

Analysis of Amy March's Personalities in Little Women from the Violation of Cooperative Principle

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Abstract

Little Women is Louisa May Alcott's family biography novel, which tells the story of the growth of four sisters in the March family. Proposed by American linguist Herbert Paul Grice, the cooperative principle is a pragmatic theory that contains four maxims: the maxim of quantity, quality, relation, and manner. It is a principle people follow to accomplish communicative tasks. This paper presents a discourse analysis of Amy March from the perspective of the violation of the cooperative principle, exploring why and how she violates the principle in the combination of the context and then analyzing the personalities reflected by the violation, concluding that Amy is rational, sophisticated, and has strong self-esteem. This paper helps readers understand the significance of this character's existence in proving that women's independence is not only expressed in self-reliance but also in freedom of choice.

Keywords

Little Women; violation of cooperative principle; Amy March.

1. Introduction

Literary pragmatics combines pragmatics with literary works, striving to create a shared interdisciplinary research ground for linguists and literary scholars by looking at the writing and reading of literary texts as interactive communication[1]. Little Women is Louisa May Alcott's family biography novel, which tells the story of the growth of four sisters in the March family. This paper presents a discourse analysis of Amy March from the perspective of the violation of the cooperative principle, exploring why and how she violates the principle and analyzing the personalities reflected by the violation, thus to illustrate the significance of this character.

2. Literature Review

Louisa May Alcott's Little Women was regarded as the first entirely American novel. The author described the March family's life against the backdrop of the American Civil War based on her childhood experiences. As a transcendentalist and feminist, the author emphasized individual dignity, self-improvement, and self-independence by describing the tortuous but sweet growth of the four sisters of the March family in simple language [2]. Even now, this masterwork has significant research value and is important to modern women and society as feminine consciousness expressed by Little Women is in line with the pursuit of contemporary women, that is, women should have an independent spirit, rational mind, strong will, etc.

The research on Little Women is mainly limited to the following aspects: feminism[3-5], family education[6-7], puritanism[8], transcendentalism[9], and analysis of Jo March[10-11]. Though Amy is a controversial and complex character, seldom do people investigate her character and personality specifically. Blackford[12] mentioned Amy when elaborated on the relationship

between Jo, Amy, and Laurie in her study. But she considered Amy as the sole victim of Jo's rage and jealousy, as well as the catalyst for Jo's evil side.

Although considerable research has been done on *Little Women*, much less is done to analyze it from a pragmatic perspective. Among the characters of this book, the youngest daughter Amy is the most controversial role but seldom do people investigate her character and personality specially. This paper uses Amy's conversation as the corpus, aiming at studying Amy's true thoughts and distinctive characteristics through her violation of the cooperative principle in conversation.

3. Violation of the Cooperative Principle

Cooperative Principle was a pragmatic theory put forward by American linguist and philosopher Herbert Paul Grice in his speech at Harvard University in 1967. Grice formally elaborated it in *Logic and Conversation* published in 1975. The cooperative principle is defined by Grice as "Make 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" [13]. Grice believed that people use something like the cooperative principle to guide us in order to assure the success of a conversation, whether they do so consciously or unconsciously [14].

The cooperative principle concludes four categories of maxims: the maxims of quantity ask the speaker to make his contribution as informative as is required (for the current purpose of the exchange) and do not make it more informative than is required. The maxims of quality ask the speaker to try to make his contribution one that is true by avoiding saying what he believes to be false and which he lacks adequate evidence. The maxim of relation requires to be relevant. The maxims of manner ensure the perspicuousness of conversation by avoiding ambiguity, being brief (avoiding prolixity), being orderly, and avoiding obscurity of expression (ibid. 45-46).

In real life, what individuals want to express may not be consistent with their words. The cooperative principle and its maxims can help explore how speakers express the implied meaning or intention outside the language signs, that is, the meaning of language in a specific situation instead of the literal meaning presented by each language unit in the language system. For his own purpose, the speaker will selectively commit violations of the maxims. The violation of the maxim of quantity means the information given by both parties is insufficient or exceeds the required amount. When a speaker says something that is unsupported by evidence or contradicts the truth, he or she is violating the quality maxim. If the content of the dialogue between the two parties is irrelevant, it means that they have violated the maxim of relation. The speaker's words become ambiguous, prolonged, or chaotic as a result of violating the maxim of manner.

The cooperative principle is not only applicable to daily conversations, but also to literary works. With the help of context, we can deduce one's genuine intention based on his violation of the maxims. It is helpful for us to interpret the characters' motives, personalities, and relationships between them from their dialogues in the novel from the standpoint of literary pragmatics.

4. Distinct Personalities of Amy March from Her Violation of the Cooperative Principle

The violation of the cooperative principle in a character's words can enable us to infer his implied intention, thus reflecting the speaker's personality. This is also true in the study of dialogue in literary works, where dialogue between characters is an important way for authors to portray their characters. In this paper, Amy March in *Little Women* is taken as the research

object, she violated the cooperative principle 42 times in total, including the quantity maxim 14 times, the quality maxim 17 times, the relation maxim 3 times, and the manner maxim 8 times. Refer to Table 1.

Table 1. Amy's violations of the maxims and the personalities reflected

Violation of the maxims Violation opersonalities	Self- esteem	Sophistication	Rationality	Total	Percentage
quantity	4	8	2	14	33.33%
quality	8	6	3	17	40.48%
manner	2	0	6	8	19.05%
relation	0	3	0	3	7.14%

4.1. Amy’s Self-esteem Reflected from the Violation of Maxims

For Amy, the first thing to mention is her self-esteem. She was so concerned about her image and didn’t allow anyone to ruin it, otherwise, she would fight back with her clever mind and eloquent words. Even when she became mature and generous as a grown-up and became a caring lady who pleased everyone, her self-esteem in her bones had not dissipated at all.

- (1) Laurie: “But you don’t intend to try till the proper moment? Bless my soul, what unearthly prudence! He’s a good fellow, Amy, but not the man I fancied you’d like.”
Amy: “He is rich, a gentleman, and has delightful manners.” [15]
- (2) Amy: “I don’t believe any of you suffer as I do... label your father if he isn’t rich, and insult you when your nose isn’t nice.”
Jo: “If you mean libel, I’d say so, and not talk about labels, as if Papa was a pickle bottle.”
Amy: “I know what I mean, and you needn’t be statirical about it. It’s proper to use good words, and improve your vocabulary.” (ibid. 6).
- (3) Laurie: “Unfortunately I have an engagement. Au revoir, mademoiselle.”
Amy: “No, be yourself with me, Laurie, and part in the good old way. I’d rather have a hearty English handshake than all the sentimental salutations in France.” (ibid. 368).

In example (1), Amy violated the maxim of quantity which showed the fact that she didn’t fall in love with Fred, but she believed some conditions of Fred would make her love him one day because he was rich and behaved like a gentleman. Although the wealth and manners of a man could be standards for women to judge whether to get married, especially in their era. Out of self-esteem, she was so ashamed of herself for choosing to give up “the proper moment” for money and status that she couldn’t react naturally in front of Laurie and answer his question directly.

Example(2)showed Amy’s violation of the maxim of quality. It’s common for people to use the wrong word, let alone for Amy, who was only a teenager. Jo picked out Amy’s mistake but irritated her. Out of her self-esteem, Amy did not want to lose face even in front of her family, so she not only refused to admit her wrong usage of words but also began to satirize that Jo was the one who needed to use good words and improve her vocabulary. Ironically, Amy used two wrong words in her rebuttal.

The maxims of manner require people to speak concisely and clearly so the other side can accurately understand his intention. In example(3), Laurie accompanied Amy to Valrosa to sketch. Amy expressed her contempt for Laurie’s laziness and idleness, and these words stung Laurie. When they parted, Laurie said he had another plan so would not meet her at night and

said goodbye to her in an alienated tone. Amy worried that Laurie would hate her because she had hurt his feelings by telling a lot of real but dreadful words. Then she used an obscure expression that violated the first maxim of manner to protect her self-esteem. She expressed her hope that Laurie could part in the good old English way which symbolized her hope of they could get along in the old way. Out of self-esteem, Amy prayed for Laurie's forgiveness with such vague but tactful words.

4.2. Amy's Sophistication Reflected from the Violation of Maxims

Louisa spent a lot of time in *Little Women* to show Amy's sophistication. Just as the mother, Mrs. March, taught her daughters in accordance with their aptitude, her daughter, Amy, made good use of it when she got along with others. Amy was good at observing people around her and knew their personalities very well. She had different ways of getting along with different people. At the same time, she seized every opportunity to make good relations with people having fortunes and high social status.

(4) Aunt March: "Don't let that young giant come near me, he worries me worse than mosquitoes."

Amy: "He has promised to be very good today, and he can be perfectly elegant if he likes." (ibid. 225).

(5) Amy: "If you weren't the sweetest-tempered fellow in the world, you'd be very angry with me." (ibid. 365).

(6) Amy: "They ought to have told me, and not let me go blundering and scolding, when I should have been more kind and patient than ever. I never did like that Miss Randal and now I hate her!"

Laurie: "Hang Miss Randal!" (ibid. 365)

In example(4), Amy violated the maxim of quantity. She responded to aunt March by providing more information to tell aunt March that although Laurie promised to behave well, she couldn't control him when he acted naughty of his own will. It showed the sophistication of Amy by not only consoling her aunt but also getting rid of blame if Laurie had bothered aunt March.

The conversation of example(5) occurred after Amy criticized Laurie. Amy knew clearly how hurtful her words were, but she had to say them for Laurie, who had wasted the time and money traveling aimlessly. At the same time, she was afraid that Laurie would hate her for it. She had no idea of losing Laurie. Feeling the upset of the young fellow, Amy wanted to console him. She chose to violate the maxims of quality because Laurie was hardly the sweetest-tempered person on the planet, and there was no evidence to back it up. Amy just wanted to give both sides a step-down, hoping to comfort Laurie and make him forgive her irritating words. Besides, even if Laurie was really angry, after Amy said this, he was too embarrassed to admit it, and would even feel relieved immediately. Therefore, Amy's clever use of a short sentence eased the tension between her and Laurie.

In example (6), Amy speculated that Laurie had become depraved because of her sister as she found that Laurie rarely mentioned Jo voluntarily, and his expression would become melancholy and painful when she mentioned Jo. She deliberately mentioned Miss Randal who had nothing to do with this matter and violated the maxim of relation. First, she wanted to beat the bush to confirm her speculation. Second, she was afraid that her speculation would be wrong and embarrass Jo and Laurie if she spoke the name of Jo directly. This example showed Amy was sophisticated and tactful.

4.3. Amy's Rationality Reflected from the Violation of Maxims

Amy was a rational person. She knew exactly what she wanted. She liked to set goals for herself. Before she went to Europe, she hoped she could become a great artist. So she kept trying for it. At the same time, she hoped to be a lady, thus behaving gracefully and speaking appropriately,

although sometimes it seemed deliberate. After going to Europe and broadening her horizons, she realized that her talent was limited and could not become an artistic genius. So she decisively gave up her dream of becoming an artist and chose to cultivate her other talents to create her value.

(7) Jo: "I thought you had too much pride and sense to truckle to any mortal woman just because she wears French boots and rides in a coupe."

Amy: "I don't truckle, and I hate being patronized as much as you do! The girls do care for me, and I for them, and there's a great deal of kindness and sense and talent among them, in spite of what you call fashionable nonsense. You don't care to make people like you, to go into good society, and cultivate your manners and tastes. I do, and I mean to make the most of every chance that comes. You can go through the world with your elbows out and your nose in the air, and call it independence, if you like. That's not my way." (ibid. 233)

(8) Amy: "Do you want to know what I honestly think of you?"

Laurie: "Pining to be told."

Amy: "Well, I despise you." (ibid. 363)

(9) Jo: "'No, you won't. You hate hard work, and you'll marry some rich man, and come home to sit in the lap of luxury all your days.'"

Amy: "I'm sure I wish it would." (ibid. 277)

Violation of the Maxim of Quantity. In front of her family, Amy was frank most of the time. She often expressed her values at length in conversations with her sisters, especially in arguments with Jo. This was an argument with Jo who thought Amy held the party in order to truckle her rich classmates. According to Amy's answer, she knew clearly what kind of person her sister Jo was and could describe her exactly. She wanted Jo to know that she respected Jo's thoughts and hoped that Jo could understand her. At the same time, she was such a rational woman who had a general plan for life, learned to use the gift with which she was endowed, and never lose a chance to achieve her goal.

Violation of the Maxim of Quality. Amy didn't really despise Laurie and chose to violate the first maxim of quality. On the contrary, she loved him very much, whether it's because she regarded him as her brother or because of the love which came silently when they traveled together in Europe. She hated the laziness and idleness of Laurie for he shouldn't waste his resources and chances of becoming the gentleman he could be or ought to be. These dreadful words were used to attract Laurie's attention, so as to help him get rid of his shortcomings. Amy clearly realized that Laurie needed help even on the condition that what she said might hurt him showed her rationality and maturity.

Amy was chosen to go to Europe. She not only took this trip as an enjoyable journey but also as a chance to test her talent for art. "I'm sure I wish it would" can be interpreted as: "If that's the case, I believe I would like to marry a rich man." The violation of the maxim of manner showed that the first wish of Amy was to be an artist who lived on her own, rather than marry a rich man. But she would still be happy to be rich through her marriage. Even if she couldn't be an artist herself, she would help others realize their dreams. She didn't regard prosperity as her own pursuit, on the contrary, it's just a way to help others generously. It showed her rationality.

5. Conclusion

Amy often violated the maxims of quantity when persuading others to accept her views. Her persuasion often achieved ideal results, which showed her rationality, determination, and sophistication. The maxims of quality were principles Amy violated most, which fully showed that she had strong self-esteem, cared about her image, and was unwilling to admit her mistakes.

The maxim of relation was a principle that Amy seldom violated, which showed that she seldom avoided problems and diverted the attention of others in communication. She was bold and confident as well as comfortable in social communication. At the same time, she was good at observing others and kept an indifferent attitude towards the world. By violating the maxims of manner, Amy often expressed deep philosophical ideas.

Based on Amy's words violating the cooperative principle, this research result shows her three distinctive characteristics: self-esteem, sophistication, and rationality. Amy March is a complex but significant female role as her existence in *Little Women* proves that women's independence is not only manifested in self-reliance, but also in freedom of choice.

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