



# An Analysis of the Movie *The Merchant of Venice* from the Perspective of Cooperative Principle

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**How to cite this paper:** Lu, X.M. (2021) An Analysis of the Movie *The Merchant of Venice* from the Perspective of Cooperative Principle. *Open Access Library Journal*, 8: e7528.

<https://doi.org/10.4236/oalib.1107528>

**Received:** May 17, 2021

**Accepted:** June 18, 2021

**Published:** June 21, 2021

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## Abstract

William Shakespeare is one of the most famous dramatists in England history. His works are popular from the Renaissance in Europe to now. *The Merchant of Venice*, which is called one of the four great comedies, is presented to people again in the form of films several centuries later. This paper tries to analyze it from the perspective of Cooperative Principle, which is one of the most important theories in linguistics. Through analysis, it is found that the violation of Cooperative Principle in the movie leads to the production of the conversational meaning, which can better shape the character of the figures; intensify the conflict between characters; facilitate the development of the plot, and attract people's eyes. This paper is a meaningful attempt to analyze the movie in terms of linguistic theory and provide some inspiration for the study of other literary works.

## Subject Areas

Education, Linguistics

## Keywords

*The Merchant of Venice*, Cooperative Principle, Conversational Implicature

## 1. Introduction

The film is adapted from Shakespeare's drama of the same name, *The Merchant of Venice*. It was directed by Michael Radford and premiered in the United States in 2004. As a kind of art, many people try to explore films from different points, such as the adaptation of films [1], the creation of films [2], the communication of film culture [3], etc. However, film is not so much a kind of performing arts as a kind of linguistic arts to some extent. Language is an important factor of films. Linguists have long been devoted to the study of language and

have put forward some important theories. This paper tries to analyze the language of the film from the angle of one of the important theories in pragmatics: Cooperative Principle, which is proposed by Oxford philosopher H.P. Grice [4]. In order to cater to the aesthetic of the audience, the film dramatized the original work to a certain extent. However, it still makes sense to better realize the charm of Shakespeare's works. From the perspective of contemporary view, the story that happened in the film is definitely unfair. However, in that historical background, it is the reflection of real life; the compliment of true friendship; the description of romantic love; the praise of logical thinking, and so on. What's more, the conflicts and turns, which may play an important role in facilitating the development of the story, are discussed in this paper in combination with Cooperative Principle.

## 2. Theoretical Framework

### 2.1. The Definition of Cooperative Principle

The Oxford philosopher Herbert Paul Grice began to formulate the ideas of Cooperative Principle in the fifties, but it was published until 1975 under the title of "Logic and Conversation".

According to Grice, there is a general assumption underpinning all utterance interpretations that the interpretation of utterances is a collaborative enterprise guided by a "Cooperative Principle" in which a speaker and hearer are engaged in some shared goal [4] [5]. In other words, people seem to follow the principle: "make your conversational contribution such as it is required, at the stage at which it occurs, by the accepted purpose or direction of the talk exchange in which you are engaged" [4]. And this principle is called Cooperative Principle, or CP for short.

Grice proposed that Cooperative Principle can be divided into four maxims: the maxim of quantity, quality, relation, and manner [4].

- 1) The maxim of quantity
  - a) Make your contribution as informative as is required (for the current purposes of the exchange).
  - b) Do not make your contribution more informative than is required.
- 2) The maxim of quality
 

Try to make your contribution one that is true:

  - a) Do not say what you believe to be false.
  - b) Do not say that for which you lack adequate evidence.
- 3) The maxim of relation
 

Be relevant.
- 4) The maxim of manner
 

Be perspicuous:

  - a) Avoid obscurity of expression.
  - b) Avoid ambiguity.
  - c) Be brief (avoid prolixity)

d) Be orderly.

## 2.2. The Production of Conversational Implicature

The use of “principle” and “maxim” does not mean that the CP and its maxims will be observed by everybody all the time [6]. People do violate them for different reasons. In Grice’s view, conversational implicatures can only be produced on the basis of the CP. In other words, the precondition of the production of conversational implicatures is that both the speaker and hearer know the violation, namely the obvious flouting of a maxim or more. Conversational implicatures arise from a combination of language and situation: the same utterance on different occasions might not generate an implicature, or might suggest a different one [7]. Therefore, the situation is an important factor to relate analysis. The following part is going to discuss the violation of the CP and the production of conversational implicature in combination with the specific situations.

## 3. Specific Analysis of Cooperative Principle of *The Merchant of Venice*

The content of the historical background of *The Merchant of Venice* and the conversations of characters are all from the movie at the following website: <https://v.qq.com/x/cover/u5oi55c0v5wpqmr/c0025hyz0hp.html>.

### 3.1. The Historical Background and Outline of *The Merchant of Venice*

#### 3.1.1. The Historical Background of *The Merchant of Venice*

The story happened in Venice in 1596. Intolerance of the Jews was a fact of 16th Century life even in Venice, the most powerful and liberal city state in Europe. By law, the Jews were forced to live in the old walled foundry or “Geto” area of the city. After sundown the gate was locked and guarded by Christians. In the daytime any man leaving the ghetto had to wear a red hat to mark him as a Jew. The Jews were forbidden to own property. So they practiced usury, the lending of money at interest. This was against Christian law. The sophisticated Venetians would turn a blind eye to it but for the religious fanatics, who hated the Jews, it was another matter...

#### 3.1.2. The Outline of *The Merchant of Venice*

A poor man, Bassanio, fell in love with a rich woman, Portia. In order to propose to her, he wanted to borrow some money from his best friend, Antonio. However, Antonio’s money was invested abroad. In order to help his friend, Antonio decided to borrow money from Shylock, who was a Jew and signed a contract, which prescribed that if he didn’t pay back in three months, he would be cut off a pound of flesh by the other. With the help of his friend, Bassanio got Portia’s heart. However, unfortunately, Antonio’s ships were all wrecked at sea, which led to his bankruptcy. Shylock hated Antonio deeply as his daughter eloped with one of Antonio’s best friends. Shylock used means to take Antonio to the

court and insisted on cutting off a pound of flesh from him. In the moment of crisis, Portia saved Antonio by her intelligence, which prompted the happy ending.

### 3.2. Violation of Four Maxims in the Movie *The Merchant of Venice*

#### 3.2.1. Violation of the Maxim of Quantity in the Movie

##### Example 1:

The following conversations happened between Shylock and another Jew Tubal when Shylock's daughter eloped with one of Antonio's best friends and took away his money and a priceless ring at the same time.

Shylock: How now, Tubal? What news from Genoa? Have you found my daughter?

Tubal: I often came where I did hear of her but cannot find her.

Shylock: Why...there, there, there. A diamond gone. Cost me two thousand ducats in Frankfurt.

...

Tubal: Yes, other men have ill luck, too. Antonio, as I heard in Genoa.

Shylock: What? What? What? Ill luck?

Tubal: There's a ship, wrecked, coming from Tripolis.

Shylock: Oh, I thank God. I thank God.

**Analysis:** In these conversations, Shylock repeated "there" three times, which showed his disappointment to her daughter who fell in love with a Christian and most importantly took away lots of his money. To a merchant, like Shylock, money is as important as his life. In the later part, Shylock used "what" three times, which expressed his eagerness to listen to bad news about Antonio. He wanted to find a chance to punish him, plague him and torture him.

##### Example 2:

The following conversations happened on the court. The duke tried to persuade Shylock to give up the request to cut a pound of flesh from Antonio.

Duke: How shall you hope for mercy, giving none?

Shylock: ...

You will answer the slaves are ours. So do I answer you. The pound of flesh that I demand of him is dearly bought. It's mine. It's mine. It's mine. And I will have it. If you deny me, fie upon your law. There is no force in the decrees of Venice.

**Analysis:** In these conversations, Shylock repeated "It's mine" three times, which showed Shylock's hate to Christians. He was indignant at the unfair treatment of Jews. What's more, he didn't want Antonio's flesh but wanted him to die at last.

#### 3.2.2. Violation of the Maxim of Quality in the Movie

##### Example 3:

The following conversations happened when Bassanio, with his true love for Portia, chose the right chest and got the right to marry the girl. However, Bassa-

nio received a letter from Antonio and got the information that his best friend had been taken to court as a result of him.

Portia: With leave, Bassanio, I am half of yourself and I must freely have half of anything that this same letter brings you.

Bassanio: Sweet Portia, they are a few of the unpleasant test words that ever blotted paper. I should have told you I was worse than nothing, for, indeed, I have engaged myself to a dear friend, who engaged my dear friend to his mere enemy to feed my means. Here is a letter, lady. The paper is the body of my friend and every word in it a gaping wound issuing life-blood.

**Analysis:** In these conversations, Bassanio's words flouted the maxim of quality. The paper cannot be Antonio's body, and words cannot be his wound, too. The figure of metaphor was used here to express Bassanio's heartbroken and guilty conscience to his best friend.

**Example 4:**

The following conversation happened when Bassanio took Antonio and other friends to see Portia. They came to tell them Antonio was safe and all of them came back safely.

Nerissa: What talk you of the motto or the value? You swore to me when I did give it you that you would wear it till your hour of death and that it should lie with you in your grave. Though not for me yet for your vehement oaths, you should have been respective and have kept it. Gave it to a judge's clerk!

Gratiano: I gave it to a youth, a kind of boy, a little scrubbed boy, no higher than thyself, the judge's clerk.

Portia: You were to blame, I must be plain with you, to part so slightly with your wife's first gift. I gave my love a ring and made him swear never to part with it. And here he stands. I dare be sworn for him, he would not lose it nor pluck it from his finger for all the wealth that the world masters.

**Analysis:** In these conversations, Portia said something that was not true. She clearly knew that Bassanio didn't wear it anymore for he gave it to a "boy". And the "boy" is her. However, she still said that because she wanted to make Bassanio feel guilty and remind him to cherish the ring which symbolized the love between them in the future.

### 3.2.3. Violation of the Maxim of Relation in the Movie

**Example 5:**

Portia's father dead, but he prescribed a rule for his daughter's marriage. He prepared three chests made of gold and silver and lead with different things in. Any men, who wanted to get marry with Portia must choose one from them. And only the man who chose the one with Portia's portrayal can be her husband and inherited the family estate. The following conversations happened between Portia and her retinue Nerissa. They were talking about men who wanted to marry Portia.

Nerissa: How say you of the French lord, Monsieur Le Bon?

Portia: Oh, God. God made him, and therefore let him pass for a man. I know

it is a sin to be a mocker, but he...!

Nerissa: What say you to Falconbridge, the young baron of England?

Portia: How oddly he's suited!

Nerissa: And the Duke of Saxony's nephew?

Portia: Very vilely in the morning when he is sober, and most vilely in the afternoon when he is drunk.

**Analysis:** In these conversations, Portia didn't respond to Nerissa directly, but she used some not relevant sentences to describe these men. These expressions showed Portia's disgust feelings more picturesquely, which also made a sharp contrast to the phenomena when she met Bassanio.

#### **Example 6:**

The following conversations happened when Bassanio went to see Shylock and explained the thing that Antonio wanted to borrow some money from him.

Shylock: Three thousand ducats. Well.

Bassanio: Ay, sir, for three months.

Shylock: For three months? Well...

Bassanio: For which, as I told you, Antonio shall be bound.

Shylock: Antonio shall be bound? Well...

Bassanio: May you help me? Will you pleasure me? Should I know your answer?

Shylock: Three thousand ducats for three months, and Antonio bound.

Bassanio: Your answer to that.

Shylock: Antonio is a good man.

**Analysis:** In these conversations, Shylock repeated Bassanio's sentences again and again. In the last turn, Shylock didn't give answer to Bassanio, but he gave a hypocritical evaluation to Antonio. This may suggest that Shylock was attempting to buy time to his consideration of whether he should lend money to Antonio and also enjoyed the feeling of being pleased by a Christian [8].

### **3.2.4. Violation of the Maxim of Manner in the Movie**

#### **Example 7:**

The following conversations happened when Bassanio talked about the thing of borrowing money from Shylock.

Bassanio: Your answer to that.

Shylock: Antonio is a good man.

Bassanio: Have you heard any imputation to the contrary?

Shylock: No, no, no, no, no. My meaning in saying that he is a good man is to have you understand that he is of good credit. Yet his means are in question. He hath a ship bound for Tripolis, another to the Indies. I understand moreover, upon the Rialto, he hath a third ship at Mexico, a fourth for England, and other ventures he hath squandered abroad. But ships are but boards, sailors are but men, there be land rats and water rats, water thieves and land thieves. I mean pirates. Then there is the peril of waters, winds and rocks. The man is, notwithstanding, of good credit. Three thousand ducats. I think I may take his bond.

**Analysis:** In these conversations, Shylock said too much to answer Bassanio's answer. Especially the later part may lead to obscurity. Shylock maybe wanted to balance the advantage and disadvantage of lending money to Antonio and expressions in this part may paved way for the bankruptcy of Antonio later, which created chance for Shylock to be revenged on him.

#### 4. Conclusion

This paper tries to analyze the language of *The Merchant of Venice* from the perspective of Cooperative Principle. With specific instances of the story, the phenomena of violating the maxim of quantity, quality, relation, and manner, is discussed respectively. There are two findings: First, the phenomena of flouting Cooperative Principle, is led mostly by using metaphor, irony, hyperbole, etc. especially in situations where the flouting of the maxim of quality happens. As far as the violation of the maxim of relation is concerned, euphemism is usually used. Second, the production of conversational implicatures, which is caused by violating Cooperative Principle, plays an important role in shaping the figures, sharpening the confliction and prompting the development of the plot. During the process of analyzing, the wisdom of Shakespeare can also be captured. By using letters, the dramatist perfectly shows pure love, true friendship, and the power of intelligence. There are many good virtues that should still be cherished and praised by contemporary people. What's more, the beauty of the language in *The Merchant of Venice* is also obvious. Therefore, maybe Shakespeare's works can be used in education to let more young people realize the charm of works of the great dramatist. In addition, there is still a large space for exploration of the combination of linguistics and literature.

#### Acknowledgements

I'd like to express my gratitude to my supervisor, Professor Wu Haiying, who gives me much guidance and encouragement in the process of writing the paper.

#### Conflicts of Interest

The author declares no conflicts of interest regarding the publication of this paper.

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