

Literary implicature: A pragmatic approach to meaning in short stories

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Annotation: This article explores the role of pragmatics in literary analysis, focusing on how indirect language and conversational implicature contribute to deeper meaning in short stories. Drawing on the theories of Grice, Levinson, Mey, and others, the study investigates how authors use linguistic strategies – such as elliptical dialogue, speech acts, and violations of Grice’s maxims – to shape character development and guide reader interpretation. Through a qualitative analysis of five short stories – “Hills Like White Elephants” by Ernest Hemingway, “October and June” by O. Henry, “The Birthmark” by Nathaniel Hawthorne, “The Chaser” by John Collier, and “The Appointment in Samarra” as retold by W. Somerset Maugham – the research reveals how indirect communication enriches narrative complexity and emotional depth. The findings show that authors carefully manipulate language to embed subtle clues about characters’ intentions, emotions, and internal conflicts. Pragmatic tool -implicature- not only reflects real-life conversation patterns, but also invites readers to participate actively in meaning-making. This study demonstrates that pragmatics offers a valuable framework for literary interpretation, enhancing our understanding of how language functions beneath the surface of the text.

Keywords: pragmatics, implicature, Grice’s maxims, literary linguistics, elliptical dialogue, speech acts, character development.

Литературная импликатура: Прагматический подход к значению в рассказах

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Аннотация: В данной статье рассматривается роль прагматики в литературном анализе, с акцентом на то, как косвенный язык и разговорная импликатура способствуют углублению смысла в рассказах. Основываясь на теориях Грайса, Левинсона, Мей и других, исследование анализирует, как авторы используют лингвистические стратегии – такие как эллиптический диалог, речевые акты и нарушения максима Грайса – для формирования характера и направления интерпретации читателя. Посредством качественного анализа пяти рассказов – «Холмы, как белые слоны» Эрнеста Хемингуэя, «Октябрь и Июнь» О. Генри, «Родимое пятно» Натаниэля Готорна, «Любовное зелье» Джона Коллиера и «Встреча в Самарре» в пересказе Сомерсета Моэма – исследование показывает, как косвенная коммуникация обогащает повествование сложностью и эмоциональной глубиной. Результаты свидетельствуют о том, что авторы сознательно манипулируют языком, чтобы внедрить тонкие намёки на намерения, эмоции и внутренние конфликты персонажей. Прагматический инструмент – импликатура – не только отражает закономерности реального общения, но и побуждает читателя к активному участию в процессе осмысления. Данное исследование демонстрирует, что прагматика предоставляет ценный инструментарий для литературной интерпретации, углубляя наше понимание того, как язык функционирует под поверхностью текста.

Ключевые слова: прагматика, импликатура, максима Грайса, литературная лингвистика, эллиптический диалог, речевые акты, развитие характера.

Adabiy implikatsiya: Qisqa hikoyalarda ma'noga pragmatik yondashuv

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Annotatsiya: Ushbu maqola adabiy tahlilda pragmatikaning rolini o'rganadi hamda qisqa hikoyalarda qanday qilib bilvosita til va konversatsion implikatura chuqur ma'no berishga xizmat qilishi haqida so'z yuritadi. Grays, Levinson, Mey kabi tilshunoslarning nazariyalariga asoslangan holda, tadqiqot mualliflarning til strategiyalari hisoblangan ellipsli dialog, nutq aktlari va Grays maksimalarining buzilishi kabilardan qanday foydalanishlarini tahlil qiladi. Tadqiqot doirasida beshta qisqa hikoya – Ernest Hemingueyning “Tepaliklar oq fillarga o'xshaydi”, O. Genrining “Oktabr va Iyun”, Nataniel Xotornning “Tug'ma dog'”, Jon Kollierning “Ta'qibchi” va Somerest Moem tomonidan qayta hikoya qilingan “Samarradagi uchrashuv” asarlari sifatli tahlil qilindi va ushbu hikoyalar asosida nazariyalar amaliy jihatdan ko'rib chiqildi. Natijalar shuni ko'rsatadiki, mualliflar til vositalaridan puxta foydalangan holatda qahramonlarning niyatlari, his-tuyg'ulari va ichki ziddiyatlarini yashirin tarzda ochib beradilar. Pragmatik vosita – implikatura – nafaqat real hayotdagi mulohazaga o'xshashlikni ta'minlaydi, balki o'quvchini ma'noni faol izohlashga undaydi. Ushbu tadqiqot pragmatika adabiy matnlarni talqin qilishda qanchalik muhim metod ekanligini ko'rsatadi hamda til yuzasidagi ma'noni chuqurroq anglash imkoniyatini taqdim etadi.

Kalit so'zlar: pragmatika, implikatura, Grays maksimalari, adabiy tilshunoslik, ellipsli dialog, nutq aktlari, qahramon tahlili.

INTRODUCTION

The intersection of pragmatics and literature reveals how indirect language plays a vital role in shaping meaning within short stories. Elements such as conversational implicature, speech acts, and violations of Grice's maxims allow authors to suggest more than what is explicitly stated, adding depth to characters and narrative. These linguistic strategies mirror the subtleties of real-life communication, where much is understood through implication rather than direct expression. In short fiction, where space is limited, such techniques become especially powerful tools for conveying emotion, tension, and unspoken conflict. Recognizing these pragmatic elements enhances the appreciation of how meaning is layered and how readers are invited to uncover what lies beneath the surface of the text.

One of the modern subfields of linguistics, pragmatics studies how meaning is conveyed beyond literal interpretation, surpassing semantics and syntax. According to Levinson (1983), context and speaker intention are the main determiners of meaning, and studying them is essential in literary text interpretation, where implicit meaning is prevalent. According to Mey (1999), literary pragmatics explores how writers shape their language to influence readers and establish effective communication. This field examines the ways in which linguistic elements are used strategically to engage an audience, particularly within literary works, while also considering the specific conditions under which language is interpreted. Similarly, Yule (1996) highlights that elements such as implicature, presupposition, and inference play a crucial role in how readers interpret texts beyond their literal meaning. These linguistic features enable readers to derive deeper meanings and contextual understanding, shaping their overall comprehension of a text.

Chapman (2011) argues that various approaches within pragmatics have become valuable tools for examining literary texts. This is because pragmatics focuses on language in use, and both the creation and interpretation of literary works serve as compelling examples of linguistic expression.

The growing emphasis on language use in linguistics has shifted attention toward the contextual and intertextual aspects of literary texts, in addition to their formal structures.

Short stories frequently employ indirect meaning and pragmatic implicature, conveying ideas implicitly rather than stating them outright (Grice, 1975). Grice's Cooperative Principle, along with its conversational maxims – Quality, Quantity, Relation, and Manner – illustrates how authors intentionally break linguistic norms to add depth and complexity to their narratives (Thomas, 1995).

Pragmatic meaning in literature often emerges through implicature, where words suggest more than their explicit definitions. Grice (1975) describes conversational implicature as meaning that depends on unspoken assumptions rather than direct expression. In literary works, this is frequently shown through irony and metaphor, which enable authors to convey deeper meanings without stating them outright (Black, 2006).

Mey (2001) explains that literary pragmatics differs from ordinary conversation because writers intentionally structure language and word choices to shape how readers interpret a text. Similarly, Pratt (1977) highlights the role of reader perception, emphasizing that individual cultural and personal experiences influence how meaning is understood.

The lexical and syntactic choices within a text play a crucial role in shaping implicit meaning. Simpson (2004) emphasizes that authors often employ minimalist language, as seen in Hemingway's works, to introduce ambiguity, thereby compelling readers to actively infer meaning. Similarly, Stubbs (2001) explains that word frequency and collocations contribute to textual cohesion, subtly embedding hidden connotations. By carefully selecting words and structures, authors guide interpretation while leaving room for multiple readings.

Culpeper (2001) applies pragmatics to character analysis, arguing that an author's choice of words and use of indirect speech acts play a key role in shaping a character's personality and hidden motivations. Furthermore, Short (1996) highlights that literary devices such as irony and euphemisms often serve as subtle indicators of a character's true intentions, allowing authors to convey meaning without making it explicitly clear. Through these linguistic strategies, writers create depth and complexity in their characters, encouraging readers to engage in interpretative analysis.

METHODS

In this research article, we analyzed various short stories to uncover the authors' pragmatic intentions and how they expressed them through linguistic strategies. Specifically, we examined "Hills Like White Elephants" by Ernest Hemingway, "October and June" by O. Henry, "The Birthmark" by Nathaniel Hawthorne, "The Chaser" by John Collier, and "The Appointment in Samarra" as retold by W. Somerset Maugham.

We employed a qualitative research method, using text analysis to identify pragmatic implicatures, the importance of the dialogue in character development, and violations of Grice's maxims. Through this approach, we explored how indirect meaning emerges in literary texts—whether through elliptical dialogue and word choice. By analyzing speech acts and conversational implicature, we aimed to reveal how these authors strategically manipulate language to guide interpretation and influence readers' perceptions.

RESULTS

The first story that we analyzed is "Hills Like White Elephants" by Ernest Hemingway. The story is written implicitly, revealing the topic of abortion and a young couple's struggle in solving this problem. However, the author never uses the word "abortion"; instead, he subtly employs different euphemisms, implicatures, hints, and metaphors to convey the real purpose of that operation. Some of the linguistic reflections of the authors' pragmatic purpose include "It tastes like licorice," and her partner replies, "That's the way with everything," "Everything tastes of licorice. Especially, all the things you've waited so long for, like absinthe", "On this side, there was no shade and no trees" and "On the other side, were fields of grain and trees along the banks of the Ebro". Besides, using different speech acts, the American tries to convince his partner to "let the air in", asserting her "It's really an awfully simple operation, Jig", "It's not really an operation at all".

The next story is by O. Henry, “October and June”. This story is characterized by its twisted plot, surprising the reader by defeated expectancy. While readers expect the captain to be older than the lady at the end of the story, they discover that the lady is in her womanhood, while the captain is young and has just reached his early young adulthood years. The implicatures and presuppositions used by the author include: “his faded uniform, stained and worn by weather and service”, “veteran”, “He carried his years well”, “Truly, Fate and Father Time had tricked him sorely” and many others.

Another story that we scrutinized is “The Birthmark” by Nathaniel Hawthorne, which questions people’s morality over the craving for perfection. The scientist Aylmer tries to remove the birthmark on his beloved wife’s face to enjoy her full beauty. Despite being successful, he loses his wife, whose link to life was through this birthmark. Pragmatic linguistic marks that the author employed include: mark as a sign of “eventual sadness, sickness and death”, “the birthmark would stand out like a red jewel on white stone”, “...many of his experiments had ended in failure”, and so on.

The next interesting story is by John Collier called “The Chaser”, and it explores the theme of manipulation of forced emotions and its unpleasant consequences in a metaphorical way. To unveil his intentions, the author brings alive a “clean gloves” shopper, the customer in search of a “love potion”, and through dialogue, readers can get acquainted with other implicatures, including “Do you know the price of this?”, “The customers come back, later in life, when they are better off, and want more expensive things”, “Au revoir” and many others.

“The Appointment in Samarra” written by S. Maugham, is a quite short, but impressive story using irony on the topic of the inevitability of fate and death. The narrator is Death, and implicatures used by the author include “She looked at me and made a threatening gesture”, “little while the servant came back, white and trembling”, “...it was only a start of surprise”, “I was astonished to see him in Bagdad, for I had an appointment with him tonight in Samarra”

DISCUSSION

Now, we will analyze how various short stories implement different linguistic strategies, such as implicature, presupposition, speech acts, irony, and violation of Grice’s maxims, to shape meaning and guide the reader’s interpretation.

One of the effective ways of implying implicitness in literary texts is implicatures. They help to convey the message without stating it explicitly. In the stories mentioned above, implicatures add deeper meaning and help to shape the aesthetic impression of the text. For instance, in the short story “Hills Like White Elephants” the title itself is a metaphorical implicature referring to elephants as a pregnancy, and it is seen as something useless or troublesome, like the white elephants that are expensive and difficult to keep and maintain. Another metaphorical implicature that was illustrated in the conversation is when Jig says, “It tastes like licorice,” her partner replies, “That’s the way with everything.” And he gets the answer “Everything tastes of licorice. Especially, all the things you’ve waited so long for, like absinthe”. In that example, the partners aren’t talking about the beverage, but they are referring to the pregnancy. From Jig’s expression, it is noticeable that she waited for her pregnancy while her partner found it irritating and bitter. In addition, the author uses two controversial expository views in the course of the story, indicating a childless life picturing “On this side, there was no shade and no trees” and life without them depicting “On the other side, were fields of grain and trees along the banks of the Ebro”. Here author also illustrates Jig’s emotional dilemma in front of the challenging decision. Observing greenery on the other side, Jig deeply believes if they have children, they “... could have all this” and “Once they take it away, you never get it back,” implying that if she loses her baby, nothing replaces it.

The “October and June” also extensively illustrates implicatures denoting characters’ ages, ultimately being a barrier to their happiness. Despite the author doesn’t reveal their age, he hints indirectly at their age several times, describing their appearance and behavior. For instance, Captain’s “...faded uniform, stained and worn by weather and service”, “...those old days of war’s alarms”, “veteran”, “...strong and rugged, he had position and wealth” imply that the Captain is a mature and strong middle-aged man. Also, the author writes that the Captain, who “had been distinguished for

his decisiveness and energy, “had lost his battle” revealing the fact that Theodora rejects him, and this deeply hurts him. The implicit meaning of the word battle is “love” or “proposal” indicating that this is the only thing that the Captain couldn’t win. However, at the end of the story the author reveals that the woman who had “a smile that was free from embarrassment” and was “in the bloom of lovely womanhood “...must be twenty-eight, at the very kindest calculation”. Most of the time, young girls tend to get embarrassed when they talk with representatives of the other gender. Still, here, the author subtly indicates that the woman is not much younger than the man, but instead, she is older than him by stating her facial expressions and behavior. In O. Henry’s “October and June,” the contrasting ages and perspectives of the Captain and Mrs. Theodora unfold through subtle linguistic cues, blending youthful idealism with seasoned realism.

The story “The Birthmark” is also rich in illustrative examples of implicatures. The story narrates about a gifted scholar’s passion and obsession for idealism, which he demands even in his love and beloved person. He couldn’t love someone if that person were not enthusiastic about his scientific studies, thus, his love was conditional or secondary compared to his love for science. It was implicitly stated in the following sentence: “His love for his young wife could only be stronger of the two if it could link itself with his love of science.”

The sentence “Aylmer saw the mark as a sign of his wife’s eventual sadness, sickness and death” implicitly suggests that the scholar sees the mark not only as a physical drawback but also a symbolic sign of torture and bad luck. It also states that the scientist fears imperfection and it can lead him into harm. Even though the author didn’t state them directly, the hidden meaning can be encoded pragmatically.

Although Aylmer was an experienced scientist, the author hints that he had various failed experiences, and his wife witnesses it: “She could not help see that many of his experiments had ended in failure”. In this sentence, the author not only informs the reader about Aylmer’s questionable abilities, but also Georgina’s hidden struggles, doubt and concern. Here she tries not to judge and support his husband’s effort, but she clearly sees that failures are undeniable. But she is still ready to take risks, signaling her devoted love for his husband over her life and personal needs.

On the other hand, Aylmer also was not confident about his success: “He was nervous and pale as death as he worked on preparing a liquid”. The implicit meaning of the sentence is that the scientist is working hard on the creation of liquid, and he is well aware of its importance. Thus, his emotions are seen on her face, demonstrating his fear of failure, which foreshadows the death of his beloved wife. Despite having excessive self-doubt and hesitation, he is unrepentant and keeps holding on to his desire to change his wife’s shortage on her face, risking her life and health.

In the sentence “Georgiana realized that her husband had been hiding his tension and fear,” we can see that they are well aware of their emotional state, but still they didn’t discuss it. It is the violation of Grice’s Maxim of manner when two interlocutors are ambiguous and obscure, they can fail in effective communication. The lack of their communication suggests that they are emotionally distant and not united in one desirable goal. While Aylmer tries to please himself, creating perfection for his eyes, his wife only tries to please her husband and gain his love and trust. However, soon she realizes that: “...his mind would forever be on the march, always requiring something newer, better and more perfect”. This sentence indicates that Georgiana has already discovered her husband’s obsessive nature and she is mindful of what she is sacrificing. She is assuming that in the future this cycle never ends and could lead to the more tragic consequences. It also reveals that in their marriage, Georgina should always obey him to save their family by perfecting herself in different senses.

At the end of the story their experiment turns to be successful as get rid of the birthmark, but the author indicates that Georgiana falls ill. Her unwell state is said to implicitly show her physical state: “She was so pale”. Here, Georgina loses her natural complexion because of her ruined physical strength, illness, and exhaustion. She is no longer happy even her husband jumps out of his success.

The strongest line from the story is told by Georgiana at the verge of her tragic death: “My poor Aylmer,” she said gently. “You have aimed so high. With so high and pure a feeling, you have rejected

the best the Earth could offer. I am dying, dearest.” The line implicitly states that Georgiana believes that Aylmer caused their suffering, and now he has to pay its price by losing his imperfect, but beloved wife. However, she is being polite even in this state, indicating that her love is bigger than her anger. Additionally, she is of the opinion that Earth is not the place of perfections and the use of “you have rejected the best the Earth could offer” indicates that her imperfect life was the best that he couldn’t accept because of his obsession. Her tone of voice “said gently” illustrates her acceptance of death, still not directly blaming her dear husband and even forgiving him for her fatal destruction.

A different tale brimming with implicatures is “The Chaser,” written by John Collier including themes of love, obsession and manipulation. Through the interaction between a naïve young man and a mysterious old apothecary, the story critiques how forced and controlled love can lead to unintended consequences of desire. Rich in implicature and double meanings, the story leaves readers questioning whether true love can – or should – be manufactured.

At the story’s outset, the naïve young man appears unaware of the deeper implications behind the apothecary’s trade and questions him. Then he gets the answer: “My dear sir,” replied the old man, “my stock in trade is not very large-I don’t deal in laxatives and teething mixtures-but such as it is, it is varied. I think nothing I sell has effects which could be precisely described as ordinary.” Here he subtly reveals that his trade is far beyond ordinary despite its small numbers. He prioritizes the quality and power of his products over the numbers and doesn’t want to be treated as “ordinary.”

The old, mysterious man never directly calls his products poison; instead, he uses euphemisms that soften the dark side of his trade. Expressions like “glove-cleaner” or “life-cleaner” cleverly conceal the life-threatening nature of the liquids he offers. By using such vague and ironic language, he masks the danger, making something sinister sound almost harmless – and in doing so, reveals just how deceptive and morally ambiguous his business truly is. Here he violates Grice’s Maxim of manner as he is being intentionally vague and indirect.

The old man’s dialogue about his unusual trade not only uncovers the secrets of his business but also shows his morals. For example, when he says: “Young people who need a love potion very seldom have five thousand dollars. Otherwise, they would not need a love potion.”, he indicates that the love potions are cheaper than other types of poisons, because young and poor people cannot afford high prices. If they had enough money, they could attract anyone easily. This quote contains conversational implicature – the old man never says outright that love potions are for the poor or desperate, or that wealth substitutes love – but these ideas are clearly implied through his tone, word choice, and ironic logic.

When the apothecary describes his love potions, he uses positive-sounding words like “bountifully,” “insistently,” and “everlastingly” is an example of how his language masks the negative consequences of the potions. While these terms may initially seem like they suggest desirable effects, they actually imply the dangerous, overwhelming nature of the potions. The permanent effects of the potions are not something that can be easily undone, and the repetition of “insistently” and “everlastingly” suggests that their influence will be uncontrollable and oppressive. Thus, the old man uses implicature to downplay the negative aspects of his potions and make them seem more appealing, despite their true nature.

Later, the old man’s statement, “That is just a dollar,” stating the price of love potion subtly reveals a deeper, manipulative strategy. While the price of the potion seems like a bargain, it implies that the old man is using a gateway product to lure the young man into his trade. The low cost makes the potion seem harmless, yet it serves as a precursor to the much more expensive and dangerous \$5000 poison that the old man expects the young man to return for. This euphemistic pricing technique subtly suggests the old man’s manipulative intent, drawing the young man in with a seemingly harmless initial purchase before exploiting his desperation for something far more lethal. Through this, Collier highlights the old man’s understanding of human nature, turning a simple transaction into a long-term, dangerous business plan.

After the purchase, the young man is about to leave happily and contentedly, saying “Good bye,” which is answered with “Au revoir” by the old man, which means “Goodbye until we meet again”. Here, the man subtly asserts that the young man will come back again for the more expensive and dangerous liquids.

W. Somerset Maugham’s short story called “The Appointment in Samarra” also includes bright examples of implicature despite its very short size. The implicatures in both sentences highlight a sense of inevitability and fate that transcends the characters’ immediate actions. In the first example, “I was astonished to see him in Bagdad, for I had an appointment with him tonight in Samarra,” the implication is that the character’s attempt to change their fate, by meeting someone in Bagdad instead of Samarra, was futile because they ultimately were destined to meet in Samarra. It suggests a theme of inescapable destiny. Similarly, the second implicature, “lend me your horse, and I will ride away from this city and avoid my fate,” implies that the character believes escaping the city will allow them to avoid their predetermined doom, yet the concept of fate suggests this attempt is equally futile. Both sentences convey a tragic irony, as the characters’ belief in their ability to change their fate is undermined by the inevitability of it.

Conversations can also serve to reveal a character’s true nature, as they expose their authentic traits through communication. In the story “The Birthmark,” when Georgiana says, “Life is not worth living while this hateful mark makes me the object of your horror,” “Then let the attempt be made at any risk,” and “I do not need proof.” her character is discovered and deduced that she is selfless and devoted wife who prioritizes her husband’s comfort over hers.

Another method that writers use to insert implicatures is through the violation of Grice’s maxims. Grice’s maxims—Quantity, Quality, Relation, and Manner—are conversational principles that help guide communication effectively. Writers often intentionally violate these maxims to create implicit meanings and provoke deeper interpretation. As an instance, In Hills Like White Elephants by Ernest Hemingway, the line “Would you please please please please please please please stop talking?” reflects the emotional tension and frustration in the conversation between the American man and Jig, violating the Maxim of Manner. The repetition suggests that she is at her breaking point, unable to handle the intensity of the conversation any longer. In this context, her words implicitly convey her fear, confusion, and the emotional strain of the decision she’s being asked to make.

In “Appointment in Samarra”, the sentence “She looked at me and made a threatening gesture” reflects a violation of Grice’s Maxim of Manner. The description of the gesture as “threatening” creates ambiguity, making it unclear exactly what was intended by the gesture. The lack of specificity in how the gesture is portrayed leaves room for interpretation and adds to the emotional tension in the scene. This indirectness in communication enhances the theme of miscommunication and uncertainty, contributing to the sense of inevitable fate that runs throughout the story.

In “The Chaser”, the old man’s question, “Do you know the price of this?” involves a violation of Grice’s Maxim of Manner. By asking this question, the old man introduces ambiguity and a level of indirectness. Instead of directly stating that the life-cleaner (poison) is too expensive for the young lover, he implies it through the question. This lack of clarity forces the young man to reflect on the cost, heightening the tension and adding an air of uncertainty to the interaction. The indirectness emphasizes the gravity of the situation, as the young lover is unknowingly stepping into a dangerous and irreversible decision, highlighting the story’s theme of the unforeseen consequences of one’s actions.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, this study highlights the power of language in shaping character development and revealing deeper themes within short stories. By analyzing the pragmatic implicatures, dialogue, and violations of Grice’s maxims in works such as “Hills Like White Elephants” by Ernest Hemingway, “October and June” by O. Henry, “The Birthmark” by Nathaniel Hawthorne, “The Chaser” by John Collier, and “The Appointment in Samarra” by W. Somerset Maugham, we have seen how authors skillfully use indirect communication to add complexity to their narratives. These

linguistic strategies not only enhance the richness of the text but also guide readers toward a more nuanced understanding of characters and themes. Ultimately, the use of conversational implicature serves as a tool for authors to subtly influence interpretation, inviting readers to look beyond the surface and uncover the deeper meanings embedded in the dialogue.

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