

Analysis of Characters' Personalities and Themes in Hemingway's Short Story *The Killers* under Violation of Cooperative Principle

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Abstract

American writer Ernest Hemingway's short story *The Killers* is a classic literary work. Its unique linguistic charm and vivid characters have attracted scholars from generation to generation to appreciate and study. This paper takes the main characters' conversations in the classic short story as the research object. Through statistical and analytical study of the conversations violating the Cooperative Principle and the conversational implicature they produce, the research aims to reveal the characters' personalities and show its profound themes, thus helping readers better understand and appreciate the short story and broadening the application of pragmatic theory in the field of literature.

Keywords: Hemingway; *The Killers*; Conversations; Cooperative Principle; Conversational Implicature.

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INTRODUCTION

Ernest Hemingway is one of the most influential American writers in the last century whose unique style of writing has established his high literary status and reputation. Hemingway is good at describing dialogues between characters to show rich connotations, and his economical and understated style---which he termed The Iceberg Theory---had a strong influence on 20th-century fiction. He is a representative of the "Lost Generation" writers in the United States, and his works show confusion and embarrassment in life, world, and society. *The Killers* is a masterpiece of Ernest Hemingway's early short stories, which was first published in Scribner's Magazine in September 1927 and meanwhile was included in the stories collection *Men Without Women*.

According to Cooperative Principle proposed by American philosopher and logician Herbert Paul Grice in 1967, verbal communication is not a series of utterances without any connection, but a combination of utterances restricted by certain conditions, and finally achieved mutual cooperation, which ensured the smooth communication through cooperation [1]. Cooperative Principle includes four maxims: the maxim of quantity, the maxim of quality, the maxim of relation and the maxim of manner, which was widely accepted as soon as it was proposed. Both sides of the communication should abide by the four maxims in order to make the communication work smoothly [2].

Although conversations take up a lot of space in *The Killers*, Hemingway's conversations do not conform to the Cooperative Principle. This paper will study and verify how and to what extent the passage violates the Cooperative Principle through the combination of quantitative and qualitative analysis, in order to provide readers with a deeper and clearer understanding of characters' personalities and themes of the story.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Since the Cooperative Principle was put forward, it has been widely used in various fields. In the field of rhetoric and writing, CP is used to develop effective writing skills; in the field of education, CP is used to analyze conversations that take place in the classroom. Experts such as Edward, Mercer and Fried have contributed a lot in this regard [3]. Kleifgen [3] finds that CP is able to be used to prove that a three-year-old child has understood the rules of the game. As an important theory in pragmatics, Cooperative Principle has also attracted wide attention in China. Since the year of 1993, many linguists who engaged in translation work, such as Chen Xiaowei, Wang Ping, Liao Kaihong and so on, have combined the Cooperative Principle with interpretation [4]. Some scholars who are engaged in teaching combine CP with practical teaching. Experts in this area are Zhou Hong, Du Hongjun, Wang Liya and so on [4].

With the advent of *The Killers*, many scholars have attempted to study it from different points of view. Liu Na [5] explored the narrative art of *The Killers*, making a general analysis on the narrative style from the three aspects: narrative pattern, narrative strategies and narrative voice. It is concluded that Hemingway's story has two unique narrative styles: firstly, unique creativity, this is a crime story, but there is no murder and bloody scene and horror atmosphere in the story; secondly, unique narrative technique, select a specific character as the perspective, through the observer to show the whole story objectively and directly. Nan Xi [6] focused on the semiotic study of *The Killers*, pointing out its validity and significance in the analysis of literary works. Qiu Yongxu [7] took the Iceberg Theory as a starting point to analyze its concise writing style, that is, the structure of the story is mainly conversations, plain language and simple plot are organically combined, implicitly revealing deep and broad ideas. From the perspective of space criticism, Qian Huan [8] tries to explore the interaction between the characters in the physical space, social space and individual psychological space through the spatial images displayed in the story, and to explore the tense "relationship set" of American social survival activities reflected by the spatial heterogeneous consciousness infiltrated in the story. By analyzing Hemingway's "ellipsis" strategy in the creation of *The Killers*, Xiong Jiang [9] tries to interpret the literary master's ingenuity from three aspects, and walks into the underwater space of "seven eighths".

There are 2962 words in the short story, of which 1688 words are conversations, accounting for more than half of the whole work. The plot development of the short story is mainly driven by the conversations between the characters [10]. Colloquial language is prominent and there is little written language throughout the short story. Since Hemingway uses a large number of conversations, the conversation research is of great significance to the analysis of the characters' personalities and the understanding of multiple themes. However, most of the studies on Hemingway's short stories are focused on its writing characteristics and Iceberg Theory. This paper provides a new perspective for Hemingway's short stories writing research by analyzing its violation of Cooperative Principle quantitatively and qualitatively.

RESEARCH METHODS

Data Collection

The author first looks through *The Killers* and then selects four characters with typical personality. Next, all the conversations of each character are picked out to be analyzed under CP. The last step is to calculate the frequency of four maxims violation separately for each target character. Similar data-collection procedure is conducted to explore how the four maxims violations reveal the themes of the short story.

Data Analysis

Both qualitative and quantitative methods are employed in this thesis. To begin with, the author describes the statistical data in the table and then interprets how the four maxims violation reflects characters' personalities with the help of abundant selected examples. The focus of this research is to explore the characters' personalities and the themes of the short story under CP.

RESULTS

The following tables are made after statistical calculation to indicate the number of conversation sentences by each character and the number and percentage of each maxim violation by the four typical characters Nick, Ole Andreson, Al and Max.

Table-1: The number of conversation sentences by each character

| | |
|--------------|-----|
| Nick | 40 |
| Ole Andreson | 24 |
| Al | 60 |
| Max | 84 |
| Sam | 14 |
| George | 66 |
| Other people | 20 |
| Total | 308 |

Table-1 shows that there are 308 sentences of conversations altogether. *The Killers* has a total of 2,962 words and 508 sentences, among which 1,688 words and 308 sentences are the conversations of characters, accounting for nearly three-fifths of the space. Two killers have the most conversations, Max has 84 sentences in conversations, Al has 60 sentences. Besides, Nick has 40 sentences, Ole Andreson has 24 sentences, Sam has 14 sentences, George has 66 sentences, and other people has 20 sentences in total.

Table-2: The number of each maxim violation by the four characters

| | Quantity maxim violation | Quality maxim violation | Relation maxim violation | Manner maxim violation |
|----------|--------------------------|-------------------------|--------------------------|------------------------|
| Nick | 1 | 3 | 5 | 4 |
| Andreson | 12 | 0 | 1 | 0 |
| Al | 8 | 2 | 1 | 3 |
| Max | 7 | 1 | 1 | 5 |

As shown in Table-2, Nick violates the quantity maxim 1 time, quality maxim 3 times, relation maxim 5 times and manner maxim 4 times. Ole Anderson violates the quantity maxim 12 times, quality maxim 0 time, relation maxim 1 time and manner

maxim 0 time. Al violates the quantity maxim 8 times, quality maxim 2 times, relation maxim 1 time and manner maxim 3 times. Max violates the quantity maxim 7 times, quality maxim 1 time, relation maxim 1 time and manner maxim 5 times.

Table-3: Percentage of each maxim violation by the four characters

| | Quantity maxim violation | Quality maxim violation | Relation maxim violation | Manner maxim violation |
|----------|--------------------------|-------------------------|--------------------------|------------------------|
| Nick | 7.7% | 23.1% | 38.5% | 30.7% |
| Anderson | 92.3% | 0 | 7.7% | 0 |
| Al | 57.1% | 14.3% | 7.2% | 21.4% |
| Max | 50% | 7.1% | 7.1% | 35.8% |

Table-3 shows the percentage of each maxim violation by the four characters. Nick violates the relation maxim most frequently, reaching to 38.5%. Ole Anderson, Al and Max all violate the quantity maxim most frequently, reaching to 92.3%, 57.1% and 50% separately.

Table-4: Distribution of CP violation of the whole short story

| | |
|--------------------------|----|
| Quantity maxim violation | 28 |
| Quality maxim violation | 6 |
| Relation maxim violation | 8 |
| Manner maxim violation | 12 |
| Total | 54 |

Table-4 shows the distribution of CP violation of the whole short story. We can see that there are quantity maxim violation 28 times, quality maxim violation 6 times, relation maxim violation 8 times and manner maxim violation 12 times. Each maxim violation reveals the themes of the short story to some extent.

DISCUSSION

The above statistical results show that Hemingway's writing technique is unusual. The four main characters in the story all violate the cooperative principle, and basically all of them violate the four principles. It shows different personalities of the four typical characters and reveals the themes of the story. The specific analysis is as follows.

Analysis of Characters' Personalities in *The Killers* under Violation of CP

Personalities of Nick—Innocent and Kindhearted

(1) Violating the Maxim of Relation

As the previous table shows that Nick violates the relation maxim most frequently, reaching to 5 times. Nick is more immature than others. He is simple and kind and does not want to mix with this dark and hypocritical society, so he often violates the relation maxim.

In *Death in the Afternoon*, Ernest Hemingway points out that the characters in the novel "are not artificially fabricated characters. They must come from the author's own digested experience, from his

knowledge, from his mind, from his heart, and from all that is in him [11]." Nick is the only character who cuts across two scenes in the whole story, and there are two great psychological fluctuations in the text. Although there is no description of Nick's psychology, the implication can also be obtained from Nick's language and behavior. As in the text:

Nick stood up. He had never had a towel in his mouth before.

"Say," he said. "What the hell?" He was trying to swagger it off.

"Mixing up in this ain't going to get you anywhere," the cook said. "You stay out of it."

"I'll go see him," Nick said to George, "Where does he live?"

The cook turned away.

"Little boys always know what they want to do," he said [12].

"He had never had a towel in his mouth before." shows that Nick has not been through anything dangerous and knows nothing about the world. The conversation between Nick and the cook violates the maxim of relation. The cook advised Nick not to get involved in the mess, but Nick ignored the suggestion and might even think that the cook was cold and selfish. Nick went to ask George where Ole Anderson lived instead of responding to the cook. So what Nick had said had nothing to do with what the cook had said, the conversation violates the maxim of relation. Nick was always caring about others, from this Nick's innocence and kindness are revealed.

(2) Violating the Maxim of Quality

There is another application of the CP that reveals Nick's kindness:

"They will kill him."

"I guess they will."

"He must have got mixed up in something in Chicago."

"I guess so," said Nick [12].

This is a conversation between Nick and another waiter, George, after Nick returned from Anderson's house. They inferred that the reason why Anderson incurred trouble might be that he had done something wrong in Chicago. From the speculation, it is

clear that the two guys were caring and helpful to others. Unlike the chef Sam, they were kind and warm-hearted. In addition, after such experience, they inevitably became mature, seeing through the complexity of society and the evil of human nature. Speculation promotes the shaping of the characters and reveals the underlying themes [13].

Personalities of Ole Andreson—Composed and Helpless

(1) Violating the Maxim of Quantity

From Table-2 and Table-3, we can see that conversations that violate the quantity maxim account for a very large proportion in Ole Andreson's words, reaching to 92.3%. Ole Andreson is a victim of the dark society who can only wait for death in the face of the merciless killing of others. He did not take actions like Nick to resist evil, but faced the coming disaster. He always said little about Nick's informing which reveals his despair for the society and develops a calm and composed personality, so he often infringes the quantity maxim. As in the text:

*"I was up at Henry's," Nick said, "and two fellows came in and tied up me and the cook, and they said they were going to kill you."
It sounded silly when he said it. Ole Anderson said nothing [12].*

This is the conversation that violates the maxim of quantity. Nick said there were two persons going to kill him, but Andreson said nothing and behaved with unusual composure. Hidden behind his composure and indifference to what Nick had said was the fact that he had been completely disappointed to the dark society. This time he did not choose to flee, nor showed fear and dread, but quietly waited for the disaster to come, ready to fight it with all his might. It also reflects Andreson's helplessness and powerlessness which produce sharp contrast to his robust figure. "He looked at the wall" is repeated seven times in the text, demonstrating his helplessness at the impending death.

(2) Violating the Maxim of Relation

There is another application of the CP that reveals Ole Andreson's personality:

*"You ought to go to the movies more. The movies are fine for a bright boy like you."
"What are you going to kill Ole Andreson for? What did he ever do to you?"
"He never had a chance to do anything to us. He never even seen us."
"And he's only going to see us once," Al said from the kitchen.
"What are you going to kill him for, then?"
George asked.
"We're killing him for a friend. Just to oblige a friend, bright boy."
"Shut up", said Al from the kitchen. "You talk too goddam much"*

"Well, I got to keep bright boy amused. Don't I, bright boy?" [12].

This is the conversation that violates the maxim of relation. The killer didn't get any useful information from George, in order to kill time, he brought up the completely irrelevant subject of movies. While George continually talked about killing, trying to dig out why they were going to kill Ole Andreson, only to find that they were killing him just for a friend. The darkness of society is revealed from this conversation, and Ole Andreson's personalities are doomed to be desperate and helpless.

Personalities of Two Killers Al and Max—Indifferent and Brutal

(1) Violating the Maxim of Quantity

From Table-2 and Table-3, it is shown that Al and Max often infringe the quantity maxim, reaching to the percentage of 57.1% and 50%. The quantity maxim requires that both parties provide the appropriate amount of information when communicating: no more or no less. While the two killers often said either too much or too little because they were deliberately trying to make a fuss, thus often violating the quantity maxim. The short story uses a straightforward approach, unfolding the plot of the story in the conversation between two killers. Conversation and language style are the most important factors in shaping these two killers. The short story does not clarify the motives of the two at the outset, but shows their unusual background and motivations in conversations:

*"What's yours?" George asked them.
"I don't know," one of the men said. "What do you want to eat Al?"
"I don't know," said Al. "I don't know what I want to eat" [12].*

This conversation violates the maxim of quantity. When George asked them what they wanted to eat, their answer was only "I don't know". Such an obscure conversation leaves the readers with an infinite amount of imagination, which is far more subtle and lays the groundwork for subsequent story development.

(2) Violating the Maxim of Manner

In the following conversations, the killers' character is even more evident:

*"What are you going to kill him for, then?"
George asked.
"We're killing him for a friend. Just to oblige a friend, bright boy." [12]*

This is the conversation that violates the maxim of manner. In the conversation the killers made no secret of their intention to kill and when talking about killing, it is as if they were talking about something very common, from which the reader can see that murder, violence and even death were commonplace at that time, and that the murderers killed

as often as he could, and they even felt proud of it. Although the author does not use an adjective to describe the cruelty of the killers, the readers can understand the indifference and brutality of the killers deeply.

Analysis of Thematic Presentation in *The Killers* under Violation of CP

There are few plots in the short story, and the characters are atypical. The theme of the story can not be understood according to the traditional typical understanding. Distinct theme of this novel is not easily perceived at first reading. The originality of Hemingway's writing is to omit the thoughts and contents for the readers to discern by themselves, which otherwise should have been expressed by another writer.

The Dark and Evil Society—Violating the Maxim of Relation

Table-4 shows there are relation maxim violation 8 times in the whole story. Although the title of the short story is *The Killers*, the protagonist is not two killers but the teenager Nick. Nick is the focus of the novel. The author exposes the darkness and cruelty of American society through Nick's eyes, ears and heart. The discovery of social evil by a young mind is the theme of the novel which is revealed by the conversation that violates the relation maxim as mentioned above. Nick is a kind-hearted and helpful boy, simple and impersonal. The story develops as Nick gradually matures, his personal experience allows him to discover the ugly and dark side of the world, that is, violence and death. The theme can also be concluded from the conversation:

"He comes here at six o'clock, don't he?"

"If he comes"

"We know all that, bright boy," Max said. "Talk about something else. Ever go to the movies?"

"Once in a while" [12].

This is the dialogue between the killer and the waiter George at the counter which violates the maxim of relation. The killer didn't get any useful information from George. In order to kill time, he brought up the completely irrelevant subject of movies. The reality is full of murder, violence and death just like in the movies, and people are physiologically and psychologically threatened. The irrelevance of the topic reveals a profound social theme.

The Uncertainty of Human Destiny—Violating the Maxim of Manner

As the previous table shows there are manner maxim violation 12 times in total. According to Grice, speakers violate the manner maxim basically in three ways: ambiguity, obscurity or failure to be brief and succinct [14]. A habit of speaking with confusion and irrelevance, i.e. a high frequency of violation against the manner maxim reveals another theme of *The*

Killers: the uncertainty of human destiny. Hemingway used the clock on the wall to create time chaos, so as to achieve an effect of time uncertainty. The fate of man was as uncertain as the clock on the wall pointing to time. Al and Max came to the restaurant to wait for Anderson, but Anderson didn't appear, which was an uncertain event. While if Anderson came to Henry's dining room as usual, he might be shot to death at the restaurant, but he didn't, which was another uncertain event. As situation changed, Anderson did not show up, leaving the two killers voluntary. But before the killers left, the restaurant staff might be shot by the killers. The fate of the restaurant staff was uncertain. Although the killers did not shoot Anderson in the dining room, he was still in danger of being shot and his fate was still uncertain. Also, as in the conversation:

"What are you going to kill him for, then?"

George asked.

"We're killing him for a friend. Just to oblige a friend, bright boy" [12].

In this conversation, George asked the killer why he was going to murder Anderson. However, the killer did not give a definite answer, only saying that they did so for a friend, which violates the maxim of manner. Just out of one person's sole idea, the professional killers were hired to carry out their duties and they did not even care who was killed. From here the humbleness of life and the uncertainty of human destiny are revealed.

The Lost Generation after the First World War—Violating the Maxim of Quantity

According to Table-4, there are 28 times of quantity maxim violation. The maxim of quantity has two rules as follows: the contribution is supposed to be as informative as it is demanded; the contribution is not supposed to be more informative than it is demanded. In the story, people either say too much or too little to show their confusion and lost. In the history of literature, the Lost Generation refers to the general name of American writers who appeared from the First World War to the Second World War. Ernest Hemingway is regarded as the Lost Generation, and his works to a large extent show his lost emotions. The so-called lost, in fact, refers to a disillusioned mood after the war, that is, the worries about people's nonideal living conditions, and it is the writer's strong reaction to the impact of war, violence and death. They are lost because the traditional values of this generation are no longer suited to the post-war world, but they cannot find a new standard of living. In *The Killers*, Hemingway's lost emotion is mainly reflected in the characters' reaction to the events, especially in Nick's conversations with others:

"I was up at Henry's," Nick said, "and two fellows came in and tied up me and the cook, and they said they were going to kill you."

It sounded silly when he said it. Ole Anderson said nothing.

.....
 "I'm going to get out of this town," Nick said.
 "Yes," said George. "That's a good thing to do."
 "I can't stand to think about him waiting in the room and knowing he's going to get it. It's too damned awful."
 "Well," said George, "you better not think about it" [12].

This is the conversation that violates the maxim of quantity. Nick told Anderson there were two persons going to kill him, but Anderson said nothing and behaved with unusual composure. Hidden behind his composure and indifference to what Nick had said was the fact that he had been completely disappointed to the dark society. While young and inexperienced Nick was surprised by Anderson's reaction, he was unable to adapt to this situation after discovering evil. Nick was a witness to the violence, and after seeing the incident, he showed a confusion, fear and overwhelming reaction.

Toward the end of the novel, Nick decided to leave the town because he was perplexed by the terrible violence as the witness of the violence. When he saw what happened, he showed a perplexed, frightened and overwhelmed reaction. He said he was to leave the town, that is, to leave Chicago, revealing the insecurity of the entire social environment. He did not say where to go; he was wandering because he felt lost, just as its creator Hemingway was.

CONCLUSION

Through the statistics and analysis of the violation of Cooperative Principle in the characters' conversations in *The Killers*, four main characters' personalities, the young waiter Nick, the boxer Ole Anderson and the two killers Al and Max are clearly displayed. Nick is innocent and kindhearted, ignorant of worldly affairs. Ole Anderson is composed and helpless, who is desperate to the dark society and yield to the reality with no resistance. Two killers Al and Max are indifferent and brutal, enjoying the pleasure of killing in apathy. Meanwhile, the multiple themes of the short story, that is, the dark and evil society, the uncertainty of human destiny and feeling at loss after the First World War, are deeply exhibited in a unique manner. We hope to help readers better understand and appreciate the masterpiece *The Killers* written by Ernest Hemingway.

In terms of theoretical implications, the results of this study prove the validity and feasibility of the analysis of literary works under violation of the Cooperative Principle. Especially in the analysis of characters' personalities and thematic presentation, the application of pragmatic approach is a good supplement.

Although the current study provides a new perspective for appreciating *The Killers*, it is not without limitations. There is still room for further research, for example, the four maxims violation of the Cooperative Principle may also be related to other aspects such as the analysis of "seven eighths", narrative style in *The Killers* or other aspects of the story, which might also be taken into consideration in order to better understand *The Killers* from the perspective of CP.

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