

Pragmatic Study of the Main Characters in The Great Gatsby

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Abstract: The Great Gatsby was written by American writer F. Scott Fitzgerald in 1925. It was conceived not only as a deeply reflection on American society in the 1920s, but also as an exploration of the conflict between humanity, dreams, and reality. From the perspective of pragmatics, based on the Cooperative Principle, this study analyzes the dialogues of the main characters in the novel through the qualitative method. It reveals the different personality of different characters. It is found that Gatsby is a calm, prudent, and thoughtful person. Daisy is changeable and capricious; Tom is selfish, indifferent, and aggressive. It not only enables us to have a more comprehensive understanding of the relationship between the characters and the theme in this novel, but also provides us with an insight into the complexity and contradiction of American society in the 1920s.

Keywords: The Great Gatsby; Cooperative Principle; Conversational Implicature; Character

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Introduction

The Great Gatsby was published in 1925 by American writer F. Scott Fitzgerald, widely regarded as a classic of 20th century American literature. Known for its masterly writing, profound themes, and complex characterizations, the novel depicts the "Jazz Age" of the 1920s in the United States. It is not only considered a profound reflection on American society in the 1920s, but also an exploration of the conflicts between humanity, dreams, and reality.

In the field of literature research, pragmatic analysis, as an important method to reveal the deep meaning of texts and the interactions between characters, provides a new perspective for understanding The Great Gatsby. F. Scott Fitzgerald's classic novel is not only known for its superb narrative skills and profound thematic ideas, but also for the rich pragmatic phenomena shown through the dialogue between characters. Through the pragmatic analysis of The Great Gatsby, we can not only have a more comprehensive understanding of the relationship between the characters and the theme expressed in this novel, but also have an insight into the complexity and contradiction of American society in the 1920s.

1 Literature Review

The study of The Great Gatsby involves many topics, including the disillusionment of the American dream, social class and wealth, love and marriage, and the exploration of modernity. In the aspect of theme research, discussions related to the American Dream are a major focus. The traditional view mostly holds that the novel criticizes the contradictions of the American Dream. For example, it showcases the illusoriness of the American Dream through Gatsby's struggles and failures. However, Zhang Mei (2024) put forward a new perspective. She pointed out that Fitzgerald's true intention was not to criticize, but to advocate for the restoration of the paradoxical nature of the American Dream. Shi Chong (2017), on the other hand, revealed the disillusionment of the American Dream through the portrayal of the three main characters in the novel, demonstrating the helplessness of the characters when struck by reality during their pursuit of dreams.

Studies on narrative techniques and the use of symbolism are also quite common. Zhu Ma (2017) studied the dual perspective narrative approach, metaphorical language and ironic devices in The Great Gatsby, analyzing how these writing techniques enhance the expressiveness of the novel and the depth of its theme. Chi Wencheng (2016) focused on the symbolic elements in the novel, such as the green light, the Valley of Ashes, and the banquet, and explored their symbolic meanings.

In conclusion, most studies have focused on narrative techniques, the American Dream, and symbolism. There have been relatively few studies that analyze the conversations in the novel by combining the Cooperative Principle in pragmatics to depict the characters. Therefore, based on the theory of Cooperative Principle, this study uses qualitative research method to analyze the dialogues of the characters in the novel, to reveal the major characters' personalities and the themes of the article. That Cooperative Principle can be used in the analysis of literary works can be further justified.

2 Theoretical Basis

2.1 Grice's Cooperative Principle

Grice proposed the Cooperative Principle and four Conversational Maxims. The principle of cooperation is that during communication, the speaker and the listener usually try their best to cooperate to make communication effective. The four conversational Maxims include:

The maxim of quantity: Provide necessary information, don't provide unnecessary information.

The maxim of quality: Don't say what you think is false, don't say for which you do not have enough evidence.

The maxim of relation: Be relevant.

The maxim of manner: Avoid ambiguity and unclear, avoid obscurity, be concise and orderly.

Simply speaking, CP requires us to speak the truth clearly and aptly. Grice's CP and accompanying guidelines help to achieve effective and efficient information exchange, better convey and understand the speaker's intent, and avoid misunderstandings. Although dialogue participants almost always follow the CP, they do not always strictly adhere to these guidelines. These guidelines may be violated for a variety of reasons. In addition to lying, people ignore guidelines in order to further observe phenomena and thus generate conversational meaning.

2.2 Conversational Implicature

Conversational Implicature was proposed by H.P. Grice in 1967. It is the meaning implied by the speaker's utterance in a specific context, which is not directly determined by the literal meaning of the utterance itself but deduced according to conversational principles and context.

H.P. Grice's cooperative principles and conversational maxims are the basic framework for analyzing Conversational Implicature. According to this framework, the production of conversational meaning depends on the cooperative behavior between the speaker and the listener, who both follow certain communication norms to ensure the effectiveness of communication. When the speaker's utterance seems to violate the conversational principles, the listener will infer the speaker's possible intention based on the concept of conversational implicature.

Understanding and using conversational meaning is very important for effective communication. In cross-cultural communication, the understanding of Conversational Implicature is particularly important, because there may be differences in Conversational Implicature in different cultural backgrounds, and a correct understanding can reduce misunderstandings and conflicts.

3 Violation of Cooperative Principles in The Great Gatsby

In most dialogue, the characters tend to follow CP and its four maxims to keep the conversation running smoothly. At the same time, some conversations with conversational meaning arising from violations of the Cooperative Principle will be divided into four categories. A careful analysis is made according to the four conversational maxims violated. By analyzing the conversation from the perspective of the CP, their personality can be revealed.

3.1 The Violation of the Quantity Maxim

When the speaker's words seem to violate these maxims, the listener will infer the speaker's possible intention based on the concept of Conversational Implication. Dialogues may seem to violate the maxim of quantity, if the listener receives

too much or not enough information. The listener will understand the speaker's true intention, either to express ridicule at others to elevate himself or herself, or to hide something.

There is a dialogue in the novel, when Gatsby wants to introduce Buchanan and his wife, it is usually the name, but in the novel, in order to achieve the purpose of satire, Gatsby adds the polo player. In fact, Gatsby wanted to embarrass Tom by adding the information of "polo player", because Tom's glory as a polo player was no longer. Gatsby said this sentence to make Tom no longer compare the past and the current scenery, so that Tom had a sincere sense of loss and frustration. In addition, through Tom's reply, "Oh no, not me" ("hurriedly negate"). It also proves that Gatsby succeeded in arousing his shame and achieving his own purpose (Xie Ailing, and Huang Fang 2021). We can also see that Gatsby knows each other's weaknesses and knows what to say to embarrass each other. It can be seen from Gatsby's resourcefulness and calm analysis, and his subtle observation of others. At the same time, we can also see that Tom is very concerned about his own face, identity and dignity.

In the first chapter of the novel, when Nick visits his cousin Daisy and her husband Tom, Daisy has a long talk with Nick in the hallway after dinner. Tom asks Daisy, "Did you give Nick a little heart to heart talk on the veranda?" Here Tom breaks the code of style by using the obscure, vague phrase "heart to heart talk" to mean that he is having an affair with a woman or making other derogatory remarks about himself. After Tom and Daisy leave the table due to a "mysterious" phone call, Nick learns from Daisy's friend Jordan that it's from Tom's mistress in New York. Nick may not understand the phrase then, but Daisy does. Daisy vaguely replies, "Did I? I can't seem to remember, but I think we talked about the Nordic race..." Her evasive answer violates the maxims of manner and quantity. The term "Nordic race," associated with "war, invasion, conquest," serves as an obscure metaphor for the mistress, satirizing Tom's infidelity. Tom quickly understood the meaning of Daisy's conversation, so before Daisy finished, he immediately said to Nick "Don't believe everything you hear, Nick" reflecting Tom want to maintain his own face, hoping to maintain a good image in front of Nike.

3.2 The Violation of the Quality Maxim

A violation of the maxim of quality means that a speaker expresses conversational meaning such as sarcasm or frustration by saying something that he is not sure of or has no evidence to prove is true.

In The Great Gatsby, there is a dialogue between Nick and his cousin Daisy. In this dialogue, Nick, as a listener, listens to Daisy's frustration about her current life. Daisy asks Nick if he would like to hear about the day her daughter was born, and Nick is willing to listen. So, Daisy says, "I hope she'll be a fool." Daisy hopes her daughter is a fool. This obviously violates the principle of quality, using irony, how can any parents in the world want their children to be fools? The reason why Daisy said this is because a fool does not understand the world, does not have so many troubles, and can live a carefree life, which is exactly what Daisy lacks. She is unhappy in her marriage because of her husband's infidelity, and she feels depressed, but she cannot speak out righteously, because she is afraid that her husband will not be able to enjoy the luxurious life after divorcing her, so she can only bear it. Turn a blind eye, the pain in your heart only you know. Daisy is selfish and only cares about maintaining her dignity and status and face. She found out that Tom was having an affair, but did not divorce or expose him, because she wanted to continue to enjoy a rich life (Wang Junshuang, 2014).

In the second chapter of the novel, Tom and his mistress Mertle meet in New York. Mertle wants to buy a puppy and asks the seller the sex of the puppy. Tom's expression clearly violated the quality guidelines, saying "it's a bitch". when he knew the puppy was a boy. The original meaning of the word "Bitch" is "female dog", and it is often used to insult women in communication, referring to a lewd and unpleasant woman. Tom's deliberate violation of the quality maxim brought out his rude, vulgar nature, and Tom then paid Mertle off. For Tom, Mertle in the bottom class is just a tool for his pleasure, as long as she satisfies her material desires, he can do whatever he wants to her, no courtesy, respect.

3.3 The Violation of the Relation Maxim

For some reason, a speaker who says something unrelated to the subject of the conversation in the hope that the listener will understand its conversational meaning is called a violation of the maxim of relation. The reason for this is that the speaker sometimes ends the topic quickly in order to hide something.

In The Great Gatsby, there is a dialogue between Tom, Nick, and Daisy. Daisy talks about entertainment all the time,

while Nick doesn't like to discuss extravagant pleasures. He is more interested in livelihood issues such as crops. So, Nick asks directly, "Can't you talk about crops or something?", apparently violating the maxim of relation, made it clear to Daisy that he didn't want to continue the previous topic. Nick's answer shows his forthright personality and disinterest in opulence, highlighting a significant disparity compared to Daisy's attitude towards affluence (Cui Ruoyu, 2023). Then, Tom suddenly interrupts their conversation to say, "Civilization's going to pieces", expressing his anxiety and worry about the fading of civilization, which is obviously not consistent with the content of the conversation, so Tom also violates the maxim of relation. Despite his attempt to steer the conversation towards loftier topics, Tom's tenuous grasp of the concept of civilization was evident in his disjointed responses. This revealed his true nature as an arrogant, irascible, and duplicitous individual.

It comes from the fifth chapter of the novel, when Nick meets Gatsby on his way home. After a period of contact, Nick and Gatsby become much closer, but Gatsby's work, background and his lonely figure are still unsolved mysteries for Nick. Later, Nick learned from Jordan's mouth that Gatsby and Daisy's "past" and that Gatsby approached him in the hope that he could help him meet Daisy again. Nick was lost in heart and even had some resistance to Gatsby. For Gatsby's warm invitation, Nick politely declined him with seemingly objective reasons. "It's late" and "go to bed" have nothing to do with Gatsby's invitation to "go to coney island" and "take a plunge." Nick breaks the association rules and means "I'd like to go with you, but it's late and it's time to go to bed. The implication of "So I can't go" implies that Gatsby himself does not want to refuse his invitation subjectively, but out of objective factors, which makes the refusal appear implicit and polite.

3.4 The Violation of the Manner Maxim

The manner maxim needs the speaker to speak in the simple way. So, the listener can understand the intended meaning very clearly. It also means that they should communicate in the straightforward way, rather than in the roundabout way.

There's a dialogue between Daisy and Nick. At a big party, Gatsby and Daisy sneak out into the back garden unnoticed. Daisy tells Nick "In case there's a fire or a flood, or any act of God." It is obvious that Daisy violated the maxim of manner. Her original intention was to ask Nick to help guard the gate of the back garden. She was afraid that Tom would find out about her affair with Gatsby, but Daisy did not express it directly, but used a more subtle way to refer to the potential crisis with fire and flood, so Daisy is a person who is passionate about love and very cautious. Nick is willing to help them, which shows that Nick is a person who knows the world and is ready to help others.

Another part is that when Tom, Daisy, Gatsby, Nick, and Jordan are planning to go away for the summer. Tom offers Daisy a ride in his car. But Daisy replied, "You take Nick and Jordan. We'll follow you in the coupe." Daisy asked Tom to drive Nick and Beck, and the other two of them drove with Tom. So, Daisy wanted to ride with Gatsby, and only themselves. Daisy arranged the way for everyone, rather than directly refuse Tom. Daisy violated the manner maxim, but it also showed that Daisy is very smart and her true feeling about Gatsby. It can be seen that Daisy is desperate for her own love. Even though Tom is aware of the danger of her shifting to another love, she still fights bravely for it. Therefore, Daisy is a woman who bravely pursues love. Her choice to reject Tom in a tactful way also shows her sense of the big picture and her resourcefulness.

3.5 Summary

Through the study of a series of character conversations, it is found that Gatsby, Daisy, Tom, and other main characters produce conversational meanings by deliberately violating the relevant maxims of the Cooperation Principle in the conversation, so as to convey their true emotions and intentions, while there are few cases of conversational meanings generated by complying with the relevant maxim of the Cooperation Principle. Gatsby mainly violates the maxim of quantity, followed by the maxim of manner. The violation of the maxim of quantity reflected that Gatsby is a calm, resourceful, restrained, shy and cautious person in dealing with problems. The violation of the manner maxim reflects Gatsby's desire to completely change his identity and win the respect of others. Daisy mainly violates the maxim of manner and quality. The violation of the manner reflects that Daisy is a passionate and cautious person in love, as well as her overall awareness and wit. The violation of maxim of quality reflects that she is a selfish, hypocritical, sensitive,

materialistic, and pitiful woman. Tom mainly violates the maxim of relevant. The violation of the relevant maxim reflects that Tom is arrogant, angry, hypocritical, evil, aggressive, and rude.

4 Conclusion

The Great Gatsby is the best work of Fitzgerald both ideologically and artistically. Through the study of characters' conversations, it is found that Gatsby, Daisy, Tom and other main characters produce Conversational Implicature by deliberately violating the maxims of the Cooperative Principle in the conversation, so as to convey their true feelings, while there are few cases of conversational meanings generated by abiding by the relevant maxims of the Cooperative Principle. The study of the Conversational Implicature is helpful to analyze the psychology process of the characters during the conversation, deepen the readers' understanding of the image of the characters and the relationship between the characters, and thus better interpret the theme of the novel.

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