

The Conversational Implicature in *Sense and Sensibility* —A CP Perspective*

CHEN Xiang-ning, FENG Yu-juan
Southwest Minzu University, Chengdu, China

Sense and Sensibility is Jane Austen's debut which uses Elinor's and Marianne's marriage life as the main line, describing exquisitely and vividly the protagonists' love and marriage. Since the dialogue is one of the basic ways to shape characters in literary works, the analysis of dialogues, especially that of those contradictory dialogues helps better analyze the novel itself. This paper analyzes different conversational implicatures in the typical dialogues in *Sense and Sensibility*, in order to help us to understand character differences, and to further understand the novel's theme. Through the analysis, this paper finds that there exist many indirect expressions in the dialogues in *Sense and Sensibility*, which reflect that characters violate the four maxims of Cooperative Principle in order to implicitly express their true thoughts and avoid such unpleasant communicational effects as embarrassment and conflict.

Keywords: cooperative principle, the four maxims, conversational implicature

1 Introduction

Pragmatics was first introduced by William Morris in the preface of his book *Logical Positivism, Pragmatism and Scientific Empiricism* in 1937, which mainly focus on the relation of signs to interpreters. Later on pragmatics has developed rapidly as a recognized distinct discipline, and its research scope has been extended incrementally, and its intersection and permeation with other disciplines has expedited a large number of fresh peripheral subjects, such as the Literary Pragmatics.

Literary Pragmatics, which is first presented in *Linguistics for Students of Literature* written by Traugott and Pratt, and which develops as an independent discipline with the publication of John Seale's *Literary Pragmatics*, studies the social meaning of linguistic structures and linguistic usage in literature, psychological process and the mechanism of output and understanding of texts, as well as the general condition of linguistic structures and social structures in literature. Literary Pragmatics reveals the interaction among literary language, social and cultural factors and the psychological process of author and readers, making it possible to unify the study of literary language and cognition, communication and social function.

* **Acknowledgements:** This paper is funded by "National College Students Innovation and Entrepreneurship Training Program of SMU" (Number: 201810656046).

FENG Yu-juan (Corresponding Author), Ph.D. candidate in English Linguistics, Associate Professor of School of Foreign Languages, Southwest Minzu University.

CHEN Xiang-ning, BA, School of Foreign Languages, Southwest Minzu University.

As one of the theories of pragmatics, The Cooperative Principle, CP for short, is originally proposed by Herbert Paul Grice. It is the most general rule based on an “ideal” human communication, describing the actual communication phenomenon in daily life, helping a lot on the understanding of human communication in real life. Literature communication can be seen as a unique type of human communication, which is derived from and is prior to real life, so it can also be analyzed by CP, which consists of two levels. On a micro-level, one can analyze the communication of characters in the literature work to reveal their mental processes and personalities. On a macro-level, one can analyze the text, author and reader as a unity, realizing the interaction with the work and author in order to capture the implicature and underlying proposition which the author actually wants to convey, and further to understand and interpret the work the best (SUN, 2006, p. 1).

Generally speaking, in the literary works, the dialogues are usually conducted purposely violating CP to convey some implied meanings. By digging into those implied meanings, readers will have a better understanding about the figures’ psychological condition, attitude and thoughts, even the theme of the novel. This paper intends to make a detailed analysis on some representative dialogues in *Sense and Sensibility* from a perspective of CP and the violations of its four maxims, and then to deduce the conversational implicature more than what is said, aiming to make a better understanding of the characters’ personality and the social status quo behind the literary work.

2 Literature Review

Jane Austen is a British female novelist born in England, whose father George Austen is a rector of Anglican parishes, and her mother Cassandra a member of substantial gentry family and a lady of high cultural attainment. Therefore, although Austen did not get a formal education, she enjoyed the capacity of self-study, and showed her talent in language at a very young age, whose works mainly focus on the conflicts in love and marriage of the gentry family. In her works, comedy is often used to make fun of people’s stupid, snobbish and blind self-confidence. The unique meticulous observation and lively witty words of the women vividly depict the world around Austen, and pry about the entire social form and the traditional code of conduct, which play an important role in the ethos of novel creation.

Sense and Sensibility is Austen’s first published novel under the pseudonym “A Lady”, whose first draft was finished in 1795, and was formally published in 1811 after several modifications. Since its publication, *Sense and Sensibility* has been the bestseller with dozens of translations, better known as comedy of manners. The novel centers on the Dashwood sisters Elinor and Marianne’s intricate marriage life, creating a humorous comparison of “reason and emotion” and finally putting forward the normative questions of morality and behavior. Up to now, there are three major approaches to the analysis of *Sense and Sensibility*.

Firstly, feminism is discussed the most in *Sense and Sensibility*. Some scholars emphasize the idea of liberal feminism conveyed by Austen in her work, which helps propel the development of feminism to a certain degree (TANG, 2012); others focus on protagonist Marianne’s emotional transformation from sensibility to sense, reflecting the necessity for feminism to depend on rationalism in a certain social background (WANG & KANG, 2007, p. 111).

The second focus on *Sense and Sensibility* is irony. It is pointed out that the protagonist Elinor becomes the main factor of irony because of her dual identities as narrator and character (QIU, 2004, p. 82); through the use of

verbal and situational irony, it is also explicitly demonstrated that Marianne's passion and sorrow is not the true willfulness but only the request from the social rational norm, and the romance she espoused is just a copy and pursuit of the convention in the world, which reveal contradictions and paradoxes in the outside world (BAI, 2009, p. 88).

The third perspective of the research of the novel lies on the reflection of Austen's view on love-money and pedigree are indispensable factors for marriage while true love is the foundation, with sense and sensibility complementing each other (ZHANG, 2013, p. 56).

However, there exists few analyses on the vivid conversation in *Sense and Sensibility*, not to mention the conversational implicatures embedded in the dialogues. In fact, interpreting dialogues in a literary work from a CP perspective helps get a more accurate interpretation and appreciation of the characters' personality, psychological activities, by exploring traits of personality and communication goal in it.

3 Theoretical Elaboration

3.1 Cooperative Principle

The theory of Cooperative Principle was originally proposed by Grice in his 1961 article *The Causal Theory of Perception*, where Grice writes that "one should not make a weaker statement rather than a stronger one unless there is a good reason for so doing" (JIANG, 2000, p. 35). In 1967, Grice delivered "William James lectures" at Harvard, through which the theory of Cooperative Principle had first become widely known.

According to Grice, our talk exchanges subconsciously comply with some unwritten rules that guide us to say what the other speaker needs; and each communicator recognizes them in a common purpose or a normally accepted direction. In other words, when people communicate, they seem to be willing to cooperate with each other so that the conversation would go smoothly. The principle they may follow can be named as Cooperative Principle, which was described as "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" (HU, 2009, p. 190).

To specify the CP, Grice puts forward four maxims of it as follows:

THE MAXIM OF QUANTITY

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

Do not make your contribution more informative than is required. (HU, 2009, p. 190)

These two seemingly repetitive maxims actually state from two different angles, one is hearer-based, by which one should convey as fully as possible the needed information, that is, the speaker should take the hearer's need for information into consideration; the other is speaker-based, by which one should speak as necessarily as possible, meaning that he just has to say what he believes to be necessary.

THE MAXIM OF QUALITY

Try to make your contribution one that is true.

Do not say what you believe to be false.

Do not say that for which you lack adequate evidence. (HU, 2009, p. 190)

The category of quality consists of a general maxim and two specific rules. From the perspective of the speaker, it seems to prescribe speakers to express the information of which they can assure the credibility and

quality. But actually it is a description of people's daily conversational phenomenon.

THE MAXIM OF RELATION
Be relevant. (HU, 2009, p. 190)

Conspicuously, this relation maxim focuses on the relevance of conversation out of politeness, that is, one says something related to the other's utterance.

THE MAXIM OF MANNER
Be perspicuous.
Avoid obscurity of expression.
Avoid ambiguity.
Be brief (avoid prolixity).
Be orderly. (HU, 2009, p. 190)

Differing from the maxims of others which focus on what a speaker said, the manner maxim is related to how a speaker should say. That is to say, it does not focus on the content of one's utterance but on the manner one making his conversational contribution.

3.2 Conversational Implicature

According to Grice, Cooperative Principle and its maxims describe what is actually observed in human's daily conversation. That is, people bear CP and its four maxims in their mind unintentionally or subconsciously. However, there are some particular conditions where people intentionally violate the four maxims to achieve certain communicational goals, or to be more specifically, to generate the "conversational implicature". The following example may help understand how conversational implicature is generated by intentionally violating Cooperative Principle:

Example (1) (Two guests are chatting in a party.)

A: This party is the worst I've ever participated in.

B: Yeah, today is a sunny day, isn't it?

Here the second speaker obviously violates the maxim of relation for he doesn't make a relevant response to the first speaker's comment on that party. So people can deduce from the second speaker's response that the possible reasons for his irrelevance may be the fact that the host of that party is nearby, or that he deems it impolite to discuss the host's kindness to hold that party. With the help of this example, readers will get a clearer understanding of how conversational implicature is generated and then it will be easier for them to interpret the conversational implicatures embedded in the dialogues in *Sense and Sensibility*, which will be illustrated abundantly in the following section.

4 Case Analysis in *Sense and Sensibility*

This section will take *Sense and Sensibility* as an example, illustrating how conversations in this novel violate the CP and its four maxims and what pragmatic effects or conversational implicatures can be achieved.

4.1 Violation of the Maxim of Quantity

According to Grice, people should offer information just as required, neither more nor less. But actually, there are two ways to infringe that maxim: namely first, understatement that impresses readers more by what is

merely implied or left unsaid than by bare statement, and second, hyperbole that is used for the intensification of feelings or emotions and for the elevation of ironic effects.

Example (2)

Have you not received my notes?

Yes, I had the pleasure of receiving the information which you were so good to send me. (Austen, 2009, p. 175)

This conversation happened on a party on which Marianne saw Willoughby being in an earnest conversation with a fashionable lady and pretending not to see her and her sister. After Marianne called his name in a tone of affection, Willoughby approached and walked towards Elinor rather than Marianne, which made Marianne so frustrated as to hurl several questions at him. However, Willoughby just made a simple and seemingly polite understatement as if Marianne was a common acquaintance to him but not his beloved one, and he made no explanation why he didn't write back to Marianne. In this conversation, Willoughby purposely violated the first maxim of quantity, making his contribution less informative than Marianne required, which indicated that he intentionally alienated Marianne and denied their romance. He showed his indifference in a euphemistic way that other people couldn't notice. This conversation indicated that Willoughby was a hypocritical and cruel man who had made use of Marianne's innocence to content himself, which was a hint of the sorrowful ending of Marianne and Willoughby.

4.2 Violation of the Maxim of Quality

The maxim of quality seems to prescribe people to say something true or what they can assure others. In literary works, the violation of quality maxim is usually elucidated by the use of metaphor and irony. In these cases, the speaker tries to emphasize his opinion towards the object he is talking and to convey the opposite meaning of what he actually says in a more polite but insinuating way.

Example (3)

What a charming little family! I never saw such fine children in my life.

I should guess so, from what I have witnessed this morning. (Austen, 2009, p. 125)

Elinor found that Anne and Lucy were foolish and vulgar at the first sight of them at Barton park. They were big liars and good at flattering the Middletons, who were all vacuous. Besides, the children of lady Middleton were spoiled, mischievous and noisy. That morning they encountered Miss Steels sashes, pulled their hairs, searched their work-bags and stole away their knives and scissors. However, Lucy said the Middletons were a charming family and their children were the finest, which was absolutely false. Elinor pretended to agree with her, but her smile was full of irony. Here Elinor used the uncertain word "guess" and added that she guessed from what she had observed that morning. She intentionally violated the first maxim of quality, saying what she believed to be false, showing her disagreement with Lucy as well as her scorn to Lucy in an unoffending way. Elinor didn't express her irony obviously out of politeness, reflecting her character of reason and maturity.

4.3 Violation of the Maxim of Relation

Sometimes people tend to say something irrelevant to the topic; in fact, they are trying to escape from the conversation or hide some privacies by purposely breaching the maxim of relation without hurting or offending the other speaker.

Example (4)

I am writing home, had not you better defer your letter?
 I am not going to write to my mother. (Austen, 2009, p. 157)

When the two sisters settled down at the Mrs. Jennings, Elinor decided to write to her mother before dinner was ready. She sat down to write, and a few minutes later Marianne did the same. Elinor thought Marianne was also going to write home so she asked her to delay her letter for a day or two. But Marianne didn't answer directly whether she would defer or not, and she just made an incomplete response that she was not writing home. This seemingly irrelevant response indicates that Marianne was writing to Willoughby. Marianne deliberately violated the maxim of relation because she wished to avoid any further inquiry from her elder sister, and she didn't want her elder sister to know her affection and her engagement with Willoughby. Marianne's quick response reflects her sensibility and immaturity towards love, shaping a sharp contrast with the view of her elder sister towards love and marriage.

4.4 Violation of the Maxim of Manner

The violation of the maxim of manner can be best demonstrated through obscure and overgeneralized expressions to avoid embarrassing or unhappy circumstances.

Example (5)

I think very highly of him, I greatly esteem him.
 Esteem him! Cold-hearted Elinor! (Jane Austen, 2009, p. 21)

This conversation took place between Marianne and Elinor when Marianne tried to verify her guess about the current state of the relationship between Elinor and Edward as well as Elinor's attitude towards Edward. Elinor tried to explain it objectively to her younger sister that she thought highly of Edward, but she was not assured of his affection for her. With consideration of the resistance from Edward's sister and mother, Elinor violated the first maxim of manner by using obscure words to explain her feeling towards Edward, which indicated her personality of sense and cautiousness. But to Marianne, who contended that one should express love and feeling passionately and vigorously, her elder sister was somewhat cowardly and cold-hearted in love. Through this conversation it could be seen that the two sisters had extremely different characteristics and attitudes towards love.

Conclusion

Based on the comprehensive study into Jane Austen's *Sense and Sensibility* from the perspective of Cooperative Principle, this paper selects some typical dialogues and classifies them into different categories in accordance with different maxims, showing that different conversations can generate different implicatures. Under the help of the Cooperative Principle and its maxims, people get an easier access to what kind of implicature is in a certain context and how it is generated. The implicature analysis of conversation in *Sense and Sensibility* not only makes clear the figures' emotional difference and the language style of this novel, manifests Austen's realism in her fiction, but also shows people that analyzing literary works with pragmatic theory can provide a brand new appreciation about that work.

References

- Austen, J. (2009). *Sense and sensibility*. Peking: Tsinghua University Press.
- BAI, S. (2009). Rich laughter—On the irony in Jane Austen's novels. *Foreign Language Education*, 30(4), 88-91.
- DU, J. H. (2002). On conversational implicature from an analysis of the violation of cooperative principle. *Journal of Southern Yangtze University: Humanities & Social Sciences Edition*, 1(5), 109-112.
- HU, Z.-L. (2009). *Linguistics: A course book*. Peking: Peking University Press.
- JIANG, W.-Q. (2000). *The theory and application of pragmatics*. Peking: Peking University Press.
- QIU, J. (2004). On the irony in the novels and films of *Sense and Sensibility*. *Foreign Literature*, 06, 82-87.
- SUN, F.-F. (2006). *On the explanatory power of the theory of conversational implicature in literary works*. 2006 Annual Meeting of Fujian Foreign Language Association, 1-7.
- TANG, J.-C. (2012). The development of feminism in *Sense and Sensibility*. *Journal of Hubei Correspondence University*, 25(1), 143-144.
- WANG, X.-C., & KANG, C.-Y. (2007). The change of feminist consciousness from *Sense to Sensibility*—Analysis of *Sense and Sensibility*. *Journal of Qiqihar University (Philosophy & Social Science Edition)*, 05, 111-113.
- ZHANG, Q. (2013). Jane Austen's views on marriage in *Sense and Sensibility*. *Journal of Jilin Radio and Television University*, 07, 56-57.