



Violation of the Cooperative Principle by Characters in the *Knives Out* Movie

ELI MARTA DEWI

Universitas 17 Agustus 1945 Surabaya

Email: elimarta29@gmail.com

BRAMANTYA PRADIPTA

Universitas 17 Agustus 1945 Surabaya

Email: bramantya@untag-sby.ac.id

Abstract. This study investigates how characters in the *Knives Out* movie violate Grice's Cooperative Principle, which consists of four conversational maxims: Quantity, Quality, Relation, and Manner. The objective of this study is to identify the types of maxim violations that occur, determine which maxim is most frequently violated, and analyze the effects of each violation on character interaction and interpretation of meaning. The study uses a descriptive qualitative method within the field of pragmatics, focusing on how maxim violations appear naturally in the characters' utterances without altering the original dialogue. The data were collected from selected utterances in the *Knives Out* movie and analyzed using Grice's (1975) theory of the Cooperative Principle. The findings reveal a total of 52 maxim violations, consisting of 22 violations of the Maxim of Quality, 13 of Quantity, 11 of Manner, and 6 of Relation. The Maxim of Quality is the most frequently violated, reflecting how deception and false information play a central role in shaping the mystery and building tension in the movie. Each maxim violation contributes differently to the narrative. Violations of Quality often involve lies or misleading statements; Quantity violations are used to withhold important information; Relation violations serve to redirect conversations; and Manner violations introduce ambiguity. These strategic violations affect how characters interact, how information is interpreted, and how the plot unfolds. This study contributes to a deeper understanding of how conversational principles are manipulated in fictional narratives, especially in the mystery genre.

Keywords : Cooperative Principle, *Knives Out*, Maxim Violation, Pragmatics

INTRODUCTION

Pragmatics is a branch of linguistics that studies the ways context contributes to meaning. As (Yule, 1996) defines, pragmatics concerns the interpretation of speaker meaning influenced by social context, background knowledge, and situational factors. It includes understanding utterances that are not explicitly stated but are inferred from interaction. Pragmatics enables researchers to analyze how speakers use language strategically to achieve communicative goals, especially in contexts where intentions are hidden or meanings are implied.

One of the most influential concepts in pragmatics is the Cooperative Principle, proposed by Grice (1975). He explained that in order to achieve effective communication, speakers usually adhere to four conversational maxims: Quantity, Quality, Relation, and Manner.

These maxims guide speakers to be informative, truthful, relevant, and clear. However, in both real and fictional conversations, these maxims are not always followed. Violating these maxims can generate conversational implicatures, lead to misinterpretation, or create dramatic effects particularly in narrative discourse like movie.

A violation occurs when a speaker intentionally disregards a maxim without the listener realizing, often to mislead, deceive, or conceal information (Grice, 1975); (Vika, 2016). On the other hand, flouting is a more overt breach of a maxim, designed to produce an implicature and prompt the listener to infer meaning beyond what is said (Kurniati & Hanidar, 2018). In fictional narratives, especially mystery genres, maxim violations are frequently used to build suspense, hide motives, or misdirect the audience. These intentional breaches make film dialogue a valuable resource for pragmatic analysis.

The *Knives Out* movie, directed by Rian Johnson, presents a compelling case for this kind of study. The film relies heavily on character dialogue to advance its plot and create mystery. Each character has a motive, and many of them use language to protect themselves, mislead others, or withhold critical information. These interactions provide clear examples of how the Cooperative Principle is repeatedly violated to serve narrative functions. The characters' utterances are not merely conversational but strategic designed to affect how others perceive truth and guilt within the story.

Although several studies have explored Gricean maxims in various genres including comedy, drama, and action research focusing on the mystery genre, especially involving multiple characters' coordinated violations, remains limited. Prior works tend to analyze single characters or scenes and do not thoroughly explore the role of frequent and deliberate violations in shaping the story's outcome. Therefore, this study fills that gap by examining the strategic violation of conversational maxims by various characters in *Knives Out*, not only in terms of type and frequency but also in their narrative implications.

This study aims to: (1) identify the types of maxim violations committed by characters in the *Knives Out* movie, (2) determine which maxim is most frequently violated, and (3) analyze how the effects of each maxim violation of the characters' utterances influences character interaction and the interpretation of meaning. Through this analysis, the study contributes to the field of pragmatics by demonstrating how conversational principles function in cinematic dialogue and how language is intentionally manipulated to enhance narrative complexity in mystery storytelling.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Previous study plays a significant role in supporting the present study, particularly by offering theoretical grounding, identifying research gaps, and providing methodological inspiration. It also helps to justify the relevance of this study by highlighting the need to explore how maxim violations reflect deeper communicative intentions, especially in mystery themed movies.

The first relevant study is conducted by (Ameylia et al., 2023) in their research titled "Conversational Maxim Violation by the Main Character in the *Shang-Chi and The Legend of the Ten Rings* Movie." This study used Grice's theory to identify and analyze maxim violations committed by the main character. The result showed that the maxim of quality was the most frequently violated. The study was conducted using a descriptive qualitative method and revealed how cultural elements influence the violation of conversational norms. Although this study focuses on a single character, it provides a foundation for understanding the strategic use of maxim violation in film narratives.

Another related study was carried out by (Putri & Rahayu, 2022) entitled "Violation of Cooperative Principles of Maurice in *The Beauty and The Beast* Movie." This study also employed Grice's Cooperative Principle and focused on a supporting character. The findings indicate that characters may violate maxims intentionally for comedic or emotional effect. The study successfully explains the connection between character portrayal and communication strategy. However, it is limited in scope because it only analyzes one character and does not explore broader conversational patterns among multiple characters.

A third study is by (Aryanto & Kholis, 2023) titled "Conversational Maxims in the *Extraction II* Movie." This study identified frequent maxim violations in an action-thriller context. The researchers used a pragmatic approach to categorize different types of maxim violations in high-stress dialogues. The study emphasizes that violations are often tied to character roles and tension in the storyline. Nevertheless, the study does not address how these violations influence the audience's interpretation or the overall meaning of the dialogue.

Although these studies have significantly contributed to the understanding of maxim violations in movies, most of them focus on a single character or a limited set of interactions. There is a lack of study that thoroughly explores maxim violations across multiple characters in a mystery movie setting, where withholding or distorting information is an essential part of the plot. Therefore, this study aims to fill that gap by analyzing maxim violations committed by various characters in the *Knives Out* movie.

Pragmatics

Pragmatics is a branch of linguistics that studies how language is used in context to convey meaning beyond what is explicitly stated. According to (Yule, 1996), pragmatics is "the study of the meaning as communicated by a speaker (or writer) and interpreted by a listener (or reader)." This means that meaning depends not only on the words used, but also on factors like the speaker's intention, the listener's interpretation, and the social or situational context. Key elements of pragmatics include deixis, presupposition, speech acts, politeness strategies, and especially implicature. Conversational implicature, which is central to Grice's Cooperative Principle, explains how speakers often imply meanings indirectly particularly when one or more maxims are intentionally violated.

Cooperative Principle

The Cooperative Principle was proposed by philosopher H.P. Grice in 1975. He argued that in order to communicate effectively, speakers and listeners typically adhere to a set of unwritten rules that ensure clarity and cooperation in conversation. Grice (1975:45) formulated the principle as follows: "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." From this principle, Grice derived four conversational maxims Quantity, Quality, Relation, and Manner which describe how speakers are expected to communicate in a cooperative way. However, in real conversations, especially in movies, these maxims are often violated, either to hide the truth, avoid conflict, or create humor and suspense.

Maxim

Grice's Cooperative Principle is supported by four conversational maxims: Quantity, Quality, Relation, and Manner. These maxims serve as guidelines for producing cooperative and effective speech.

1. Maxim of Quantity

Provide the right amount of information, no more and no less than required. Grice noted cases in which an apparent violation of one maxim is the result of conflict with another maxim. He illustrates this type with the example :

A: *Where does C live?*

B: *Somewhere in the South of France.*

B's reply here seems to violate the maxim of quantity, specifically the first submaxim, since it is not as informative as would be appropriate in this context (Kroeger, 2025)

2. Maxim of Quality

Be truthful. Do not say what you believe to be false or for which you lack evidence.

A : *What is your position in this company?*

B : *Public relations manager.* (jade is actually an intern, and john is not aware of the fact). According to this case, jade violates the maxim of quality because she apparently lies about her position in that company, and the listener does not know the truth. It can be inferred that speaker violate the maxim when the hearers do no know the truth (Kasap, Süleyman Dağdemir, 2021)

3. Maxim of Relation

Be relevant. Say things that are pertinent to the ongoing conversation. Two of Grice's classic examples of this type are shown in In both cases the second speaker's reply is an apparent violation of the maxim of relevance (Kroeger, 2025).

A: *I am out of petrol [=gasoline].*

B: *There is a garage [=service station] around the corner.*

A: *Smith doesn't seem to have a girlfriend these days.*

B: *He has been paying a lot of visits to New York lately.*

4. Maxim of Manner

Be clear. Avoid ambiguity, obscurity, and be orderly in expression.

A: *"How much did that new dress cost, darling?"*

B: *"A tiny fraction of my salary, though probably a bigger fraction of the salary of the woman that sold it to me."*

In this example, the speaker gives an ambiguous and indirect response rather than clearly stating the price. This creates confusion and violates the Maxim of Manner (Mirayanti et al., 2024)

METHOD

This study applies a qualitative approach to analyze maxim violations in the *Knives Out* movie. This method is appropriate because it allows the researcher to explore the context and meaning behind each utterance in detail. As stated by (Norman K. Denzin, 2018), qualitative research focuses on understanding meaning through the interpretation of naturally occurring or purposeful data, especially in social or cultural contexts. The data source was the *Knives Out* (2019) movie directed by Rian Johnson and its complete script, accessed from scriptslug.com. The data consisted of utterances by characters that violate one or more of Grice's maxims. These utterances were selected based on their relevance to the Cooperative Principle and were categorized accordingly. The data collection involved watching the movie, reading the script, and identifying utterances that violated

the maxims of Quantity, Quality, Relation, or Manner. Each selected utterance was organized into a data table containing the character's name, the utterance, the violated maxim, and the context of the violation. The analysis was conducted by classifying each utterance based on the type of maxim violated and explaining the intention and effect of each violation. The frequency of each maxim violation was also calculated to determine the most commonly violated maxim. The researcher served as the instrument in the analysis, supported by documentation, field notes, and theoretical references from pragmatic studies.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

Findings of Violation of Maxim

This study identified 52 utterances in the *Knives Out* movie that violated cooperative principle. The distribution is as follows:

Table 1. The Frequencies of Violation of Maxim

| No | Violation of Maxim | Frequency |
|-------------------|--------------------|-----------|
| 1. | Maxim of Quantity | 13 |
| 2. | Maxim of Quality | 22 |
| 3. | Maxim of Relation | 6 |
| 4. | Maxim of Manner | 11 |
| TOTAL DATA | | 52 |

Based on the table above, the Maxim of Quality is the most frequently violated maxim in the *Knives Out* movie, with a total of 22 utterances. This indicates that the characters often deliver false or untruthful statements, which contributes significantly to the plot's mystery and tension. The Maxim of Quantity ranks second with 13 violations, followed by the Maxim of Manner with 11 violations, and finally, the Maxim of Relation with 6 violations.

A. Violation Maxim of Quantity

Data VQN1

Elliott : "Right, did all three of you show up at around the same time?"

Linda : "N...o, Richard came early to help the caterers set up."

This dialogue takes place during an investigation scene in *Knives Out* (2019), a mystery movie directed by Rian Johnson. The story centers on the sudden death of renowned crime novelist Harlan Thrombey, and the efforts of a private detective, Benoit Blanc, to uncover the truth behind it. After Harlan's death, the police question each family member to reconstruct the timeline of events during Harlan's birthday party the night he died. The questioning scene is crucial because it lays the groundwork for identifying inconsistencies in the characters' testimonies.

In this particular interaction, Lieutenant Elliott asks Linda about the arrival time of herself, her husband Richard, and her nephew Ransom. The question is specific: "Did all three of you show up at around the same time?" However, Linda responds with: "N...o, Richard came early to help the caterers set up." Her answer only mentions Richard and completely omits any information about her own arrival or Ransom's.

This response violates the Maxim of Quantity, which, according to Grice (1975), requires speakers to provide as much information as is necessary for the current purposes of the exchange not less, not more. Elliott's question calls for a complete answer regarding all three individuals, but Linda only addresses one. This deliberate under-information hinders the flow of cooperative conversation, as the listener must infer or assume the rest.

Additionally, Linda's hesitation ("N...o") and partial response may suggest discomfort or reluctance. It is possible she is withholding information to protect herself or Ransom, whose relationship with the family is strained and who later becomes a central suspect. This kind of incomplete response is consistent with how several characters in the film behave selectively revealing facts, manipulating language, and violating conversational norms to control how much the investigators (and the audience) know. The omission, whether intentional or not, causes a breakdown in cooperative communication, making it a clear example of a violation of the maxim of quantity.

B. Violation Maxim of Quality

Data VQL5

Elliott : *"So you run your father's publishing company?"*

Walt : *"Yeah. It's our... it's the family's publishing company. Dad trusts me to run it."*

This dialogue takes place during Walt's interview with the investigators in *Knives Out* (2019). When asked about his role in the family business, Walt says that the publishing company belongs to the family and that Harlan, his father, trusts him to manage it.

On the surface, Walt's answer sounds confident and positive. However, as the story develops, it is revealed that Harlan still holds full control over the company and makes all the important decisions. In fact, just before his death, Harlan had decided to fire Walt from the company. This means Walt's claim that *"Dad trusts me to run it"* is no longer true.

Walt's response violates the Maxim of Quality, which states that a speaker should not say something they know is false or something they cannot support with evidence (Grice, 1975). By pretending that he still has authority and trust from his father, Walt is giving a false impression of his position. His words are meant to protect his image, especially in front of the investigators, but they distort the truth.

This type of statement shows that Walt is more focused on appearing important than on being honest. Although he doesn't directly lie, his way of speaking is misleading and inaccurate, which makes his utterance a clear violation of the maxim of quality.

C. Violation Maxim of Relation

Data VRL4

Blanc : *"Mr. Drysdale—"*

Ransom : *"CSI KFC?"*

This utterance takes place when Ransom finally appears at the house and meets Blanc face-to-face. Blanc tries to begin the conversation formally by addressing him as *"Mr.*

Drysdale.” However, Ransom responds with a sarcastic comment: “*CSI KFC?*” This remark is not related to Blanc’s greeting and serves only to mock him. The phrase combines references to crime TV shows (CSI) and fast food (KFC), creating an intentionally absurd and disrespectful reply. This utterance is a clear violation of the Maxim of Relation because it completely ignores the content and purpose of Blanc’s statement. Instead of engaging in cooperative conversation, Ransom chooses to deflect and insult. Grice (1975) emphasizes that relevance is essential in maintaining effective dialogue, especially in formal or investigative settings. By responding in this way, Ransom breaks the expected flow of communication, likely as a way to assert dominance or avoid serious engagement. His sarcastic tone reflects his dismissive attitude toward the investigation and further isolates him from the rest of the characters.

D. Violation Maxim of Manner

Data VMN1

Elliott : “*And you remained close to the Thrombeys?*”

Joni : “*Oh they’re my family. I feel simultaneously freed by and supported by them, that balance of opposites is the nugget of Flam.*”

In this scene, Joni is responding to a question about her relationship with the Thrombey family. While the question is straightforward, her answer is filled with abstract and poetic language: “*I feel simultaneously freed by and supported by them, that balance of opposites is the nugget of Flam.*” This statement is difficult to interpret because it uses metaphorical phrases such as “*nugget of Flam*” without explaining their meaning. The Maxim of Manner, according to Grice (1975), requires speakers to avoid obscurity, ambiguity, and unnecessary complexity in their language. Joni’s utterance fails to meet these standards. Instead of offering a clear and direct description of her relationship with the family, she speaks in a vague, philosophical manner. This could be an attempt to project a certain image or avoid scrutiny, but it nonetheless disrupts effective communication. Her response forces the listener to guess the meaning, making it a clear violation of the Maxim of Manner.

The Effect of Each Violated Maxim

The violation of each maxim in *Knives Out* contributes differently to how information is interpreted by other characters and by the audience. These effects are not random but serve specific communicative and narrative purposes. Below is a discussion of how each type of maxim violation affects the flow of conversation and meaning in the movie.

1. The Effect of Violating the Maxim of Quantity

The Maxim of Quantity requires speakers to provide sufficient but not excessive information. In *Knives Out*, this maxim is violated when characters like Linda and Marta offer partial or limited responses. For instance, Linda avoids stating when she or Ransom arrived at the party, and Marta summarizes the night of Harlan’s death without revealing crucial details. These violations create ambiguity and force others such as Blanc or the audience to fill in the gaps. The effect is a breakdown in transparent communication, often

used by characters as a protective strategy to delay or hide the truth, thereby building narrative tension and complicating the investigation.

2. The Effect of Violating the Maxim of Quality

The Maxim of Quality emphasizes truthfulness and requires speakers to avoid saying what they know is false or lack evidence for. In *Knives Out*, this maxim is frequently violated through lies and distortions. Richard, for example, falsely claims Harlan's threat referred to a nursing home, when it was actually about exposing his affair. Joni also downplays her fraud by calling it a minor issue. These violations serve to protect personal reputation, avoid conflict, and mislead others. Even Blanc violates this maxim when he falsely claims Ransom has confessed used strategically to provoke Marta's reaction. The effect of such violations is misdirection and manipulation, allowing characters to delay consequences and control the narrative.

3. The Effect of Violating the Maxim of Relation

The Maxim of Relation requires speakers to stay relevant and respond appropriately to the topic. In *Knives Out*, this maxim is violated when characters deflect questions or give unrelated responses. For instance, Ransom responds to Blanc's formal inquiry with sarcasm, calling him "CSI KFC," avoiding the question and mocking the detective. These irrelevant replies serve as a defense mechanism or power play, allowing characters to avoid exposure or express resistance. The effect is a disruption in the conversation's direction, creating tension, confusion, or emotional distance between characters.

4. The Effect of Violating the Maxim of Manner

The Maxim of Manner calls for clarity, brevity, and order in communication. In the movie, characters like Walt and Linda violate this maxim by speaking vaguely or using ambiguous expressions. Walt, for example, gives unclear statements when discussing the publishing business, revealing his discomfort and insecurity. These violations blur the message and force listeners to interpret underlying meanings. As a result, conversations become more complex, and suspicions arise. The unclear delivery becomes a subtle way to hide intentions or avoid direct confrontation.

CONCLUSION

This study examined the violation of the Cooperative Principle in the *Knives Out* movie, focusing on the four maxims proposed by Grice (1975): Quantity, Quality, Relation, and Manner. A total of 52 maxim violations were identified from the characters' utterances, each serving different communicative purposes.

The Maxim of Quality was the most frequently violated (22 utterances), showing that many characters used lies or unverified information to protect themselves, hide mistakes, or manipulate others. This reflects how deception plays a key role in the plot and character conflict. The Maxim of Quantity was violated 13 times, usually through withholding important details. These partial answers created ambiguity and forced others to make

assumptions. The Maxim of Manner was violated in 11 utterances, where unclear or vague language was used to avoid direct confrontation or delay the truth. The Maxim of Relation had the fewest violations (6 utterances), often used to divert attention or avoid responsibility with irrelevant replies.

Overall, these violations were not random but intentional and strategic, used by characters to influence interpretation, hide intentions, or shift the conversation. The frequent violation of the Maxim of Quality highlights how central deception is to the mystery narrative. Meanwhile, violations of Quantity, Manner, and Relation contribute to confusion, tension, and complexity in the story. This study shows that Grice's Cooperative Principle can help explain how characters interact and how their words create deeper meanings in the story.

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