and pursue the "kite" in his heart.

(2) On the day of the kite competition, after Amir cut the last opponent's kite, Hassan and he embraced each other and then hurriedly run away to helped Amir chase the opponent's kite. After

receiving other's congratulations, Amir went to look for Hassan, he wanted to bring back the kite symbolizing victory like a hero, but he couldn't find where Hassan is. Then he asked his classmate Omar on the corner.

*Amir: "Have you seen Hassan?"*

*Omar: "Your Hazara? I hear he's a great kite runner. Although I've always wondered how he manage. I mean, with those tight little eyes, how does he see anything? "*

A similar conversation took place during Amir's second inquiry. Amir described Hassan to an old merchant.

*Merchant: "I might have seen him."*

*Amir: "Which way did he go?"*

*Merchant: "What is a boy like you doing here at this time of the day looking for a Hazara?"*

*Amir: "I need to find him."*

*Merchant: "What is he to you?"*

*Amir: "He's our servant's son."*

*Merchant: "He is? Lucky Hazara, having such a concerned master. His father should get on his knees, sweep the dust at your feet with eyelashes."*

In the first conversation, Omar first violated the Maxim of Relation, he did not answer Hassan's question, and then he went on to say a series of words violated the Maxim of Quantity. In the second time, so did the old merchant. These two people's answers do not contain the information required but include the information beyond conversation. Not only did they not answer Amir's question, but they asked a series questions to make their contribution more informative than is required.

Actually, both of these conversations are contempt and mockery to Hazara people represented by Hassan, satirized that why Amir's family has Hazara, and why Amir plays with the despicable Hazara. In Afghanistan, the Pashtuns are a symbol of nobility, and the Hazara people are regarded as a symbol of racial heterogeneity and inferiority. Even a fourth-grade child can clearly draw a line with the Hazara people, which obviously showed that how low status of the Hazara in Afghanistan. Meanwhile, this also reflect the contradiction in Amir's internal mind, although Hassan is a very kind and loyal person, he can never treat Hassan as a friend, because Hassan is a "Hazara".

(3) A few days after Hassan was raped, Ali (Hassan's father) noticed that Hassan was abnormal, but Hassan said nothing, so Ali asked Amir.

*Ali: "You would tell me, nay? You would tell me if some thing had happened?"*

*Amir: "Like I said, how should I know what's wrong with him? Maybe he is sick. People got sick all the time, Ali. Now, am I going to freeze to death or are you planning on lightening the stove today?"*

In this conversation, Amir's violates the Maxim of Quantity. He asks Ali whether he wants to freeze him or go to make a fire. This sentence obviously exceeds the information that Ali needs. The reason why Amir hurriedly ended Ali's topic and asked about other irrelevant matters was that Amir was guilty of conscience. He was afraid that if Ali continue to ask questions, he would see through his

lie or make him edit a bigger lie or bring things to light, so he quickly turned the topic off and made Ali to set a fire, so as to relieve himself. In this dialogue, Amir's series of questioning vividly reflects Amir's character when he was a child, that is, with timid and cowardly characteristics, which is very different from the courageous integrity of his father.

### 3.2 Violation of the Maxim of Quality in *The Kite Runner*

The Maxim of quality refers to make your contribution one that is true, do not say what you believe to be false and do not say what you lack adequate evidence. The following are related dialogues:

(1) On the day of the kite competition, Amir finally found Hassan, but he saw that Hassan was bullied in order to protect the kite he chased for him. After witnessing Hassan was raped, Amir pretended he had just arrived, and he saw Hassan trembling out of the corner.

"Where have you been? I'm looking for you." Amir said to Hassan hardly, speaking those words like chewing on a rock.

Hassan dragged a sleeve across his face, wiped snot and tears. "Agha sahib (here means Amir's Baba) would be worried." was all he said. He turned from Amir and limped away.

In this episode, Amir first lied, apparently violate the Maxim of Quality, and Hassan violated the Maxim of Relation. Although Amir have witnessed the whole process that Hassan was insulted, in order to bring back "victory" blue kite, to win his father's favor and affection, Amir chose to turn a blind eye, and deliberately showed an anxious and to said to Hassan he was looking for him. Amir's lie showed cowardice and hypocrisy in his character, and highlighted his ambivalence. Although he always felt that Hassan was not his "friend" and decided to sacrifice Hassan in order to win his father's love, in his deep heart he could not forgive his behavior, and this incident prevented Amir and Hassan from getting along normally. His "father's love" won by the kite is his self-deception, a toy made of glue and bamboo can't bridge the gap between his Baba and him.

As for Hassan, he knew the importance of the kite to Amir, because he regarded Amir as his best friend, he is willing to do anything for Amir, so when he was in danger or even raped, he would rather sacrifice himself to help Amir bring back the kite, a symbol of victory. In fact, Hassan knew that Amir had witnessed what had just happened, but he still had no regrets, so when asked where he had gone, Hassan didn't want to poke their friendship, but he can't pretend to be indifferent after suffering so much damage, so he deliberately diverge from the topic, only said that Agha sahib would be worried, and ran away in a hurry. Hassan's words were disheartening. He possesses such kind of characteristic, that is, eternal loyalty and lamb-like goodness. He would rather sacrifice himself than let Amir feels guilty about it, because he always regarded Amir as his best "friend".

(2) A few days after Hassan was raped, Ali (Hassan's father) noticed that Hassan was abnormal, but Hassan said nothing, so Ali asked Amir.

*Ali: "Dis something happen to Hassan, Amir agha? Something he's not telling me?"*

*Amir shrugged: "How should I know?"*

In this conversation, Amir violates the Maxim of Quality. He told a lie and intentionally concealed the facts. Amir knew nothing more about what happened that day, but in order to protect his "victory fruits", he deceived Ali. After that day, Amir couldn't look directly into his deep heart. He was afraid of being aware of his cowardice and betrayal, but he couldn't forgive himself. So when talking with others, he was flustered and it is difficult for him to communicate normally. This dialogue promoted the development of the storyline. Because Amir couldn't face it all the time, he forced Hassan away, and later it took him half a lifetime to complete the redemption.

### 3.3 Violation of the Maxim of Relation in *The Kite Runner*

The Maxim of Relation requires that the content of the speech should be appropriate and relevant to the conversation. The following are some dialogues that violate relation maxims:

(1) When Amir went to Lake Kalka with his Baba, because his father was preparing the next day's speech, Amir wanted to get his attention, so he said to his father, *"I think I have cancer."* Baba just looked up and *told Amir that he could get some soda by himself.*

In this conversation, Baba's answer clearly violated the Maxim of Relation. It was his father's proposal to go to the lake, but since Amir did not bring Hassan, Baba was only concerned about his own affairs. Amir tried to attract Baba's attention and communicate with him, but received only Baba's cold response. On the surface, Baba's reply showed that he didn't believe what Amir was saying, he just wanted Amir to play by himself and do not disturb him. On a deeper level, Baba's response reflects the estranged and distant relationship between the father and the son, on one hand due to the huge personality difference between them, and on the other hand because of the conflicting feelings of the Baba—his guilt towards Hassan made he couldn't completely favors Amir.

(2) One day, Amir read a book to Hassan. He pretended to look at the book, but said nothing to do with the book. Instead, he made up a story for himself. When Amir finished reading, Hassan began to clap.

*Amir: "What are you doing?"*

**Hassan** clapped his hands and answered: *"That was the best story you've read me in a long time."*

In this conversation, Hassan's answer clearly violates the Maxim of Relation. He didn't answer this question, but excitedly told Amir that the story is extremely wonderful. This reflects the simple kindness of Hassan's character, unconditional trust and loyalty to Amir, and shows Hassan's desire for knowledge. Although there is no condition for school, Hassan grasps every opportunity to learn.

(3) In order to force Hassan away, Amir framed Hassan to steal his watch, Hassan admitted, and Ali decided to take Hassan away. Amir's Baba was so heart-struck and said he will forgive Hassan and begged them not to leave, while Ali and Hassan are very determined to leave.

*Amir's Baba begged and said: "At least tell me why, I need to know!"*

*Ali: "Will you drive us to the bus station?"*

In this dialogue Ali's answer obviously violates the Maxim of Relation. He did not reply to the

questions, but instead asked if Amir's father could take them to the bus station. Firstly, this demonstrates their resolution to leave. Moreover, it showed that Ali wants to maintain the dignity and image of Amir, he is unwilling to estrange Amir and his father. Ali did not tell Amir's Baba the truth, just like he didn't protest when Hassan confessed to stealing. Even when leaving, they did not forget to protect Amir. How loyal they are can withstand the test of humanity? This stands in stark contrast to Amir's selfishness and cowardice when he was a child. It was this loyalty that made Amir later resolutely decided to redeem.

(4) When Amir and his father moved to the United States for several years, his father's health is deteriorating. One day, when Amir saw his father cough bloody sputum into the toilet, he was completely panicked.

*Amir asked his Baba, "How long have you been doing that?"*

*The Baba said, "What's for dinner?"*

Here, the father intentionally violated the Maxim of Relation. Firstly, he changed the subject to avoid worrying Amir. Secondly, this further deepened Amir Baba's character. Baba always set store by overall interests, he doesn't care about small things, even his individual health. He hopes that Amir could become an upright man and stand up to the difficulties in life. He hoped that Amir could support his own one day.

(5) Many years later, Amir got the news that Sohrab, Hassan's son, was living a miserable life in the orphanage, he decided to save Sohrab. After suffering many difficulties and nearly losing his life, Amir found Sohrab, but was informed that Sohrab must be re-sent to an orphanage before being brought back to the United States legally.

*Amir said to Sohrab: "Well, Mr. Faisal thinks that it would really help if we could ask you to stay in a home for kids for a while."*

*Sohrab: "Home for kids?" his smell fading. "You mean an orphanage?"*

*Amir: "It would be for just a little while, I promise."*

Here, Amir violates the Maxim of Relation. He had promised Sohrab never to send him to an orphanage again, he did not want to lose the trust that Sohrab had built up with him. On the other hand, he knew that little Sohrab had suffered too much, and his young heart had suffered too much. He couldn't bear to answer the orphanage directly, so he answered with a kind lie. From the moment he decided to rescue Sohrab, he knew that the road was doomed to be full of hardships and even no return, but he knew that it was a "road to be a good man again", a road to complete self-salvation, a road to cure his heart disease for many years. No matter how hard he is, he will take Sorabo back to the United States and make up Sohrab like a father. He is willing to do anything for Sohrab, just like what Hassan had did for him, a thousand times over.

(6) When Amir told Sohrab the fact that he had to stay in the orphanage for a while to come to America, Sohrab committed suicide. After a difficult rescue, Sohrab was finally rescued. Amir felt very guilty and regretful. He came to look after Sohrab in the hospital.

*Amir: "How are you?" "You should try to eat something. Gain your quwat back, your strength."*

Do you want me to help you?" How do you feel?"

**Sohrab:** "Tired.", "Tired of everything."

Sohrab's response has nothing to do with Amir's question. Such an answer showed that Sorabo was really tired. He lost his parents at a very young age, and was tortured and mistreated by Taliban. He could not see the hope of future life and no longer believed in anyone. Here Sohrab is an epitomes of Afghan children at the time, is one of thousands of orphans. With such simple words, the author depicted the tragic fate of Afghan children, and showed authors sympathy for the people in that war era.

#### 4. Conclusion

Overall, from the perspective of violating the CP and its maxims, this paper selected some dialogues in *The Kite Runner*, analyzed their Conversational Implicature and tried to explore the profound meanings behind the literal meanings from the dialogues. The significance lies in firstly helping readers to better understand the illocutionary meaning of the dialogue in the novel, so as to better grasp the character image, plot development and novel theme. In addition, it also proves the feasibility and importance of pragmatic method to be applied in literary works analysis. It is expected that this paper could provide reference and thinking for those who want to analyze literary works from the linguistic level in the future.

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