

# Conversational Analysis from the Perspective of the Cooperative Principle—Taking the Film *Twelve Years A Slave* as an Example

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**Abstract**—In 1967, the American language philosopher Grice has put forward a famous theory of the cooperative principle at the Harvard University. He believes that in the process of people's communication, conversations between the two sides in naturally or unconsciously follows a principle in order to effectively complete the task of communication. Grice proposed that people in communication must follow the general principles of authenticity, information, relevance and clarity. This paper analyzes words which are from movie *Twelve Years a Slave* based on the cooperative principle. By means of combination between the sentence meaning and the specific context, audiences are easy to understand characters and theme of the film. What's more, it is important for people to better understand, grasp and use the cooperative principle.

**Index Terms**—the cooperative principle, maxims, conversational analysis, *Twelve Years a Slave*

## I. INTRODUCTION

In 1967, American language philosopher Grice put forward the famous theory of cooperative principle for the first time and made the following statement: any communication has its own purpose, and in order to achieve this purpose, the communication participants will follow the cooperative principle naturally or unconsciously. After that, Grice proposed four maxims, namely, the maxim of quality, the maxim of quantity, the maxim of relation and the maxim of manner. In recent years, linguists who use the cooperative principle to analyze film conversations have made great achievements. These linguists take the film conversations as a starting point, and discover the way in which people understand and grasp the world from the conversations of characters. As the main content of pragmatics, the cooperative principle has attached great importance by scholars both at home and abroad. Sperber & Wilson (1995), Wang Junmin (2008) have made a series of research on the application of cooperative principle in advertising. Qian Guanlian (1999), Feng Guangwu (2006), systematically analyze philosophical basis and view of the cooperative principle.

Hollywood movie *Twelve Years a Slave* won Best screenplay Award in the seventy-first Golden Globes and won three more awards of Best Motion Picture, Best Supporting Actress and Best Adapted Screenplay in the eighty-sixth Oscar awards. The success of film lies not only in the actor's consummate acting skill also in the classic conversations inspiring people. This movie is selected to remember the past wars and cherish the memory of the people who suffered from racial discrimination. Each of us should face up to this history and arouse national consciousness. Although this history is long gone, it still applies to those who love freedom and respect for dignity.

This paper analyzes words which are from movie *Twelve Years a Slave* based on the cooperative principle. By means of combination between the sentence meaning and the specific context, audience are more easier to understand characters and theme of the film, also, it is important for people to better understand and use the cooperative principle.

## II. LITERATURE REVIEW

In 1967, the American language philosopher Grice making a speech at the Harvard University has put forward a famous theory of the cooperative principle. He believes that in the process of people's communication, conversations between the two sides in naturally or unconsciously follows a principle in order to effectively complete the task of communication. This principle consists of four maxims: the maxim of quality, the maxim of quantity, the maxim of relation and the maxim of manner. The specific contents are as follows:

(1) The maxim of quantity

- A. Make your contribution as informative as required (for the current purpose of the exchange).
- B. Do not make your contribution more informative than is required.

(2) The maxim of quality

- A. Do not say what you believe to be false.
- B. Do not say that for which you lack adequate evidence.

(3) The maxim of relation

Be relevant

(4) The maxim of manner

- A. Avoid obscurity of expression.
- B. Avoid ambiguity.
- C. Be brief (avoid unnecessary prolixity).
- D. Be orderly.

The domestic and foreign scholars have carried on the supplement to the cooperative principle, such as Leech's "politeness principle", Levinson's "QIM three principles", and the domestic Suo Zhenyu, Zhou Liquan also making positive efforts. The domestic scholars' attention to this theory began with Hu Zhuanglin. He has first introduced the cooperative principle into China in his book of Pragmatics.

All of us not always abide by the cooperative principle and its four maxims in daily life. People will break the rules and lie. What's more, it also promotes conversational implicature. The following are several cases that violate the cooperative principle.

- (1) Violation of the maxim of quantity.
- (2) Violation of the maxim of quality.
- (3) Violation of the maxim of relation.
- (4) Violation of the maxim of manner.

### III. THE APPLICATION OF THE GRICE'S THEORY IN THE MOVIE *TWELVE YEARS A SLAVE*

This section will be divided into two parts: Observing the cooperative principle and violating the cooperative principle by choosing some conversations from the movie. Movie has already become a part of people's life. It is not only the content of people's entertainment, but also helps people understand the world. The movie *Twelve Years a Slave* narrates a story during the Civil War. In this period, the United States has experienced a great social change: the rapid development of capitalism, which had a great influence on the ideas, psychology and behavior of the American. This movie provides us with a window to explore the perspective of American society in the nineteenth century. English movie appreciation is an effective way to further strengthen cultural exchanges and promote people's understanding in different countries. Because the film has been in recent years, there are few pragmatic studies on it. Guided by Grice's cooperative principle, this paper makes a systematic discussion on the conversations between characters. On the one hand, it is easy to understand the story by following the cooperative principle. On the other hand, violating the four maxims will help the plot develop and make the film more attractive. In theory, the perspective of Grice's cooperative principle can be an effective way to analyze the film, and this research will also contribute to broaden the perspective of the related research.

#### A. *Observing the Cooperative Principle*

##### 1. The maxim of quantity

In the Analysis of Conversational Implicature and Cooperative Principle, Che Xinyu (2017) said that according to Grice's theory, people need to follow a series of basic principles of cooperation (cooperative principle) in order to achieve the purpose of communication. Grice proposed that people in communication must follow the general principles of authenticity, information, relevance and clarity.

Example 1:

Solomon: "This is the way our president left the world."

Solomon: "The whole morning, solemn bell rang through the sky and funeral mourning announced soon. Our city, together with our whole country, has been summoned to the great fall and mourning: William-Henry-Harrison."

Margaret: "Can you read it again?"

Anne: "Now can't, baby."

Margaret: "Thank God, give us food to fill the hunger, give us rest. Let memory never forget."

Solomon: "Margaret, the prayers are beautiful."

There are some conversations between Solomon's couple and their daughter before dinner. Solomon has read the news about the death of the president, which attracts the attention of Margaret, so she begs her father to do it again. And then, her mother makes a short response to her. Seeing the delicacy dinner cooked by her mother, Margaret can't help praying. Her prayer words are sincere and pure. Solomon immediately praises her due to the beautiful prayers. The conversations are concise and there is no extra information in the process of conversations. These refined words reflect a happy life in the family before Solomon was arrested. So these conversations follow the maxim of quantity of Grice's Theory. Ironically, Solomon is concerned about the death of the president of the country and her daughter thanks the Lord, which makes a strong contrast with Solomon being trafficked into slave. The conversations among the family are short and compares to what Solomon said after being a slave. The former conversations are easy and pleasant, while the latter are full of despair and repression.

##### 2. The maxim of quality

Example 2:

Bozzie: "Hey, boy, how do you feel?"

Solomon: "I'm Solomon Northup. I am a free man; I live in Saratoga, New York. Living with my wife and children, they are also free. I have a proof document. You don't have the right to detain me."

*Bozzie: "You're not."*

*Bozzie: "Now that you say so, take out your proof."*

These are some conversations between Solomon and Bozzie after Solomon is arrested. Although Solomon's statement is a bit long during the conversations, these words follow the maxim of quality. That is to say, he is telling the truth and there is plenty of evidence. After being imprisoned, he wanted to take out his own legal documents to prove that he was a free man while the file has already been taken away by Bozzie. However, he asked Solomon to take out legal documents. Obviously, the violation of the maxim of quality appears in the discourse. In fact, Bozzie knows that Solomon has been trafficked by others. Driven by interests, however, he becomes ruthless and without a trace of humanity. In the conversations, Solomon gives a detailed description of his life, but the words violate the maxim of relation, because Bozzie is just asking his feeling. From here we can see the fear and unrest of Solomon.

### 3. The maxim of relation

Example 3:

*Mrs. Ford: "let me see them..."*

*Mrs. Ford: "This is crying. Why does she cry?"*

*Ford: "Separated from the children."*

*Mrs. Ford: "Oh, my God."*

The conversations take place between the slave owner Ford and his wife. Their words are short but refined. This passage follows Grice's maxim of relation. It can also be seen that Mrs. Ford's ambivalence to both sympathy and helplessness of slaves. As a woman, Mrs. Ford knows what the child means to a mother. So when Ford has told her why the black woman cried, she sighed. In such a large background, the Ford couple can do nothing but powerless sympathy. Here, the short language is more capable of showing their helplessness.

### 4. The maxim of manner

The maxim of manner is that the conversations should be clear, avoid obscure and ambiguous. In the play, there is often a case of replacing regular expression with a particularly obscure expression, with the following session as an example.

Example 4:

*Solomon: "Ford is a decent man."*

*Ilisa: "He's a slave owner."*

*Solomon: "No, no."*

*Ilisa: "Because he favors you, you're blusk."*

The conversations took place between Solomon and Ilisa. The whole conversations are very short and orderly. In order to make the conversations go smoothly, the conversations between the two sides of the communication must have relevance. Otherwise, the conversations will be blocked or terminated. Because the slave owner has separated Lisa from her children, she hates all the slave owners. However, Solomon is particularly listening to Mr. Ford, which was the reason why Lisa quarreled with him. Solomon regards Mr. Ford as a person who has a good heart, but in the eyes of Ilisa, Ford is just like any other slave owners. Missing children too much, Ilisa is in deep sorrow throughout the conversations. Her words are full of resentment. As a man, Solomon does not understand Ilisa's mood at all. She has no reason to judge anything in the world.

## B. Violating the Cooperative Principle

### 1. Violation of the maxim of quantity

Liu Zhen (2011) said that people often violate principles on the basis of complying with the cooperative principle to convey a potential real intention in the paper Multi-level Cooperation -- from Speech Act Theory to Discourse Cooperation.

The maxim of quantity requires that the information provided by the two sides must be equal and mutually necessary.

Example 5:

*Judge Turner: "Is it Platt? Have you ever planted sugarcane before?"*

*Solomon: "No, sir."*

*Judge Turner: "You start very quickly, as if you were born. Are you educated?"*

*Solomon: "Niggers are hired to work, not to read and write."*

When Judge Turner asks Solomon if he has been educated, Solomon does not answer the question directly, but he talks about the status of the blacks as a whole. Obviously, Solomon's answer does not follow the maxim of quantity. Here, Solomon lies to the judge because he has been educated in the north. His answer is the helplessness of himself as a black man. In order to survive, Solomon does not give a long answer when talking to the slave owner, and he knows that a black slave would never say he has been educated. Under such a social background, black people are completely reduced to tools. They have no dignity. It can be seen from the above conversations that Solomon is both a clever man and a persistent man. He believes that one day he will be able to get out of this dark place.

### 2. Violation of the maxim of quality

Wang Min (2017) said that the proposal of cooperative principle is of great significance to the study of linguistics in his passage of violation of the cooperative principle in communication. In daily communication, people always try to abide by the cooperative principle. However, there will be a violation of the principle. For example, the speaker has

deliberately provided false information which is cannot be found by others.

Example 6:

*Hamilton: "I am Mr. Brown's assistant, an internationally known magician."*

*Brown: "We're going back to join the gang. We left a few days from the circus. We wanted to perform a few games and make a little money."*

*Hamilton: "We have to ask Mr. Moon because of..."*

*Brown: "Yes, we want to play music for the performance. It's a great effort for this. Really talented people seem to be rare."*

*Solomon: "Thank you, sir..."*

*Brown: "If we could convince you to go to New York with us... Play with us, pay you one dollar a day for each day, and pay three dollars a night. In addition, we also offer travel expenses enough for you to return from New York to Saratoga."*

In the conversations, Hamilton and Brown gain the trust of Solomon by elaborating lies, and these lies make Solomon excited. Then he follows them arrives in south, away from his wife and children. If it were not for their deceit and lies, Solomon would not have been a slave for twelve years. Solomon is a kindhearted man. He is grateful to the tricksters' lies. It was the violation of the maxim of quality that made Solomon's life bumpy. For the sake of their own interests, two white men make Solomon into the dark abyss. In front of money, they have no human nature. In the eyes of these white people, money is more valuable than free. They venerate God, but they treat the chosen people of God cruelly.

3. Violation of the maxim of relation.

Guo Min (2017), in the Interpretation of Verbal Humor from the Perspective of the Cooperative Principle, said that following the cooperative principle and its four principles will help the smooth progress of conversations and the effective communication of information. But in actual conversations, the participants often intentionally violate the cooperative principle.

Example 7:

*Margaret: "I've all jumped here. You do it, too."*

*Anne: "I don't want to destroy my skirt. Catch me!"*

In the movie when the children and her husband Solomon encourage Anne to skip the mud, she does not answer because she doesn't want to ruin her skirt. Obviously, she cares about her skirt. In the cooperative principle, Anne's answer seems to be little irrelevant. From this conversations, we can feel that the family live happily before he has been sold. Their lives are surrounded by affection and love.

4. Violation of the maxim of manner

Example 8:

*Clemence: "I think so, no matter what we used to... Well, it's now, and then we'll be shipped to the south. I dare to guess that it is New Orleans. When we arrive, we will be sent to the market. Well, once I went to the state of slavery, I think there's only one end."*

Clemence envisions Solomon's next situation, but in fact he thinks of what he would do. His innermost feelings can be realized in his disorderly discourse. The whole part consists of two different outcomes. The violation of the maxim of manner shows their position. Although this phrase is a conjecture, it appears to be a mess in the language organization. In slavery society, once the blacks are sold as slaves, there is no dawn of freedom. Clemence knows this, so he could conceive of his future fate. Although the words are a little messy, he thinks of all the possibilities. Clemence's words seem somewhat ambiguous, but it exposes the fact that once the black people are sold to the south, their situation is bound to be very bad. In the society where slavery prevails, the black people who are trafficked are helpless about their own destiny. They are like commodities.

#### IV. CONCLUSION

In the present situation, black slavery has long been canceled, but racial discrimination still exists in American society. For example, in some industries in the United States, it is difficult for blacks to get a very high position even if they are capable. But not because it is defined as a lower ethnic group means to yield, or to change his fate and the ethnic group by their own resistance. Death is the relief of those who are free and unable to be saved, and the consolation of those who cannot be relieved of time. The distance between life and death is very close. Some people can't bear the setbacks and blows in life, so they choose the quiet death. But those who carry their hopes are more romantic. It is easy to die; but it is difficult to live. Life is so long, setbacks and pain are the required courses for everyone. The hero of the film inspired everyone, especially words he said after he was trapped. So the film's conversations are worth studying. Consequently, film's conversations, as a language phenomenon, have drawn much attention of many language scholars.

The purpose of theoretical research is to use. The cooperative principle has caused a strong repercussion in China, for example, people have applied it to the appreciation of literary works. Through the combination of analysis and synthesis, these articles have achieved good results.

This article is a good material for learning cooperative principle through a small part of the movie *Twelve Years a*

*Slave*. If we can spend some time using the CP theory to analyze the conversations of these popular movies, we can better understand American culture. In addition, in the course of our daily communication, everyone should comply with the principle of conversational cooperation as much as possible so that we can communicate more smoothly. There are many kinds of conversations in real life and many phenomena worth studying. For example, the communication can not be carried out normally because of the different background of knowledge. Although the existing theories are not perfect, they complement the cooperative principle from different angles. This movie is selected to remember the past wars and cherish the memory of the people who suffered from racial discrimination. Each of us should face up to this history and arouse national consciousness. Although this history is long gone, it still applies to those who love freedom and respect for dignity.

The article is pragmatic analysis based on the cooperative principle of Grice. It can be seen that one way to expand the plot of literary works is to build a conversations between characters. Although some of the dialogues in this movie are violating the cooperative principle from the perspective of pragmatics, this is to better describe film characters' journey of the heart from the perspective of literature.

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