

# Analysis of Conversational Implicature in the Film *The Truman Show* from the Perspective of Cooperative Principle

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## Abstract

**The Truman Show is an American satirical film directed by Peter Weir in 1998, which chronicles the life of Truman Burbank, a small-town insurance salesman. He is initially unaware that his life is recorded and broadcast worldwide 24 hours a day, but slowly he starts to realize that his life is a facade and embarks on a quest to discover the truth about his life. Dialogues between main characters in the film *The Truman Show* are selected. Adopting Paul Grice's theories of Cooperative Principle and Conversational Implicature as theoretical framework, the present thesis attempts to analyze in each dialogue what maxims or sub-maxims of Cooperative Principle are violated and what implicatures are thus produced. Through the above analysis, this thesis has proved the feasibility of applying Grice's Cooperative Principle and Conversational Implicature to analyze the films.**

## Keywords

**Conversational Implicature; Cooperative Principle; Film Dialogues; *The Truman Show*.**

## 1. Introduction

Cooperative Principle, proposed by Herbert Paul Grice in *Logic and Conversation* (1975), is one of the most important theories in the field of pragmatics. While making a conversation, the participants, i.e. the speaker and the hearer, need to be perfectly willing to cooperate or obey the cooperative principles. This thesis attempts to analyze the dialogues between several main characters selected from the film *The Truman Show* by the guidance of four maxims and nine sub-maxims in Cooperative Principle. It also verifies the feasibility of applying pragmatics theories into the appreciation of films. Besides, the author tries to help the audience to fully understand the characters and better appreciate the film.

## 2. Literature Review

### 2.1. An Overview of *The Truman Show*

#### 2.1.1. Information about *The Truman Show*

The film *The Truman Show* was directed by the Australian film director Peter Weir, written by Andrew Niccol, and released in 1998 as a classic satire. In this film, Truman Burbank, an insurance broker, is the first baby who was adopted legally by a company in the world. He is the protagonist of *The Truman Show*, a live-action television show in which his whole life, since the moment of his birth, is shot by about five thousand cameras hidden in Seahaven Island, 24 hour a day, 7 days a week. Seahaven Island, Truman's hometown, is in fact a giant set built under a gigantic round roof in Hollywood. In the reality show, every aspect of Truman's life, including his first step, his first lose the tooth, his first day in school, his first love and so on, is broadcast live and unedited around the world. Truman's family members, friends, and everyone he knows are all played by actors, so that Christof, the creator of the reality show, could weaves and

controls the plots. In other words, the audience before the television can watch privacy details of an ordinary people, Truman.

Under such arrangement, Truman turns 30 years old undoubtedly. Then a lot of unreasonable things come one after another, which are eventually noticed by Truman. He hears a strange conversation tracking his direction from car's radio when he drives to work. His dead father reappeared suddenly. At the same time, Truman also gradually notices from subtle things that his daily life is monitored. For example, there are always the same people appearing in the same places at certain times every day. His wife Meryl often introduces to him all kinds of products she buy suddenly. The television programs Truman watches abound with dangers of going travelling and benefits of staying at home. When he wants to go to Fiji, the travel's agent tells him all the tickets are sold out and the bus to Chicago goes wrong.

All these events make Truman wondering that the world revolves around him. Truman decides to escape the island where he lives for 30 years and to find his first girlfriend. Finally, Truman successfully leaves the world that imprisoned him and steps into the unknown, dangerous but real world.

Because all the people around Truman need to hide the truth and cover some details which may disclose that everything is fake except for Truman, the dialogues between the characters are usually metaphorical, indirect and contained with rich conversational implicatures. As a result, the conversations in *The Truman Show* play a great role in the shaping of the character images and the development of its plot.

### 2.1.2. Previous Studies on The Truman Show

*The Truman Show* is a great success both financially and critically. It received wide attention from the audience, movie critics and researchers since its release. According to the published papers about the film *The Truman Show*, the study contents are related to different aspects of the film and vary from various perspectives. Based on it, the author finds that the research of the film *The Truman Show* can be divided into four categories: the narrative mode, the theme, the artistic skills, and subtitle translation. This part will illustrate them one by one.

Firstly, Zhang Chenwen (2020) interprets the film *The Truman Show* from the perspective of space narrative. Three kinds of space narrative are presented: representational space, constitutive space and transitional space. Representational space reproduces a real world by using videos and images to realize the imitation of the reality. In the film, it refers to the reality TV program *The Truman Show*. Constitutive space is the recreation of the real world. The control room on Seahaven Island and the audience of *The Truman Show* constitute constitutive space of the film. Transitional space means the door marked "EXIT" that connects the fake world and the real world.

Secondly, the film *The Truman Show* can be analyzed into a variety of themes. Xu Chunliang (2017) studies the alienation theme manifested in it. By the guidance of the alienation theory, the author analyzes different alienation phenomena in *The Truman Show*, including alienated parents, marriage, friendship, the audience of the reality show, and even Truman himself. Huang Xiaoli (2019) examines the modern dilemma from certain details of the film and interprets sources of voyeurism based on the Cave Metaphor Theory.

Thirdly, in terms of the artistic world, analyzing the film *The Truman Show* from metaphor is popular. Sun Xiao (2017) studies five metaphors. Truman is the epitome of everyone in daily life who dares to resist and change. Christof is the representation of manipulative power in human nature. The actors in the reality show are people who are controlled by the outside world. The door at the end of the movie stands for reality and freedom. Seahaven Island signifies an ideal utopian world.

At last, the translation of subtitles greatly contributes to the success of the film. Based on the Eco-Translation Theory, Qu Yi, Geng Na and Chen Ning (2019) analyze the ecological

environment of subtitle translation in the film *The Truman Show* from the aspects of language, culture and interpersonal communication. Zou Limin, He Fang and Quan Xiaoxia analyze and study the subtitles in the film from the perspective of expression, culture image and situational context under the guidance of the Relevance Translation Theory.

## 2.2. Previous Studies on Cooperative Principle

### 2.2.1. Introduction to Cooperative Principle

#### 2.2.1.1 Maxims of Cooperative Principle

Cooperative Principle is one of the most important theories of H. P. Grice. He thinks that people are observing a set of principles so that they could communicate effectively and successfully during a conversation. What's more, he thinks there are some special maxims under the general principle and sub-maxims in each maxim respectively. The following is the four maxims and nine sub-maxims.

The Maxim of quantity:

1. Make your contribution as informative as is required (for current purposes of the exchange).
2. Do not make your contribution more informative than is required.

The Maxim of quality: Try to make your contribution one that is true.

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

The Maxim of relation (later called relevance):

Be relevant.

The Maxim of manner: Be perspicuous.

1. Avoid obscurity of expression.
2. Avoid ambiguity.
3. Be brief (avoid unnecessary prolixity)
4. Be orderly. (Grice 1975:45)

The nine sub-maxims can be treated as detailed explanation for and summary of the maxims.

The maxim of quantity requires the speaker conveys sufficient information to the hearer, but at the same time, the information should not be too much.

The maxim of quality needs the speaker to make sure that the information he or she conveyed is supposed to be true and evidence-supported. The speaker shouldn't provide wrong information to the hearer.

The maxim of relation means that the information provided by the speaker should be closely related to the main point of the conversation.

The maxim of manner refers that while talking, the speaker should talk in a clear and concise way so as to make the hearer fully understand.

Take one dialogue in the film *The Truman Show* as an example.

*Truman: Who are you?*

*Christof: I am the creator of a television show that gives hope and joy and inspiration to millions.*

*Truman: And who am I?*

*Christof: You're the star.*

*Truman: Was nothing real?*

*Christof: You were real.*

Christof answers Truman's three questions in an appropriate, honest and brief way. He provides the exact information to Truman, and doesn't say other irrelevant things. He only tells

the real identity of Truman and himself. He doesn't lie to Truman. So it can be said that Christof observes the four maxims.

In conclusion, the first three maxims, i.e. the maxim of quantity, the maxim of quality, and the maxim of relation, are related "what to say". And the maxim of manner is about "how to say". When the speaker observes the four maxims in the conversation, they are conveying informative, true, evidentiary information in a clear and short manner to the hearer: "they should speak sincerely, relevantly and clearly, while providing sufficient information" (Levinson 1983:101-2). Meanwhile, the other party of the conversation, the hearer, need to response in the same way.

### 2.2.1.2 Violation of the Maxims

However, in daily life, people do not obey each maxim and sub-maxim all the time. In order to achieve a certain communicative purpose, the CP might be violated for various reasons.

When the conversation participants violate the CP and its maxims, conversational implicatures is produced. And the hearer may understand or not understand the implied meaning behind the literal meaning. Thus, the real intention of the speaker may be misunderstood.

The speaker may violate a maxim in various ways. According to H. P. Grice (1975), first, the speaker may violate a maxim silently. Second, the speaker may suggest his unwillingness to be cooperative in the conversation by saying "I cannot say more" directly. Third, the speaker may face a conflict while communicating. For example, if he doesn't violating the maxim of quality, he is unable to observe the maxim of quantity. Lastly, the speaker may betray a maxim blatantly. Taking violating the maxim of quality as an example, the speaker may flout it by telling a lie in an obvious and open way.

The following four examples are used to illustrate how the maxims are violated.

#### Example 1

A: *Hey! What's your plan on Saturday?*

B: *I'm going to visit my grandma. And on Sunday I'll go swimming.*

B not only says what he going to do on Saturday, but also talks about his plan on Sunday, which is unnecessary and redundant information. Thus, B violates the maxim of quantity.

#### Example 2

A: *Would you come to join us tonight?*

B: *I'm afraid I have an exam tonight.*

It is known to both A and B that B doesn't have an exam in the night. Here B declines A's invitation by telling a lie, so B violates the maxim of quality.

#### Example 3

A: *Look at the dog. How cute!*

B: *Hurry up! We'll be late!*

B's answer has nothing to do with A's utterance related to the dog. So B violates the maxim of relation. But the intention of B is to urge A to look out the time. They don't have extra time to notice a dog on the street.

#### Example 4

A: *Let's buy Monica something.*

B: *Ok, but I veto S-U-G-A-R.*

Here B violates the maxim of manner. B talks ambiguously on purpose to avoid Monica noticing sugar.

### 2.2.2. Studies of Cooperative Principle at Abroad

As a significant theory in pragmatics, Cooperative Principle was first proposed by Herbert Paul Grice, an influential American philosopher and logician. This theory was initially spread in

unauthorized manuscript form from 1967 when Paul Grice addressed William James Lectures at Harvard.

In 1975, *Logic and Conversation*, some ideas in the second speech of William James Lectures was published. In the book, Paul Grice defined CP as follows:

Make your conversational contribution such as required at the stage at which it occurs by the accepted purpose or direction of the talk exchange in which you are engaged. (Grice, 1975:45)

According to Paul Grice, in a conversation, the conversation participants must obey some principles voluntarily to make themselves understood. The general principle is called Cooperative Principle, and CP is an abbreviation of it.

Under the general principle, H. P. Grice put forward four maxims of CP in *Logic and Conversation* (1975). He borrowed the name of the four maxims from Immanuel Kant, a famous German philosopher: the maxim of quality, the maxim of quantity, the maxim of relation and the maxim of manner.

Later, Paul Grice proposed another three principles: aesthetic, social and moral maxims, but he didn't elaborate it in detail and the three maxims were not as widely used as the first four maxims.

In *Further notes on logic and conversation* (1978), H. P. Grice added that the generation of implicature is not the function of one certain maxim, but the result of the interaction of several maxims together. He also believed that the importance of those maxims is different in which the maxim of quality should be observed first.

Paul Grice passed away in the summer of 1988, right before the publication of his book *Studies in the Way of Words* (1989), in which the theory of CP was collected.

### 2.2.3. Studies of Cooperative Principle in China

Hu Zhuanglin was the first scholar who introduced Cooperative Principle to China in his article *Pragmatics* which was published in 1980. Later, Cheng Yumin introduced Cooperative Principle in his article *Grice's Conversational Implicature* in 1983 which was believed to be the most concrete and faithful one. In this passage, Chen Yuming elaborated the four cooperative principles thoroughly and the violation of them respectively with examples. He also studied H. P. Grice's CP from the three aspects of logic, language and language use. Since then, Shen Jiaxuan translated the article *The Second Topic of Pragmatics: Conversational Implicature* (1986). Afterwards, the theory of Cooperative Principle was discussed and studied extensively. Expect for articles, Cooperative Principle were also written into several dominant linguistics textbooks. For example, He Ziran explained CP in *A Study of Pragmatics* (2000). Hu Zhuanglin included CP in his book *Linguistics: A Course Book* (2001). Four years later, CP was introduced in the textbook *A New Concise Course on Linguistics for Students of English* (2005) written by Dai Weidong. In the year of 2001, *A New Introduction to Pragmatics* written by He Zhaoxiong and Ran Yongping also include CP.

### 2.3. Previous Studies on Conversational Implicature

Conversational Implicature was explained by H. P. Grice at William James Lectures and later published in *Logic and Conversation* (1975). In the paper, Paul Grice said, "a conversational implicature is something which is implied in conversation, that is, something which is left implicit in actual language use."

In daily life, people always express meanings more than what they directly say. The message hidden in their utterances is called Conversational Implicature. It refers to what a speaker can suggest and imply in an undirected manner, usually caused by the violation of CP. A Conversational Implicature is something left implicit in actual language use. Therefore, Conversational Implicature serves as an explanation of some utterances.

### 3. Data Analysis

#### 3.1. The Violation of the Maxim of Quantity

##### *Example 1*

*Truman: Good Morning!*

*Mrs. Washington: Good Morning!*

*Washington's Kid: Good Morning!*

*Truman: Oh! And in case I don't see you! Good afternoon, Good evening, and Good night!*

This dialogue happens between Truman and his neighbors when he leaves for work. Obviously, Truman violates the second sub-maxim of quantity, which is "do not make your contribution more informative than is required". When Mrs. Washington greets in the morning, Truman not only greets with "Good morning", but also adds greetings in the afternoon, the evening and the night with a big smile, which can be seen as unnecessary information. This behavior also pictures a kind, friendly and genuine Truman.

##### *Example 2*

*Truman: Hey! Go ahead. You first, please. I'm not that anxious to get there.*

The dialogue occurs at the revolving door of Truman's office building. He lets his colleague go first by providing the sentence "I'm not that anxious to get there." However, the first sentence can convey the same meaning. Therefore, Truman violates the maxim of quantity. By doing so, Truman shows his sincerity and also avoids embarrassment.

#### 3.2. The Violation of the Maxim of Quality

The maxim of quality requires what the speaker says is true and not false. But in the film *The Truman Show*, it is full of lies. Truman lives in a counterfeit world. As the creator and director of the show, Christof, says: "There's nothing fake about Truman himself." All people around Truman are paid actors in the reality show. Therefore, what they say is against the maxim of quality more or less.

##### *Example 3*

*Truman: Get a paper there, will you, Harold? One of these...for the wife. Loves her fashion mags.*

Truman points to the magazines at newspaper stand and says the above sentence to the news vendor. According to Paul Grice's Cooperative Principle, Truman violates the first sub-maxim of quality, i.e. do not say what you believe to be false. Truman lies to Harold that his wife likes reading fashion magazines, so this newspaper is bought for her. Actually the real intention of Truman is to patch the face of his first girlfriend Sylvia together by using pictures of female models in the fashion magazine. Even though he gets married with Meryl under a series of coincidence made by the show stuff, he cannot forget the good times spent with Sylvia. Sylvia is the person who speaks the truth at the early time. It is because of her that Truman is always determined to find out the secrets.

##### *Example 4*

*Young Truman: I'd like to be an explorer. Like the great Magellan.*

*Teacher: Oh, you're too late. There's really nothing left to explore.*

Truman was a child full of curiosity. When the teacher told the story of the Explorer Magellan in class, little Truman excitedly said that he would also like to be an explorer like Magellan when he grows up. To cut his curiosity, the teacher lies to him and says there's nothing left for him to explore. Obviously, the teacher violates the maxim of quality. She is one of the actors who are commanded by Christof. The real world is full of unknown. The lie is funny, but it is ubiquitous in Truman's life. The reason for people doing so is to prevent Truman from leaving Seahaven Island. To achieve this, they bend the truth to Truman.

### 3.3. The Violation of the Maxim of Relation

#### Example 5

*Meryl: You're soaked! Where have you been?*

*Truman: I figured we could scrape together eight thousand dollars...*

#### Example 6

*Meryl: I thought we were going to try for a baby. Isn't that enough of an adventure?*

*Truman: That can wait. I need to get away. See some of the world. Explore!*

These two dialogues happen after Truman has a conversation with Marlon. In Truman's home, when his wife asks Truman where he goes and says the baby plan, Truman doesn't answer her question directly "I went out with Marlon", "Yes, it is." or "No, it isn't". Instead, he keeps talking about his plan of exploration, which is irrelevant to Meryl's questions. Thus Truman violates the maxim of relation by saying something irrelevant, which shows the audience that how eager Truman is to leaving home and exploring the world.

#### Example 7

*Truman: It was dad. I swear! Dressed like a homeless man! ... forced him onto a bus.*

*Mother: Well! It's about time they cleaned up the trash downtown before we become just like the rest of the country.*

Because the actor of Truman's father, Kirk, is not satisfied with the arrangement of death by drowning, he makes an attempt to infiltrate Seahaven Island and made it. Very soon, he is recognized by Truman on the street, but is hidden by other actors. After encountering his "dead" father alive again, Truman tells his mother excitedly. The response of Truman's mother violates the maxim of relation. What she should go on talking with Truman is his father. However, she doesn't do this. Instead, she says that it is due to Truman's over-thinking of his father and turns to talking about tramps. Because Truman describes to her that his father is dressed like a homeless man. She wants to conceal the truth that Truman's father is still alive. This shows her guilty and indifference.

#### Example 8

*Truman: Why do you want to have a baby with me? You can't stand me.*

*Meryl: That's not true! Why don't you let me fix you some of this new Mococoa drink... No artificial sweeteners.*

*Truman: What the hell are you talking about? Who you talking to?*

*Meryl :( super happy) I've tasted other cocoas. This is the best.*

At the end of the film, Truman asks his wife why she wants to have a baby for him since she doesn't like him. Meryl completely violates the maxim of relation and doesn't answer the reason why she wants to have a baby. On the contrary, she pours a drink. At that time, a hidden camera zooms in on her face. She begins advertising the Mococoa drink. Because everything appearing in the reality show is commodities for sale. When Truman asks her what and who she is talking about and to, Meryl still neglects Truman and continues advertising. Meryl turns a blind ear to Truman's questions and ignores his sadness, which makes the audience feel sympathy for him.

#### Example 9

*Christof: I know you better than you know yourself.*

*Truman: You never had a camera in my head!*

At the end of the movie, Christof tries to keep Truman staying in Seahaven Island. But Truman is determined to leave the fake world. It seems that his answer is not related to "Know Yourself", thus, violating the maxim of relation. However, by shouting it, Truman shows that nobody knows him better than himself.

### 3.4. The Violation of the Maxim of Manner

#### Example 10

*Ticket person: One way or return?*

*Truman: Return.*

“One way or return” has two meanings. It can be understood as whether Truman wants a one-way ticket or a return ticket. Meanwhile, the ticket person suggests that Truman may be trapped in the Wells Park and never return. This sentence is very obscure and ambiguous, thus violating the maxim of manner, and also aggravates Truman’s fear.

#### Example 11

*Truman: I’ll cross my fingers for you.*

When Truman’s mother and wife begin to realize that Truman is suspicious of his life and wants to leave the Seahaven Island, they try to keep Truman. They invite Truman to read his photo albums. However, Truman notices that his wife, Meryl, crossed her index finger and middle finger in one of their wedding photos. There are two different meanings of the gesture: one is to pray for good luck; the other is to cancel an oath. Obviously, Meryl makes this gesture because her marriage vow is not true. She knows that their marriage is not real. She herself is just an actress. The next day, when Meryl says she is going to the hospital, Truman says, “I’ll cross my fingers for you.” Ostensibly, it sounds like Truman would pray for Meryl to succeed in the operation. In fact, Truman alludes to Meryl’s deceit in the wedding ceremony. Truman discloses his doubt to Meryl by saying an obscure sentence. Thus the maxim of manner is violated.

### 3.5. The Violation of More than One Maxim

#### Example 12

*Truman: What’s your rush?*

*Meryl: Surgery. There was that elevator disaster downtown. ...Anyway, wish me luck.*

When Truman asks Meryl what she is going to do in the morning, Meryl answers “surgery” as well as a mass of sentences describing how her patient was injured. Through Meryl’s reply, we can feel her panic and fluster for she is lying all the time. Meryl is not a nurse. Her real job is an actress who plays the wife of Truman. In order to justify herself, Meryl makes up a story and tries to describe it vividly so as to match her occupation. Thus, he violates the maxim of quantity and the maxim of quality at the same time.

#### Example 13

*Office Neighbor: Let’s see, Burbank, got a prospect in Wells Park for you to close.*

*Truman: Wells Park? On Harbor Island?*

*Office Neighbor: You...know another one?*

*Truman: Well, I can’t do it. I have an appointment. Dentist.*

The dialogue happens between Truman and his colleague who wants Truman to Wells Park to connect with a customer. When Truman asks him if the Wells Park is on Harbor Island, the colleague does not give him a direct answer “Yes” or “No”, instead saying a sentence irrelevant to the question. So the colleague violates the maxim of relation. Here the implied meaning is “Wells Park is on Harbor Island.”

In order to prevent Truman from leaving Seahaven Island, people around Truman lie to him by violating the maxim of quality. When Truman was a child, he begged his father to take him to sea so that he could travel to other places. The director arranges for his father died of drowning in order to dispel little Truman’s curiosity about the world. From then on, Truman develops a severe fear of sailing at sea and never wants to go out of Seahaven Island. Therefore, in order to avoid going to seashore, he lies to his colleague and makes up an appointment with the dentist, which violates the maxim of quality for he say something false.



## 4. Conclusion

Through a detailed analysis of the dialogues in the film *The Truman Show*, the following results are reached. The characters in the film *The Truman Show* provide more or less information in their dialogues. Sometimes they are lying to Truman or change the topic suddenly. The real intention of those characters is conveyed in their utterance which flouts the maxim of quantity, quality, relation and manner. Thus, the violation of one or more maxims is always happening in each dialogue. When the four maxims of CP are violated, conversational implicature is produced, which make the personalities of characters clear and cause humorous as well as satirical effect. All in all, the violation of the maxims of CP is a common process in films and the plot is driven by the conversational implicatures.

Based on the analysis, the following implications can be achieved. First, applying pragmatics theories into the appreciation of films is proved to be feasible. Through the analysis of conversational implicature based on the principles of cooperation, a film can be better interpreted by its audience. Second, previous studies are mainly focused on the theme, artistic skills, translation or other points of view, but there has been little research into film dialogues from the perspective of Cooperative Principle. This thesis tries to adopt H. P. Grice's Cooperative Principle and Conversation Implicature Theory as the theoretical framework to make a thorough study of dialogues in the film *The Truman Show*. At last, the author hopes that this paper will provide scenarists or film directors with some useful and practical suggestions. Although the thesis offers a new method of appreciating the film *The Truman Show*, there are still some limitations because of the author's limited time and personal abilities. The dialogues in the films are analyzed only from Cooperative Principle and Conversational Implicature. Other pragmatics theories such as Austin's Speech Act Theory, Leech's Politeness Principle and Face Theory can also be adopted as the guiding theory.

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