

# Analysis of Conversational Implicature in *Friends* From the Perspective of Cooperative Principles

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*Friends* is an American television sitcom that tells the interesting stories of life between six old friends in Manhattan, New York, and their 10-year journey together. The plot section is exciting and diverse, with distinctive characteristics and humorous dialogue, and is considered one of the most famous sitcoms in the world. The lines of the protagonist in this drama have great pragmatic value and can be analyzed from multiple perspectives. This paper starts from the perspective of pragmatics and uses the cooperative principle as the theoretical framework to analyze the dialogues and conversations of characters, aiming to gain a deeper understanding of the conversational implicatures and to analyze the plot development and character traits at a deeper level.

**Keywords:** *Friends*, cooperative principle, conversational implicatures

## Introduction

It is the Oxford philosopher Herbert Paul Grice who first proposed the cooperative principle (Hu, 2011, p. 176). He noticed that in daily conversation people do not usually say things directly but tend to imply them (Grice, 1975, p. 43). He believed that all communication has a specific purpose, and both parties in conversation have a tacit rule. Cooperative principle includes four parameters: (1) Maxim of quantity: be informative. (a) Make your contribution as informative as is required (for the current purposes of the exchange); and (b) Do not make your contribution more informative than is required. (2) Maxim of quality: be truthful or try to make a contribution that is true. (a) Do not say what you believe to be false; and (b) Do not say something for which you lack adequate evidence. (3) Maxim of relation: be relevant. And (4) Maxim of manner: be perspicuous.

Grice believes that conversation is a communicative activity established by both parties based on cooperation to achieve a certain communicative goal. Conversation is a rational, cooperative, and purposeful behavior (Zhang, 2008). If the speaker violates the cooperative principle, in some cases this violation may be intentional. That is to say, people have the ability to express implicit meanings when speaking, and the ability to understand implicit meanings when listening to others (Shen, 1997). The listener needs to infer the purpose of the speaker's violation of the cooperative principle and the true meaning they want to express based on the context at the time, which is the conversational implicature (Ran, 2006). When the interlocutor violates a certain cooperative principle, they will ponder over the extraneous sounds, which is the process of generating conversational implicature (Gu, 2016). Research has found that speakers can gain additional language effects when violating the cooperative principle, such as humor (Xu & Li, 2020), euphemism (Yao, 2014), and attracting attention.

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In *Friends*, many conversations demonstrate a violation of the cooperative principle, which adds rich context and depth to the dialogue, thus requiring in-depth analysis. This paper starts from the four maxims of the cooperative principle, combined with the background and character images of *Friends*, analyzing the violation of cooperative principles and related conversational implicature through examples of dialogue.

### Data Collection

The thesis is mainly the analysis of conversational implicatures in *Friends*, so the methodology adopted is the combination of qualitative analysis and quantitative analysis.

There are 10 seasons of *Friends* with a total of 236 episodes. Collecting and analyzing all the conversational implicatures from the perspective of cooperative principles in the total 10 seasons is an impossible job for the author in such a short academic period. Besides, the way that the author collects the data is also limited by the number of seasons. Moreover, the evaluation of the 10th season of *Friends* is significantly lower than before, so the author tries to avoid the last season as much as possible. Considering that *Friends* runs for 10 years with one season a year, the author then selects the first, third, fifth, seventh, and ninth seasons as the samples for the present study in case that time influences the result. Firstly, the author tries to rewatch the clips of these five seasons as much as possible again. Then, the author collects some dialogues that the author is interested in from these five seasons. Finally, the author analyzes these dialogues and whether they violate the cooperative principle. It is in this way that the data is collected in the presentation study.

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#### Violating the Maxim of Quantity

Quantity maxim is to make your contribution as informative as is required for the current exchange and not to make your contribution more informative than is required. But in the actual life, people do not always follow the maxim. In *Friends*, characters often say more or less information than they are required. Thus, they disobey the maxim of quantity.

Example 1 (selected from Episode 4 of Season 1):

Chandler: All right, kids, I gotta get to work. If I don't input those numbers, it doesn't make much of a difference.

Rachel: So, like, you guys all have jobs?

Monica: Yeah, we all have jobs. See, that's how we buy stuff.

Joey: Yeah, I'm an actor.

Rachel: Wow! Would I have seen you in anything?

Joey: I doubt it. Mostly regional work.

Monica: Oh, wait, wait, unless you happened to catch the Rerun's production of *Pinocchio*.

Chandler: "Look, Gippetto, I'm a real live boy."

Joey: I will not take this abuse.

Chandler: You're right. I'm sorry. "Once I was a wooden boy, a little wooden boy..."

This conversation takes place in the fourth episode of the first season when the five protagonists still do not quite learn about each other. Rachel has a wealthy father and her family is richer than others, so she does not

have to worry about food or drink and does not have to worry about work. Therefore, Rachel asks if everyone has a job. Joey answers that he is an actor, and Rachel then asks him what movies or TV shows she has appeared in that she knows. At that time, Joey was not very famous, so he just used “I double it, mostly regional work” to answer, which apparently goes against the principle of quantity. He did not accurately answer what movies or TV shows he had appeared in, or what the names of movies or TV shows were.

Next, Chandler replies “Unless you happened to catch the Rerun’s production of *Pinocchio*” and also replies with a line from Joey’s character in *Pinocchio*, instead of directly answering Joey’s previous role in *Pinocchio*. The implication is that Joey’s characters are not very well-known, and Rachel must not be familiar with them. Therefore, Joey replies, “I will not take this abuse”.

### **Violating the Maxim of Quality**

The quality maxim requires that speakers should try their best to make sure what they contribute to the conversation is true. Under the category of this maxim, there’re two principles: One is “do not say what you believe to be false”, and the other is “do not say that for which you lack adequate evidence”. The quality maxim requires people to be sincere, and not to say something false in the conversation. Just as what is mentioned by Grice, “You violate the quality maxim when you deliberately lie or communicate in a way that does not reflect an honest intension” (Grice, 1975). However, people usually do not obey the maxim intentionally or unintentionally in order to be smooth in the daily conversation. Thus the violation of this maxim is commonly seen in daily life, and so is it in the situation comedy *Friends*.

#### **False information.**

Example 2 (selected from Episode 11 of Season 5):

Chandler: Ross is wearing leather pants! Does anybody else see that Ross is wearing leather pants? Someone comments on the pants!

Rachel: I think they’re very nice.

Monica: I like them.

Joey: Yeah!

Monica: I like them a lot.

Chandler: That’s not what I had in mind! See, people like Ross don’t generally wear these types of pants. You see, they’re very tight. Maybe there’s something in that area.

Ross: Oh see, I needed a new thing for today and there’s this leather store that I go by always smells so good and I thought to myself, “Wow, I never owned a really good smelling pair of pants before.”

(After Ross left)

Chandler: Oh, come on!

Ross: Okay, seriously, what do you think?

Joey: You look like a freak.

Rachel: Awful, absolutely awful.

Ross bought a new pair of leather pants for a date and asked his friends to give him feedback. Everyone knew at first glance that the leather pants did not fit well, and Ross looked very funny wearing them. However, Ross really liked these leather pants. Everyone deliberately said that these leather pants looked good in order to not undermine Ross and ensure a smooth date. After Ross left, everyone expressed their true opinions, and it was obvious that they had provided false information, which violated quality maxim.

**Inadequate evidence.**

Example 3 (selected from Episode 18 of Season 7):

Monica: I keep thinking all the things I won't have. It's freaking me out. I don't know what to do about it.

Phoebe: Don't sweat it. Chandler is not around, so go ahead and get it out of your system. That guy's cute.

Monica: Phoebe, come on. I'm serious. I've got to talk about this.

Phoebe: That's the last thing you want to do.

Monica: Why?

Phoebe: Because you're marrying him!

Monica: You gotta help me out here, Phobes.

Phoebe: Alright. I've never been engaged. I've never really been married. I can only tell you what my mother told me. When you have doubts or fears or anxieties about a relationship, do not communicate them to your husband.

Monica: So, I'm supposed to share my doubts and fears with the guy I'm spending the rest of my life with?

Phoebe: That is correct. Yes!

Monica and Chandler were about to get married, and Monica had various worries in her heart. She was worried that she would not be able to become a good wife and a good mother in the future. Therefore, she wanted to tell her husband Chandler about her thoughts. But Chandler was born into an unhappy family, with his father being a gay and his mother having various infidelities. He never had any expectations for marriage until he met Monica and regained his confidence in it. Phoebe understood that if Monica chose to reveal her feelings to Chandler at this time, it would definitely make Chandler afraid of marriage, so she said a sentence that was lack of evidence, "I can only tell you what my mother told me. When you have doubts or fears or anxieties about a relationship, do not communicate them to your husband".

**Violating the Maxim of Relation**

The relation maxim requires people to be relevant in their conversation. Violating it means saying something that has nothing to do with the conversation. If the hearer is a normal person but intentionally says something irrelevant to the speaker, the speaker will surely think over the reason for the hearer's irrelevance. In daily life, people often say something unrelated to the topic out of politeness, face-saving, or aggression. In *Friends*, conversations that violate the maxim of relation are often seen.

Example 4 (selected from Episode 1 of Season 7: The protagonists are in Monica's apartment, wishing Chandler and Monica a happy engagement):

Phoebe: (to Monica) So have you decided on a band for the wedding? Because you know, I am kind of musical.

Rachel: Phoebe, she just got engaged a couple of hours ago. I doubt she even has time for this.

Phoebe: Speaking of chiming in, remember the time you burned down my apartment?

Rachel: (to Monica) Yeah, you are on your own.

Phoebe is very passionate about playing the guitar and is immersed in the process of writing and directing. However, everyone agrees that her music is not commendable. Due to face-saving, everyone feels embarrassed to tell her the truth. In most cases, everyone can only politely refuse to watch her performance based on objective circumstances.

In this scenario, when Monica announced her engagement to everyone, Phoebe eagerly offered to play at her wedding. Rachel said, “She just got engaged a couple of hours ago. I doubt she even has time for this”. Rachel’s answer seemed unrelated to Phoebe’s question, but she helped Monica politely decline Phoebe’s request by breaking the maxim of relation. Phoebe is smart, so she certainly read out the meaning of Rachel’s reply. However, she did not give a direct response after hearing it. Instead, she said to Rachel, “Remember the time you burned down my apartment?” This sentence seemed unrelated to the topic and was confusing, but for Rachel, it was an indirect yet powerful counterattack. The implied meaning is: “You burned down my house, you owe me! If I don’t argue with you, it’s okay. Not only are you not grateful, but you are actually ruining my good deeds with kindness”. Rachel felt guilty immediately after hearing this, so she did not know how to reply. Then, she told Monica, “Yeah, you are on your own”.

### **Violating the Maxim of Manner**

The maxim of manner includes four sub-maxims: avoid obscurity of expression, avoid ambiguity, be brief, and be orderly. If the speaker says something in an obscure, ambiguous, or prolix way, he violates the maxim of manner.

Example 5 (selected from Episode 1 of Season 1):

Ross: Hi (be in low spirits).

Joey: This guy says “hello”, I wanna kill myself.

Monica: Are you okay, sweetie?

Ross: I just feel like someone reached down my throat, grabbed my small intestine, pulled it out of my mouth, and tied it around my neck.

Chandler: Cookie?

In the first episode of the first season, Ross just divorced his wife because she was lesbian and had an affair, which made him very depressed and difficult to accept. When Monica saw her brother’s dejected expression, she couldn’t help but ask, “Are you okay, sweetie?” Ross deliberately expressed his pain indirectly, “I just feel like someone reached down my throat, grabbed my small intestine, pulled it out of my mouth, and tied it around my neck”. At this moment, Ross’s feeling could have been expressed in “heartbreak” or similar words, but he used a longer and more obscure sentence to describe it, which violates the maxim of avoiding ambiguity and conciseness in conversation. Chandler did not know how to comfort sad Ross, so he pretended to be relaxed and said, “Cookie?”

### **Conclusion**

Cooperative principle has been studied by many scholars since its proposal by Grice. This paper provides a brief description of cooperative principle, its violation, and conversational implicature. The well-known family sitcom *Friends* is selected as the corpus source. The author has made a comprehensive analysis of some dialogues in *Friends*, which can help the author deeply understand the cooperative principle and familiarize with the culture of the target language. At the same time, the analysis of dialogues helps us gain a deeper understanding of the conversational implicatures of the protagonist’s dialogue in *Friends*.

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