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Maxim Violation in “Dilbert” Comic Strips

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ABSTRACT

This research investigates the conversations in the “Dilbert” comic written by Scott Adams. The data came from the dialogues in the comic “Dilbert.” They were analyzed using Gricean Maxims of Conversations. This qualitative study used content analysis as the data of this research is text. This research aimed to analyze the maxims that were violated in this comic to create humor and the reason why the characters were violating the maxims during conversations. Fifteen comic strips from the website dilbert.com were chosen and analyzed. The results show that the characters mostly violate maxims of relevance since they need to come up with an excuse for the given questions or avoid accusation. They also violate the maxim of quality as they sometimes lie too in order to get out of the situation or accusation.

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Dilbert, Grice’s Maxims, Humor, Maxim Violation

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1. Introduction

Humans communicate on a daily basis to connect with each other and to achieve that communication goal, humans use language. There are many purposes speakers intend to achieve, such as gaining information, earning trust, or pleasing others (Kencana 2021). Both parties must have a common goal, which is to make the conversation meaningful and have mutual understanding (Guo & Liu, 2019). Language is used to communicate with others where thoughts and feelings are exchanged (Simarmata, Mono, & Nasution, 2021). Language also connects people and helps them deliver the idea they have all together with its meaning. Other than its usage in real-life situations between humans, language is also used in literary works, including movies, which is a popular media reflecting human society (Andy and Ambalegin 2019). In addition to movies, human interactions are also portrayed through other media such as comics. Some types of comics are known in the media, including satire, irony, sarcasm, and humor (Khamdamovna, 2020).

Humor violates Grice’s Maxims of Conversation in order to be funny, as humorous outcomes in conversations can be created by violating the principle of cooperation (Astuti & Zulaeha, 2018). The humor becomes funny by not giving the right answer or explanation to the asked questions. Sometimes a speaker intentionally violates the maxims to bring humor (Al-Zubeiry 2020). According to Attardo (1993), Grice suggested that humor and irony may be associated with violations of conversational maxims, which is considered as an accord built within humor research that a humorous text usually violates one or some of the maxims. The said maxims are derived by Grice (1975), which originated from the cooperative principle which reads “Make your 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.” That general principle may be categorized into four maxims, namely maxims of quantity, maxims of quality, maxims of relation, and maxims of manner.

Fromkin, Rodman, and Hyams (2018) explain each of the maxims. Maxim of quality means does not say what you believe is false and lacking evidence. Maxim of quantity suggests making your contribution as informative as and do not make it more or less informative than required. Maxim of relations rules the relevance of your contribution which suggests the speaker is relevant. Finally, the maxim of manner regulates the clarity of the contribution: avoid obscurity of expression; avoid ambiguity; avoid unnecessary wordiness; and be orderly.

Attardo (1990) explained how each maxim is usually violated. Maxim of quantity is usually violated by either not providing enough information or too much information. Maxim of relation is violated by not providing relevant information. The Maxim of manner is violated by giving an ambiguous answer. Lastly, the maxim of quality is violated by giving the

wrong information or information that is lacking evidence. The violation usually happens when the utterances fail to follow the maxims' recommendation and thus constitute examples of non-cooperative behavior or relevant contribution. Therefore, the given answer is understood as a joke (Attardo 1990).

In addition to maxim violation, Grice (1975) also describes how a participant in a conversation may fail to fulfill a maxim by opting out, clashing, or flouting a maxim. Violating a maxim means that the utterances mislead the other person. Opting out a maxim happens when the speaker is unwilling to cooperate with the way the maxims work. Clashing a maxim is when a speaker is unable to fulfill the maxim of quantity (be as informative as required) but does not violate the second maxim of quality (have adequate evidence for what you say). Flouting a maxim means that the speaker blatantly fails to fulfill the maxim and therefore conveys an additional meaning that is defined as implicature (Prasetyo, Muslim, & Imperiani 2018; Yule, 1996).

This research analyzed some violations of Grice's maxims in the comic strip "Dilbert" by Scott Adams that was launched in 1989. There are some characters in "Dilbert" who constantly violate the maxims of conversation. These violations of maxims are done for some purposes. For example, the characters violate maxims to avoid telling the truth, intimidate their coworkers, feel secure, manipulate facts, avoid consequences, deny blame, and get advantages for themselves. This research aimed to analyze the maxims that were violated in this comic to create humor and the reason why the characters were violating the maxims during conversations.

There was already some research regarding maxims violation. The first research analyzed maxims violation done by the main characters of "Tilik" short film. It was done by Albiansyah, Hidayat, and Alek (2021) by applying note-taking techniques and analyzing the short movie's transcript. The result shows that the main characters did violate all the maxims of conversations: quality, quantity, relevance, and manner with the most violated were maxims of quality and quantity. The reasons main characters violated the maxims because they tried to deliver a certain message, including surprising the listeners, reassuring them, trying to get their attention, avoiding conflicts, making fun of the situation, creating interactivity, and giving more explanations needed. Those are the motives behind the main characters violating the maxims.

The next research analyzed maxims violation in "Night at the Museum" movie. Andy and Ambalegin (2019) found that from the data collected, most conversations in the movie had violated the maxims of conversation. The most recurrent maxim violation is the maxim of manner while the least violated is the maxim of quantity. According to the research, the violation of the maxim was done to contribute to and build an interesting plot in the movie. In other words, the violation was done intentionally to make the movie enjoyable. The researcher also suggested that it is important to avoid misunderstanding in delivering information to the other person. The misunderstanding can be done by avoiding maxims violation to make the information more understandable.

Xu (2022) researched the humor discourse in the "Friends" sitcom by using the perspective of the cooperative principle. The result shows that in the 30 episodes of "Friends" chosen the most violated maxim is the maxim of quality and quantity. The researcher used the term 'ignored' rather than violating it in describing the characters' utterances. In violating Grice's maxims, the characters also apply metaphor, irony, hyperbole, and rhetorical question in their utterances. Those maxim violations, however, provide a funny impact on the sitcom, as it serves the main intention of a comedy show.

Kencana (2021) investigated the violation of conversational maxims in an Indonesian comedy program named 'The East.' She used a descriptive-qualitative approach in analyzing the utterances after transcribing the utterances, and then she categorized the utterances into the types of violated maxims. Not only did she explore the violation of maxims, but she also analyzed the implicature in the humorous utterances in one of the episodes of the TV program. The result shows that there are some violations of cooperative principal maxims in the show, with the maxim of quality being one that is the most violated and is followed by maxims of quantity. The implicature in the show shows how the speaker feels about the other person involved in the conversations.

Prasetyo, Muslim, and Imperiani (2018) researched the flouting and violation of maxims in a defendant's court testimony. The result shows that the defendant flouted all the maxims, which are maxims of quality, quantity, relation, and manner. However, the defendant only violated the maxim of quality. The reason why the defendant was violating and flouting the maxim is to prove that she is innocent and to reduce the sentence she might get. The violation and flouting were also done in order to yield hidden additional meanings in her utterances and mislead the audience into believing that she is innocent.

2. Methodology

The research was done under the umbrella of the qualitative method which relies on the text (Creswell & Creswell 2018). The researcher discussed the violation of Grice's maxims of conversation in the comic "Dilbert" by applying content analysis in the process. Content analysis is a research method applied to written or visual materials with the purpose of identifying specified characteristics of the material (Ary, Jacobs, Sorensen, and Walker 2018). According to Ary, Jacob, and Razavieh (2009), content analysis is a method used to study human behavior on written and spoken content. The definition of content analysis is suitable for the goal of this paper, which is to analyze the characters' behavior based on the written content, which is their written conversation in the comic.

The object of this research is the comic "Dilbert" by Scott Adams. The data source of this research is the comic strip taken from Scott Adams' official website (dilbert.com). This comic takes place in an office where Wally, Dilbert, The Boss, and Dilbert's other coworker work. They are working in a micromanaged office with Dilbert as an engineer. Most of the comics talk about business. The genre of "Dilbert" itself is a satire-humor.

A number of comic strips from dilbert.com were chosen, ranging from the year 2019 to 2020. The reason why the comics were chosen was whether or not the conversations contain maxims violation done by either of the characters. In total, there are 5 comics from 2019 and 5 comics from 2020. The reason why the comics were chosen was whether or not the conversations contain maxims violation done by either of the characters.

3. Result and Discussion

In total, there are 5 comics from 2019 and 5 comics from 2020. The utterances were counted and analyzed. There was a total of 49 utterances said by the characters. In the chosen comics, the characters involved are Wally, The Boss, Dilbert, and Alice.

The first comic discussed is entitled "Wally Has Best Excuse." The comic starts with Wally saying "I was tempted to succeed this week, but I caught myself in time. Success would improve my odds of mating, and I don't think you want more people like me in this world." Wally is not talking to the point that he wants to take a day off. It means Wally violates the maxims of quantity. In addition, Wally also violates maxims of manner about being brief. Instead of being to the point, he rambles about the cause and effect of him being success where he actually just wants to say that he refuses to work. Once he is successful, his probability of mating will improve. The word "mating" has 2 meanings, 'to make friends' and 'to have sex.' This violates the maxims of manner because it is ambiguous. Then Wally continues saying "I don't think you want more people like me in this world" which means Wally concludes that The Boss dislikes Wally.

Although Wally speaks so much about taking a day off, The Boss still understands his intention. This means The Boss can take implicature from Wally's rambling. His boss sarcastically compliments Wally that it is the best excuse for not working. Wally then responds to The Boss' reply literally, which is not a real compliment. The Boss violates the maxim of quality, where he is actually telling a lie about Wally's excuse, pretending that he compliments that excuse as the best excuse he very heard. Wally responds by prohibiting his boss from complimenting him, which is actually not a literal compliment.

The second comic from Dilbert involving Wally is entitled "Complaints about Wally". The comic starts with The Boss stating "Wally, I received 43 complaints that you have been clipping your toenails in the office." From this statement, The Boss violates the maxims of quantity where he might not really receive 43 complaints about Wally. That statement is unsupported by enough evidence about the number of complaints explained in the comic. In the next episode of the comic, Alice, another employee in the office scolds when Wally slurps his soup. The next dialogue reveals that Wally has been so disturbing by the activities he does in the office. One of the activities is clipping toenails. This comic shows that Wally might have been clipping his toenails and disturbing the office, but readers are unsure about the exact number of complaints. It is also possible that The Boss fulfills the maxims of quality by saying the truth about the complaint. It can be concluded since the following episode of the comic reveals Wally's disturbing activity.

The Boss continues by saying "You have single-handedly destroyed all productivity on this entire floor" with the term 'single-handedly' printed in bold. This statement violates maxims of manner, where The Boss exaggerates the fact about destroying all the productivity on the entire floor. By saying 'single-handedly', The Boss actually wants to say that Wally does a simple thing that really disturbs all the coworkers. The conversation continues with Wally saying "In my defense, it takes two hands if you count the one holding the toe" also with the word 'two' printed in bold. In this situation, Wally is trying to deny the blame from The Boss by emphasizing The Boss' mistake saying 'single-handedly' destroyed the productivity.

What Wally means is he would not be able to clip his toenails only using one hand. Wally's dialogue is actually meant to deny the accusation from The Boss. Here, he violates the maxims of relevance. Wally is supposed to accept the accusation, but rather he denies the fact that he has disturbed his coworkers, instead, he corrects his boss which is actually not even necessary. That answer is not relevant.

The third comic starts with Alice, another employee in the office, complaining about Wally slurping his soup. She shouts (can be concluded this way because Alice's dialogue was printed bigger and bold), "Can you please stop slurping that soup?!" From the structure and the context, this is a speech act of indirect request because Alice is using the modals 'can' rather than directly saying "Please stop slurping that soup?!" Alice's request by using the word 'can' might be a form of sarcasm to Wally. Or, Alice is trying to be polite while actually she has already felt disturbed by Wally's behavior. The use of models might also indicate that Alice's trying to make Wally realizes his annoying behavior.

Wally replies to Alice's complaint by mentioning all his upsetting activities. One of them is clipping toenails. This is related to the previous episode when The Boss scolds Wally. The activities mentioned by Wally are clipping toenails making lip-smacking sounds, using his speaker phone, and using a microwave for fish. Even from these activities, we can conclude that Wally is very annoying. However, he does not feel that he is annoying. He feels like these activities are normal and will disturb nobody else. By mentioning his annoying behavior, Wally violates maxims of relevance. His answer is not related to Alice's complaint.

Alice replies to Wally's irrelevant answer by saying "Doesn't that tell you something???" with bold font. Alice thinks Wally understands that his behavior is very annoying and disturbing. Rather than admitting his fault, Wally's reply turns back into blaming Alice. Wally's reply, "Yes, it's impossible to please you," once again shows that he refuses to be blamed, although it is clearly his mistake.

His reply both violates and fulfills maxims of relevance. It fulfills the maxims of relevance because it answers Alice's claim that Wally should have concluded something from his previous statement (Wally's statement on his previous annoying and disturbing activity in the workplace). Alice claims that Wally's confession shows an idea about how bad he has been, and Wally agrees. On the other hand, it violates the maxims of relevance because that is not the answer Alice expects. Wally might agree that what just he says informed something, but it's different from Alice's intention.

What Alice means is that Wally must have noticed that he is a very annoying colleague. Rather than admitting that he is an annoying person, Wally turns back the fact that it is just very difficult to please Alice. In his statement, Wally wants to convey a message that what he has done is not annoying at all.

The fourth comic involves Alice and Wally again. This time, Alice asks Wally about making an appointment. Alice asks whether or not they can meet the following day at 8 a.m. Rather than answering with yes or no, Wally answers Alice's question by telling her about his agenda for the following day at 8. This is a grey area of violating maxims of relevance. Wally does not answer Alice's question clearly and directly. Alice expects an answer of either yes or no. Wally's answer might be an expression of not wanting to meet Alice at 8. "That's when I eat breakfast in the cafeteria" is an explanation of a "no" to the appointment, but he states unclearly whether he can or not. This violates maxims of relevance.

At the same time, Wally's answer fulfills maxims of relevance. It is very possible for Wally to have breakfast at 8 in the morning. Having breakfast at 8 in the morning is very logical. It is relevant to daily activity. Also, it can be considered as a pre-supposition, by saying that, Wally expects Alice to understand that he cannot meet at 8 because he wants to have breakfast. Alice seems to understand what Wally means, so she offers about moving the meeting to 9 a.m. This time, Wally's answer violates maxims of manner and quantity. Wally gives too much information on what he will do at 9 in the morning after having breakfast, which violates both maxims of quantity and manner. He does not answer the offer briefly. Moreover, Wally rambles and he is not to the point about not wanting to meet Alice. He is avoiding telling the truth and only thinks about himself.

In "Wally Needs a Raise", the comic starts with Wally talking about the catastrophe happening in the system, and also that he is the only one who can solve the problem. From the first four dialogues, Wally is exaggerating the catastrophe that they need to restart and rebuild from zero and he is the only one who is qualified to solve the problem. Then, he says that he only wants to solve the problem if The Boss gives him a raise and a promotion. From these dialogues, Wally violates the maxims of quantity and the maxims of manner. He violates maxims of quantity because he rambles too much, which means he does not go straight to the point. His ramble is exaggerated. He violates maxims of manner because he does not convey his purpose briefly.

Wally purposely creates the catastrophe so he can fix it and get what he wants. We can get this information from The Boss says in the next dialogue. He says, "Weren't you the cause of the catastrophe?" to which Wally responds with "Exactly. That's why I'm the only person who knows how to fix it." This dialogue proves that Wally fulfills the maxims of quality. He finally admits the activity he does. Purposely creating the catastrophe to gain a raise and a promotion, it means Wally is trying to blackmail The Boss. When The Boss accuses Wally of an attempt to blackmail him, Wally violates the maxims of quality again. Previously, he admits to creating a catastrophe to get a promotion, but then when The Boss accuses him, he directly denies the fact. By doing this, Wally is not telling the truth, which means he violates the maxims of quality.

When The Boss sarcastically asks, "Wouldn't I be rewarded for your value?" Wally answers "Let's not label it," which might mean Wally wants The Boss to forget the whole thing. Wally violates the maxims of relevance. He is not giving a relevant answer to The Boss' accusation. Wally once again tries to avoid the problem he has done by violating the maxims of relevance. He gives an irrelevant answer to switch the topic and run from accusation.

The next comic is "Just Like Marketing" where The Boss asks Dilbert about his project, "How's your project going?" and instead of giving the answer directly, Dilbert rambles "It was doing fine until a thick wave of stupidity swept over it and extinguished my spark of divinity." Dilbert continues, "I don't know what will become of me." In this case, Dilbert is violating maxims of quantity and relevance. He violates the maxim of quantity by rambling too much and not being to the point. He also violates the maxim of relevance by not giving the required answer and not being relevant to The Boss's question. His continuation is also not relevant to the question given by the boss.

In the comic "Old Strategy" it is the boss that violates the maxims of quality and relevance. The boss starts by saying that "Our new strategy is to make great products and sell them at a fair price" to which Dilbert asks, "What was our old strategy?" and the Boss says, "I'd rather not say." In the first utterance, the boss violates the maxim of quality where there is a high chance that he is lying, as to answer Dilbert's question he says "I'd rather not say," which implies that what he says earlier may be a lie.

In the comic entitled "Violating Rules" The Boss accused Dilbert of violating four hundred company rules by saying, "Our internal audit found that you violated over four hundred company rules in the past year," and Dilbert answers, "I'm also the only employee who accomplished anything last year." Dilbert is violating the maxims of quality as he is probably lying with that answer. He asks the boss to "Now connect the dots" to which The Boss replies, "So you're saying we need more rules."

In a conversation between The Boss and Dilbert in "Clear Email from Boss" Dilbert is denying The Boss' accusation. The Boss starts by saying, "Why didn't you upgrade the servers like I asked?" to which Dilbert replies, "You never asked me to do that," which probably is just an attempt to deny his accusation. When the boss mentioned the email which is the proof, Dilbert again denies the question by saying "Which is...an entirely different topic." He violates the maxim of quality by lying and the maxim of relevance by not giving a relevant answer to the question.

Finally, in the comic "Marketing Complains" The Boss is accusing Dilbert of not using the marketing division idea. Dilbert says, "That's because all of their ideas are moronic," which violates the maxim of relevance as that is not The Boss' question. The boss replied, "I told them I fired you. Don't leave your cubicle or use any digital devices until this blows over," which indicates that The Boss is lying and therefore violating the maxim of quality.

4. Conclusion

Of the ten analyzed comics, the most violated maxim is maxims of relevance and maxims of quality. It is mostly because the character must come up with an excuse or a lie, which that also what makes the comic funny. Wally is a character who does not want to be blamed although it's his fault. Mostly, he violates maxims of relevance. The main reason Wally violates maxims of relevance is that he is avoiding accusation and blames toward him. He violates maxims of relevance by changing the topic of conversation and not giving suitable answers to the questions. He also turns back the fact about his annoying behavior, putting the blame on the other people. Wally always has excuses and illogical reasons when he is accused by his coworkers or The Boss. He tries to find another people's mistake and focus on that mistake to avoid talking about his behavior. Wally's behavior represents a person who declines to be seen as the suspect in the problem. He is an insincere person since all he wants are advantages for him. He is unfair and self-centered.

Dilbert on the other hand is also a similar type of employee to Wally who is always trying to deny each accusation by giving an irrelevant answer and sometimes lies. The Boss is also violating some maxim of quality by lying, and manner by exaggerating things he said to his employee. The comic Dilbert is mostly funny by violating the maxims of quality and

relevance because most of the characters are either giving the wrong answer or an irrelevant answer to avoid the accusation charged against them.

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