



## An Application of H.P. Grice's Theory of Implicature to Somerset Maugham's Short Story *The Punctiliousness of Don Sebastian*

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### ABSTRACT

**Purpose:** Somerset Maugham was successful with well-received novels, notable essays, crowd-drawing plays and more than a hundred short stories. But unfortunately his critics branded him a 'commercial' writer and an artistic failure.

**Methodology:** Paul Grice introduced the technical notions of Cooperative Principle and 'conversational implicature' to arrive at the right meaning of an utterance. This study applies Grice's theory of conversational implicature to interpret the language of Somerset Maugham in his short story *The Punctiliousness of Don Sebastian* to show his language gifts.

**Findings:** This minute analysis exposes explicitly the complexities of Maugham's use of language.

**KEYWORDS :** implicature, cooperative principle.

### Introduction

William Somerset Maugham was called the grand old man of letters and his writing profession was a stunning success as he observed with intense interest the lives of the people he knew and converted them into writing material with an adept psychological perception. But many of his critics did not treat his short stories kindly, primarily because of their themes. The technical virtuosity of his narration and linguistic skill in writing remain unexplored.

His writings, which are carried on through mimesis, provide conversation as the staple of his method of narration. There is scope to study his proficiency in style that is apparently simple, but full of linguistic nuances that call for a systematic attention. An enquiry into Maugham's language through an application of Grice's Maxims and the implicature emanating from the apparent violation of the Maxims, will help a reader understand that his language use is only apparently simple.

In the present study, an attempt has been made to explore the nuances of Maugham's implicature to bring out his artistry, by analyzing the conversations in the story through an application of H.P. Grice's Cooperative Principle. The present study would facilitate to establish Maugham as a writer with linguistic skills.

### Theory of Implicature

H.P. Grice's *Studies in the Way of Words* covers several topics in everyday language use particularly on meaning, logical connectives and more importantly the notion of implying. His discussions on Maxims of Conversation and conversational implicatures paved way for philosophers to expound on presupposition to disseminate communication through language.

Implicature refers to what is suggested in an utterance, even though neither expressed nor strictly implied. It helped "to clarify the intuitive difference between what is expressed literally in a sentence and what is merely suggested by an utterance of the same string of words."

His influential theory of 'implicature' explained how conversational implicatures arise. In everyday speech, people indulge in many implicatures, which help them to use and understand language. His Cooperative Principle and the four Maxims of Conversation help to understand the linguistic meaning of words in a sentence when implications are intended.

### Cooperative Principle.

Maxim of Quantity:

1. Make your contribution as informative as is required Do not make your contribution more informative than is required

Maxim of Quality. Try to make your contribution one that is true Its two more specific maxims are:

1. Do not say what you believe to be false
2. Do not say that for which you lack adequate evidence

Maxim of Relation. Be relevant.

Maxim of Manner. Be perspicuous;

1. Avoid obscurity of expression
2. Avoid ambiguity
3. Be brief (avoid unnecessary prolixity)
4. Be orderly

### The Punctiliousness of Don Sebastian

In this short story, *The Punctiliousness of Don Sebastian*, Maugham takes up the theme of honour in Spanish backdrop and shows the innate nature of the Spanish in reacting fiercely to infidelity. Don Sebastian dispenses direct justice, when the fidelity of his spouse becomes suspect. Here, Sebastian poisoned his brother Archbishop Pablo, when he came to know of the Bishop's secret meetings with his wife.

### Maxim of Quality

1. The narrator was travelling in a train to Madrid when the train stopped suddenly. When he enquired the porter what place it was, the porter answered

"Xiormonez."

The narrator was surprised that the train should stop there and again said that he did not know that the train would stop at Xiormonez. To which the porter impassively answered,

"We do not stop at Xiormonez."

But when the narrator again persisted by saying that the train had now stopped at Xiormonez, the porter briefly answered,

"That may be, but we are going on again".

The sub maxim "Provide adequate and complete information" has been violated in all the above responses, as the porter was intentionally uncommunicative and did not give adequate information to the narrator. His impersonal response implies that he was not willing to engage himself in any conversation with the

narrator.

Don Sebastian's wife Dona Sodina died after fifteen years of marriage. At night he picked up her breviary and suddenly saw the words "To-night, my beloved, I come." in his brother Pablo's handwriting and in another page he saw the same words written in his wife's writing. Don Sebastian dropped the breviary but his face showed no change

2. When the anniversary of his death drew near, Don Sebastian wrote to his brother Archbishop Pablo. His punctilious letter of invitation to his brother concealed his dark intention.

"I implore you – who are my only relative in this world, and heir to all my goods and estates – to visit me quickly, for I have a presentiment that death is not far off, and I would see you before we are parted by the immense sea"

Here, he violates the sub maxim, "do not convey what you believe to be false or unverified". He had deviously plotted to punish his brother and falsely lured him by throwing the net of brotherly love over Pablo.

3. On the day of the anniversary, Don Sebastian invited his brother Archbishop Pablo to dinner and served him a wine from Cordova. After having made his brother drink the wine, he on his part let slip the glass and discretely avoided the drink. This implies the wine was poisoned. He then invited Pablo to come to his wife's room and showed Dona Sodina's breviary. Pablo started with surprise. but Don Sebastian imperturbably interrupted him saying,

"Do not be afraid! I will not touch you".

The words are not reassuring as it violates the sub maxim "avoid obscurity and ambiguity", as it is natural for any cuckolded husband to be murderously angry with his wife's lover. But this reassurance suggests that Don Sebastian had some other plan of retribution.

4. When the Archbishop confirmed Don Sebastian's worst fear and confessed that Pablo and Dona Sodina had been in love and had later repented it, Don Sebastian replied,

"I have forgiven you."

This implication violates the sub maxim "make your contribution true" as Don Sebastian said it ominously without a trace of forgiveness. But the contrary seems to be true, making the Archbishop wonder at its implication.

#### Maxim of Relevance

1. When he found from her breviary that his beloved wife and his trusted brother had been in love, Don Sebastian dropped the breviary and sat staring at it and said,

"And yet", he whispered "I loved thee well".

This conversational implicature implies that he still loved his wife even after discovering her treachery. The word 'yet' implies that he was agonised at the thought that his wife had sought love from another man by disregarding his own love.

2. Pablo started with surprise when he saw the breviary and then Don Sebastian asked if Dona Sodina had loved Pablo. He stammered and asked Don Sebastian to forgive her for she had repented it bitterly. Don Sebastian enigmatically said,

"I have forgiven you"

and added,

"You have no cause for anxiety. From now it is finished.

I will forget."

After opening the door he helped his brother to cross the threshold and bade him goodnight by kissing him on either cheek. These words do not reveal how Don Sebastian felt about the relationship between Dona Sodina and his brother and thus violates the sub maxim, "Be relevant."

3. When the present duke showed to the narrator the dog lying at Don Sebastian's feet and said that it was a symbol of fidelity the narrator replied that he had read from the guide book that

"she was chaste and faithful".

To that the duke replied

"If she had been, Don Sebastian would perhaps never have become Duque de Losas."

The maxim of manner is violated as how her infidelity led to Don Sebastian's rise to become a Duke; it marks too much of a jump in thought sequence.

4. The narrator completed reading the manuscript and in the evening the present duke passed the narrator's hotel and enquired if he had read the manuscript. The narrator answered that he had thought it to be interesting. To that the duke replied,

"It is not half so interesting as a good dinner".

This is a violation of "be perspicuous", as the duke concealed his impoverished state by inviting himself to dinner with the narrator.

5. Towards the end of the narration, when the duke despaired that his ancestral line would end because he was not married, the narrator gave the duke a letter of introduction to an heiress at Hampstead

"for even in these days it is not so bad a thing to be Duchess of Losas, and the present duke has no brother".

These concluding words "the present duke has no brother" violates the submaxim "avoid obscurity and ambiguity", as it implies that he had no brother to tempt his wife's soul as Dona Sodina had been tempted by the Archbishop.

#### Maxim of Manner

1. On hearing the tolling of the bells on the death of his brother, Don Sebastian said to himself

"It was belladonna that sent his body to the worms; and it was Belladonna that sent his soul to hell."

The punning on Belladonna – referring to the poison and the beautiful lady – implies that Don Sebastian's had murdered his own brother.

2. The Duke had a manuscript and the narrator remarked that the duke was fortunate to possess such things and the duke shrugged his shoulders and answered,

"What good are they? I would sooner have 500 pesetas than this musty parchment".

The duke's words violate the sub maxim "be perspicuous" as they imply that he was willing to sell the family heirloom for money. It also signifies his deplorable economic state, where he is ready to sell the rare manuscript which every ancient family would want to treasure.

#### Conclusion

Thus, a rigorous application of Grice's theory of implicature exposes the violation of maxims in the conversation of the characters. This

short story contains more narration than dialogue, but still Maugham's language in this story abounds in implicature, as he uses his prose style to show that his characters when confronted with difficult situations do not explicitly commit themselves but only implicitly, as they are bound by the purpose of their moves (Vanderveken and Searle 1985, p. 25). Thus, these implicatures become indirect speech acts (Bach 1994, p. 13), which promote interpretative reasoning. The present study of Somerset Maugham's short stories in the light of Grice's theory of implicature emphasizes that his simple style and limited vocabulary have rich resources for generating verbal implicatures. This linguistic approach enables the readers to improve their cognitive interpretation by understanding Maugham's use of obscure and ambiguous utterances.

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