

Interpretation of Conversational Implicature in the Film *Green Book* From the Perspective of the Cooperative Principle

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Abstract—*Green Book*, which premiered in September 2018, won various awards during the North American film awards season, culminating in the 2019 Academy Awards for Best Picture, Best Original Screenplay and Best Supporting Actor. The film follows the travels of African-American pianist Dr. Donald Shirley and his hired Italian chauffeur and bodyguard, Tony Lip, in the 1960s. Combining Grice's conversational implicature theory and cooperative principle theory, this paper analyzes the dialogue between Dr. Donald Shirley and Tony Lip in the film, explores the implication of conversation from the violation of the cooperative principle, so as to deeply understand how conversation depicts character's personality and how conversation conveys humor.

Index Terms—cooperative principle, *Green Book*, violation of sub-maxims, conversational implicature

I. INTRODUCTION

In 1936, Victor Hugo Green, a black mail carrier in Harlem, New York, published the first black travel guide, called *The Negro Motorist Green Book*. The aim is to provide practical information on hotels, shops and restaurants that cater to black people to help them avoid unnecessary trouble. Hence the title of the film, *Green Book* (Qu Huiyu, 2019). In this film, director Peter Farrelly changed his style with a road trip across America, a human journey that transcended race, color, identity and class. Here's what it's about: The movie was based on a true story from the 1960s during the black civil rights movement. Dr. Donald Shirley, an African-American pianist, planned to tour the racist South of the United States. To take care of his travel and ensure his safety, he hired Tony Lip, an Italian who lived in the Bronx, New York, as his driver and security guard. So the two began their journey south.

Racial discrimination was still severe in 1960s America, especially in the ideologically conservative South with a long history of slavery, where blacks and whites still lived in two worlds.

In the film, as the trip went into the deep south of the United States, social racism against black people became more and more obvious. In New York, Donald was a celebrity in five-star hotels, but in the south, he lived in the dirty motel identified by the *Green Book*. He was offered an old piano full of rubbish at the show; the clothing store owner refused to try on the suit he wanted; he was forbidden to use the white man's bathroom in the house; on the rainy day, he was arrested into prison by the police by all means; he was not even allowed in white people's restaurants. All of this stems from southern society's inherent discrimination against blacks.

Praised but never accepted as a "vehicle" for white people to display their tastes, Donald said: "White people listen to my music to show that they are educated. When I don't play the piano, I am nothing more than a nigger to them." "Talent alone is not enough. It takes great courage to change people's minds." Donald's trip to the south was his effort to break the racial tradition. He had the courage to step out of the safety of New York city society and take his talents to nine cities to speak for his countrymen. Although he suffered injustice and gained little along the way, he made a complete change in Tony's attitude towards the black people. Isn't this a fresh start?

The American film industry may be tired of negativity and want to go back to art itself, stripping away the heavy stuff, telling stories in smaller dots and focusing more on people as individuals. Through a pamphlet symbolizing the absurdity and inequality of a special era, the *Green Book* subtly questioned the contemporaneity, and enabled the whole society to rethink equality, which showed the original intention of historical criticism in this road film composed of upper-class black, lower-class white, and green manual. The description of the black community and the observation of marginalized people in the film were not only derived from the director's examination of history, but also from his rosy vision of reality. As Green wrote in his foreword to one edition of the *Green Book*: "In the near future, this set of books need not be published again. All Americans are members of the same race, each with equal rights and equal opportunities. The day the book stops being published, it will be our day because it means we can go wherever we want and we won't have to suffer discrimination."

Based on the above background, this paper analyzes the dialogue between Dr. Donald Shirley and Tony Lip to explore the deep meaning of the dialogue from the perspective of violating the principle of cooperation. Then, it will further analyze the language characteristics and personality characteristics of the film characters.

II. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

This part mainly talks about the theories applied in this paper, including the cooperative principle and the conversational implicature.

A. Cooperative Principle

In his paper, *Logic and Conversation*, Grice (1975) argues that in order for a person to interpret what someone else says, some kind of cooperative principle must be assumed to be in operation. People assume, he argued, that there is a set of principles which direct us to a particular interpretation of what someone says, unless we receive some indication to the contrary. Thus, when someone is speaking to us, we base our understanding of what they are saying on the assumption that they are saying what needs to be said rather than more than needs to be said, they are saying it at an appropriate point in the interaction and they have a reason for saying what they say.

Grice based his cooperative principle on four sub-principles, or maxims. These are the maxims of quality, quantity, relation and manner. Grice's maxim of quantity says we should make our contribution as informative as is required for the particular purpose and not make it more informative than is required. The maxim of quality says people should only say what they believe to be true and what they have evidence for. The maxim of relation says we should make our contribution relevant to the interaction, or we should indicate in what way it is not. His maxim of manner says we should be clear in what we say, we should avoid ambiguity or obscurity and we should be brief and orderly in our contribution to the interaction.

1. The Maxim of Quantity

The maxim of quantity refers to the amount of information that is required in one conversation. When a speaker provides as much or as little information as is required, he violates the maxim of quantity. Here is an example of a speaker following the quality maxim.

A: Do you know Tom's phone number?

B: Yes, it is 13856283567.

The listener answers directly to the speaker, and the speaker does not need to infer from what the listener says. In everyday communication, however, successful conversations are often more complicated than that. Sometimes people give too much or not enough information. In other words, for many different reasons, the maxim of quantity is often violated in order to convey the implied meaning.

2. The Maxim of Quality

The maxim of quality requires speakers to provide true information instead of false or untrue one. Nor should they say things for which there is no good evidence. In our daily life, people should have enough evidence to tell the truth. Do not say anything that you think is wrong. And do not say anything without sufficient evidence. However, in most cases, people may tell lies or make less contribution for various reasons. People often flout quality maxim apparently so that they can express some unpleasant or embarrassing topics, such as social taboos. Sometimes, they say something in a roundabout way. They often use rhetorical devices such as irony, metaphor, or euphemism.

3. The Maxim of Manner

The maxim of manner means that to be clear about what the speaker is saying, we should (1) avoid difficult words; (2) avoid ambiguous words; (3) speak concisely; (4) speak coherently (He, 2000).

First of all, to follow the first sub-rule of manner: keep your dialogue simple, not obscure.

Second, the second sub-rule of manner is to be clear and avoid ambiguity. It is widely observed in conversation. Take the following situation as an example: A: Do you have many classes this semester? B: We only have five days a week. That's too much. The sentence "we only have classes five days a week" is ambiguous. One means that there are more classes, the other means that there are fewer classes. B purposely added "too many" after the sentence in order to avoid a misunderstanding and ensure that the purpose of the conversation between the two sides can be realized.

Third, the third sub-rule of manner principle is generally followed in conversation. Be brief and to the point.

Finally, it is essential to follow the fourth sub-rule of manner in our daily conversations. That is to speak coherently and avoid confusion. For example, student: Sir, how to write this composition? Teacher: look at the material first, then examine the topic, then decide the topic, and finally look at the word requirements. In this example, the teacher followed the rule of "speaking coherently" and gave clear answers to the student's questions. In this way, students know the steps of writing the composition.

4. The Maxim of Relation

The maxim of relation principle requires both sides to focus on the topic in order for the conversation to flow smoothly. If neither side connects what they are saying to the topic, the conversation can't go on. Instead, the speakers should try to make what they say relevant, and relevance means sticking to the relation principle that what you say must be relevant to the conversation at hand. For example:

A: Where shall we go tomorrow?

B: If it's sunny tomorrow, let's go hiking.

C: Hiking is a bit tired. Let's go for a picnic.

D: It's too far for a picnic. Let's go shopping.

The four men are talking about the same subject. Although they have different opinions, they adhere strictly to the relation rule. Their conversation revolves around what was fun. Following the relation rule in the conversation keeps the conversation connected.

Taken together, these four criteria can be used to measure whether a speaker complies with or violates the principle of cooperation. Grice believes that the dialogue follows the principle of cooperation and moves toward the expected goals, which makes the dialogue proceed smoothly. However, in everyday conversations, conversations are not always cooperative. The violation of these principles actually carries the implied meaning of the dialogue.

B. Conversational Implicature

Conversational implicature is a key concept in pragmatics which has implications for both production and interpretation of discourse. It refers to the inference a hearer makes about a speaker's intended meaning that arises from their use of the literal meaning of what the speaker said, the conversational principle, and its maxims. For example, if I say 'There's nothing on at the movies' I do not mean 'nothing at all', but rather 'nothing that I'm interested in seeing'. The person I am speaking to will assume this and 'implicate' my meaning (Paltridge, 2012). Implicature is not the same, however, as inference. As Thomas (1995) explains, an implicature 'is generated intentionally by the speaker and may (or may not) be understood by the hearer'. An inference, on the other hand, is produced by a hearer on the basis of certain evidence and may not, in fact, be the same as what a speaker intends.

The following examples will be illustrated to explain conversational implicature in detail.

Example 1

Mr. Wang: Are you going to school this afternoon?

Mr. Li: The school is near to the bookshop.

Example 2

Nancy: Do you like my new dress?

Lucy: Oh, it is pink.

For this kind of speech, the listener has to understand the real intention of the speaker through the surface meaning. From the surface meaning of the discourses, there is no logical connection at all. However, the discourses can be seen as normal and acceptable from the perspective of pragmatics. The above discourses can be explained from the perspective of the theory of pragmatic implicature or conversational implicature. Under the condition of some certain context, the listener's answer to the speaker's question can convey the implicit information respectively. The first example is intended to convey the implied information that Mr. Li is not going to school this afternoon. The second example implies that Lucy doesn't like Nancy's new dress at all. Evidently, the above information is not the literal meaning of the discourses but the extra communicative information in a specific context, which is conversational implicature.

Based on the cooperative principles and the conversational implicature, this paper explores the deep meanings in the conversation and then further analyzes the language characteristics and personality characteristics of film characters.

III. THE ANALYSIS OF THE COOPERATIVE PRINCIPLE IN THE DIALOGUE OF CHARACTERS IN THE FILM *GREEN BOOK*

Dialogue in the film provides the techniques for characterizing characters. Although the dialogues between the characters are the authors' descriptions, they are based on people's lives. Since the cooperative principle is applicable to people's communication and people may violate the maxims in daily life, this is true of dialogues in the films. As a matter of fact, some features which are shown by flouting maxims are used to convey the implied meaning of dialogues among the characters in the films. Through the analysis of dialogue in some contexts, characters' personalities, plot and climax of the movie and also the theme of the movie are constructed perfectly. Therefore, we can make full use of pragmatic strategies to enjoy the movie much better. Meanwhile, the application of cooperative principle in the film *Green Book* has further proved its advanced nature.

A. Conversational Implicature by Violation of Quantity Maxim

The first maxim of cooperative principle is the quantity maxim, which states that a person's contribution to social intercourse should provide sufficient information, but the information should not be too much, and over what is in need. The example of violating quantity maxim in the *Green Book* is as follows.

Tony Lip is interviewing for a new job with Dr. Donald Shelly. The dialogue is as follows.

Tony: I thought it was to an office interview and they said a doctor needed a driver.

Donald: They just said that to you? Actually much more complicated than this.

Donald: Have you driven professionally before?

Tony: Sanitation. Garbage trucks. Plus I drive my boss home at night. But I can drive anything. Limos, tow trucks. Snowplows, whatever.

In response to Donald's question, Tony said more information than the question should cover. In fact, a "yes" or "no" answer would be enough for him to complete the conversation, according to the principle of quantity. However, he provided more information than the original question required because he, as an interviewee, wanted to show as much

of his work experience as possible. He added a lot of relevant experience in order to enhance the interviewer's impression of him and his ability to do the job.

B. Conversational Implicature by Violation of Quality Maxim

The maxim of quality relates to the truthfulness and authenticity of words, which should be supported by sufficient evidence. Examples of violating quality maxim in the *Green Book* are as follows.

Example 1:

Tony worked as a bartender at Copa's at the beginning of the film. Tony hid Gio's hat and then returned it to him, making it look like he had helped him find it. The conversation between Tony and Gio is as follows:

(Tony threw Gio's hat on the table.)

Gio: My hat!

Tony: Heard it was missing, so I looked into it.

Gio's friend: Who had the balls to clip Gio's hat?

Tony: Don't worry about it. I took care of him.

This was a scene which was played by Tony himself in order to get Gio's tip. So Tony said "I took care of him", which violated the quality principle of cooperation. This reflected the poor education and cunning character of working-class Tony. Here, Tony was portrayed as a vulgar and even violent white man, in stark contrast to the other main character, Donald, who is a well-educated black man with elegance.

Example 2:

The conversation was still in the course of Tony's interview. The following conversation occurred:

Donald: Do you foresee any issues in working for a black man?

Tony: No! No. Just the other day me and my wife had a couple of colored guys over at the house. For drinks.

Tony's reaction was a clear violation of quality principle. As a matter of fact, like other white people, he had a prejudice against blacks, throwing away their repairman's drinking glasses and calling them "niggers" with discrimination. Then, why did he say that? Because he lost his job. His family's financial situation forced him to find a new job to make ends meet. So he told his employer Donald, who is also black, things he didn't believe, mainly because he wanted to be friendly to black people in front of Donald in order to get the job. Here, Tony's words violated the cooperative principle of quality just for leaving a good impression on Donald so as to get the job he desired.

C. Conversational Implicature by Violation of Manner Maxim

The maxim of manner states that people should obey the way they speak. In order to communicate clearly, participants in a conversation should remove elements of misdirection or ambiguity and communicate in an effective way. They should speak clearly and have good logic in order to be understood well. Here I picked an example from the *Green Book* to analyze.

The conversation took place on their journey when the leading actor, Donald, spoke in Russian after explaining to the two collaborators.

Donald: Tony, we are little quiet, okay.

Tony: Well.

Tony: You say this is amazing, quiet. My wife, Delores, also always say these words, also don't always say. For example, I go home after work and she would say, because she took the kids all day, she would say, Tony, be quiet, just like you had just been, amazing.

This conversation violated the manner maxim. Tony's reply to Donald was long and incoherent. He went on and on about how he felt about what Donald had said. From Tony's words, we can see that in this communication, he expressed his dissatisfaction with this sentence through nagging words, and even a little dislike, because Donald required him to be gentle and civilized.

D. Conversational Implicature by Violation of Relation Maxim

The relation maxim requires what the speaker says should be relevant and keep close to the topic information under discussion, so that the conversation could continue smoothly. If participants during a conversation are unwilling to deliver relevant information or make a series of disconnected utterance instead of orderly words, the conversation will quickly end.

Example 1:

On his first meeting with Dr. Donald, the following conversation was produced when he saw the elaborate decoration of Donald's home:

Tony : What about that? That a molar?

Donald : A, what?

Tony : A molar. Like a shark tooth? Tiger's maybe.

Donald : It was a gift.

Tony was curious about Donald's furniture and accessories and asked if he was wearing animal teeth. In this case, "yes" or "no" is enough to answer Tony's question, but Donald answered "It was a gift", which clearly violated the relation principle of cooperation. And the violation of this principle showed that Dr. Donald was a well-educated man. It

reflected their difference in values as well.

Example 2:

The following dialogue is the scene of the two leading men having a meal at a restaurant on their way to the concert.

Donald: What about it? (For the meal being used now)

Tony: Very salty.

Donald: Have you ever thought of being a food critic?

Tony: No, no. How's that? Very profitable?

Donald: I just think you're too glib when it comes to describing food "salty". It's so vivid I feel like I could taste it myself.

Tony: I mean it's salty. Salty is a cheat. Any chef can make something salty. But to make it taste good without salt, to use all the other flavors, that's what cooking is...

Donald: If we want to get to Pittsburgh by dinner, we should be moving.

From the above dialogue, we can see that Donald violated the relation principle. After asking Tony how he felt about food and then hearing that Tony answered the word "salty", Donald turned to the topic of food critics which had nothing to do with the taste of the food. He wanted to laugh at Tony's lack of vocabulary and low education level in response to Tony's answer. We all know that food critics need to be able to express themselves well, and it is not appropriate for them to just use the word "salty" to describe the food they are reviewing. It's obvious to see that Donald is just taking the opportunity to make a dig at Tony. When Tony didn't get the message and instead offered his own opinion on the subject, Donald said something unrelated to the current conversation, reminding Tony that it was time to leave for Pittsburgh. This, of course, meant that he didn't want to listen to Tony, because Tony didn't get the message and took his "salty" question seriously.

IV. CONCLUSION

Through the above analysis, we can find that the dialogues of the characters in the film violated the principle of cooperation in many places, thus generating the conversational implicature, which subtly shaped the personalities of the characters, Donald and Tony, in the film. The personality of Donald and Tony the author shaped was in sharp contrast. Tony, a white man, is vulgar and even violent, while Shelly, a well-educated black man, is gentlemanly and elegant. Tony had a prejudice against black people. But after watching Donald's performance in Pittsburgh, he developed a respect for Donald. The prejudice began to dissolve at that moment, and he grew to admire Donald's talent and grace. These two images completely overturned people's normal cognition. In this way, the film plot was promoted step by step and the theme of the film was sublimated.

As English is popular all over the world, English films also enjoy great popularity among different people. Apart from the theme, plot or the settings, film dialogues make big contributions to the success of the films. However, people whose native language is not English may have difficulties in fully understanding film dialogues. As a result, it is hard for the audience to appreciate original English films. Therefore, it is necessary to interpret the dialogues in the film based on pragmatic theories, which are usually applied to analyzing the pragmatic phenomena in human communication and literary works. As an important part of pragmatics, conversational implicature based on the cooperative principle has made a great contribution to the interpretation of human communication. In this article, Grice's cooperative principle and four maxims are applied to the analysis of dialogues in the film *Green Book*. We have analyzed how the characters violated the four maxims of CP, and how the conversational implicature was conveyed, which not only can bring enjoyment and foreign cultures to the audience, but also enrich and promote the Chinese cultures.

Note:

Green Book is a drama film directed by Peter Farrelly and starring Viggo Mortensen and Mahershala Ali. It premiered at the Toronto International Film Festival on September 11, 2018 and was released on the Chinese mainland on March 1, 2019. The monologue quoted from the film will not be noted separately in this paper.

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