

Shift of power in David Mamet's Oleanna: a study within Grice's cooperative principles

Dayani, Roksana; Amjad, Fazel Asadi

Veröffentlichungsversion / Published Version
Zeitschriftenartikel / journal article

Empfohlene Zitierung / Suggested Citation:

Dayani, R., & Amjad, F. A. (2016). Shift of power in David Mamet's Oleanna: a study within Grice's cooperative principles. *International Letters of Social and Humanistic Sciences*, 72, 76-82. <https://nbn-resolving.org/urn:nbn:de:101:1-2019080411593001782821>

Nutzungsbedingungen:

Dieser Text wird unter einer CC BY Lizenz (Namensnennung) zur Verfügung gestellt. Nähere Auskünfte zu den CC-Lizenzen finden Sie hier:
<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/deed.de>

Terms of use:

This document is made available under a CC BY Licence (Attribution). For more Information see:
<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0>

Shift of Power in David Mamet's *Oleanna*: A Study within Grice's Cooperative Principles

Roksana Dayani^{1,a*}, Fazel Asadi Amjad^{2,b}

¹ MA graduate of English Literature, Kharazmi University (Tehran), Tehran, Iran

² Associate Professor of English Literature, Department of Literature and Human Science, Kharazmi University (Tehran), Mofatteh Ave. No.49, P.O.Box 15719_14911, Tehran, Iran

^a roksanadayani@ymail.com, ^b asadi@khu.ac.ir

Keywords: *Oleanna*, Grice, Exchange of Power, Conversational Implicatures, Cooperative Principles, violation of Maxims.

Abstract. This article is devoted to analyze verbal interactions in *Oleanna* [1993] within Grice's Cooperative Principles [1975] in order to illustrate how the shift of power gradually takes place in the academic discourse of the play. Maxims of this principle are applied on John's utterances in the first act on which the foundation of asymmetric relationship is laid. As expected within Grice's framework, the breaching of maxims, besides their observation, is performed by John through four ways of violating, opting out, clashing and flouting. The conversational implicatures consequently generating from the flouting of some maxims, most frequently of quality, and quantity, conflict with Carol's assumptions about the state of professorship in academic context which motivate her for gaining power. The study, thereby, aims to demonstrate how clashing and flouting of maxims by John make him weak to Carol's new voice and culminate in reversal in teacher-student relationship in the play.

Introduction

The need to uncover the underlying account of exchange of power, as a pivotal question of *Oleanna*, in conversation between John the professor and Carol the student, demands the application of Grice's Co-operative Principle on their interactions. The fact that professor's verbal contributions are manifestation of Carol's accusation against him suggests that Mamet has manipulated the language in a way that the talk exchange between John and Carol brings about role-reversal between them. Demanding participants to have effective exchange of information and thus co-operative efforts in their conversational contribution, Grice makes his CP suitable candidate for our aim of revealing how the shift of power and professor's consequence loss of his power have gradually taken place in this process. In *Oleanna*, what left Carol in uproar and in consequence corroborated the shift of power is the absent of this conversational cooperation that she couldn't have found in John's verbal contribution. While characters pursue their objectives and motivations through using language, Grice's emphasis on conversational implicatures make it convenient to examine how John does (not) make his contribution such as is required by accepted purpose of conversation in which he is engaged and how Carol achieves some possible conversational implicatures from John's particular purpose. While an exchange of power is considered as a linguistic conflict of this play, the previous studies mostly focus on defined aspect of power as a conflict of play. The issue of power is examined in relation to the institution of education by some scholars like Silverston and Garner Jr [1,2]. Whereas Kulmala defines *Oleanna* as dramatization of power struggle over habitus, the concept proposed by Bourdieu, a struggle for self-serving goal and survival in capitalistic society is the conflict of play for Maclead, Rayan and Piette[3,4,5,6,7]. Nevertheless, C.W.E Bigby's view, language as a characters' battleground, and Brenda Murphy's emphasis on the significant of language are more approximate to the approach of this study [8,9]. Regardless to the initial aim of John and Carol in gaining power over each other or to the especial kind of power, we sought to illuminate Mamet's main subjects in this play which are human interaction and the use of language.

Even so previous studies have adopted different perspectives for reading *Oleanna*; they hardly ever carried out close analysis of John's linguistic interaction. Namely, it is character's linguistic battleground in the first act that eventually paved the way for the exchange of power. The point which turns our attention to Grice's CP is final Carol's complain and accusation calling John's contribution uncooperative. To examine the gradual occurrence of shift of power, we aim at considering professor's conversational contribution within the frameworks of CP's maxims. Hence this study will provide pragmatics perspective on professor's interaction and presents more comprehensive outlook on Carol's claims than those concise points of view restrictedly interpreting her utterances as pointing only to concepts of sexual harassment and political correctness. Present study will defer to Mamet's statement that his characters "are absolutely both wrong and they are absolutely both right" [8].

To apply Cooperation Maxims on conversational interactions of professor, it is necessary to consider Mamet's dramatic strategy stimulating the process of John's downfall. In the first act, the balance sheet relationship between John and Carol as professor and student is evident. Thus, John's breaking or observing maxims should be unearthed considering the academic discourse of play. Whereas in the first act, both characters are playing within teacher-student relationship, in the second and more shocking third acts the balance of this power relationship shift. It is owing to Grice's focus on the determinative role of hearer in considering the language of speaker (un)cooperative that the two final acts become master keys containing Carol's implicatures and interpretations of John's utterances of the first act. Examining the exchange of power as the dramatic tension of play, we need to illuminate the power difference between John and Carol. According to C. West and D.H Zimmerman there are three types of participant identities ;master identities, situated identities and discourse identities [10]. Under the first and second category , concerning respectively the dimensions of age, sex, social class and particular social setting like identities of professor and student, John has power over Carol as a young, female and lower class student. Following the third type, which constantly shifts between discourse participants, the power relation of John and Carol is dynamic in that the socially powerless participant can momentarily gain power over socially powerful participant in particular encounter. In an attempt to investigate the linguistic occurrence of exchange of power in *Oleanna*, this study first focuses on brief review of Cooperative Principles proposed by Grice. Then, it demonstrates the application of cooperation maxims to John's conversational exchanges such that the gradual occurrence of shift of power will be revealed. The final hope of this paper is to explore break of these maxims that are variably performed by John as striving to maintain the general purpose of conversation.

H. G Grice's [1975] theory of meaning has made one of the most important contributions to the study of pragmatics .The concern of his theory is on the speaker's intended meaning besides the inferential ability of the interlocutor(s) [11]. What Grice observed in those conversational exchanges was cooperative efforts which embrace the speaker's intention and the hearer's inference of speaker's intention in specific situations. Thus, the Cooperative Principle [CP] is as such: "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" [12] Likewise, Grice proposed four conversational maxims governing the rules of conversation: 1) quantity: 'do not make your contribution more informative than is required; 2) quality: do not say what you believe to be false or that for which you lack evidence; 3) relation: be relevant; and, 4) manner: be brief and orderly' [12]. There being adherence to the CP and its maxims, the normal assumption in the production and interpretation of utterances will be represented in that speakers produce and interpret utterances that are satisfactorily informative, true, relevant, and perspicuous. Nevertheless, apart from his prime interest in understanding those situations in which a speaker adheres to the CP, it is more prominent for him when the speaker i) 'violates one or more maxims outright, ii) explicitly opts out of them, iii) fulfills one maxim only to clash with another, or iv) blatantly flouts or exploits a maxim to lead the hearer to construct an inference or a conversational implicature' [12]. A conversational implicature is an inference about "speaker meaning that is both triggered by the speaker's obvious failure to fulfill one or more of the maxims and constructed by the hearer in order to preserve the

assumption that the speaker is nonetheless adhering to the more global CP [13]. The present study set about to examine the salient and gradual emergence of shift of power throughout the play while culminates in John's downfall.

Discussion

From the beginning of the first act, the professor's contribution challenged Carol's assumption about the power of professor, who should know more than other people do. His answer to Carol's question is less informative and suggests that John doesn't know the exact meaning of "terms of art":

JOHN. What is a "term of art"? It seems to mean a term, which has come, through its use, to mean something more specific than the words would, to someone not acquainted with them...indicate. That, I believe, is what a "term of art", would mean. [Pause]
CAROL. You don't know what it means...? [14]

It doesn't mean that John has opt out from observing the quantity maxim in that he has just clashed this maxim to fulfill quality maxim which demands saying what you believe is true [12]. Nevertheless, the unpleasant outcome of John's utterance can be traced in Carol's assumption suggesting she can't accept that a professor can forget the meaning of concepts [14]. It would expect that Carol assumes the professor as un-cooperative, and it seems that they don't have any common ground. According to Webber, in Carol's teaching schemata, the lecturer is expert in all area while in John's the lecturer can tell the students what he thinks and then they (the student) decide [15]. In the next part, John's honesty following quality maxim has been emerged as the break of this maxim when he denies Carol's reasons and expresses what he believes is true [12]:

Carol: I'm doing what I'm told. I bought your book, I read your...
JOHN. No, I'm sure you...
CAROL. No....it's difficult for me.../ the language, the "things" that you say...
JOHN. I'm sorry I don't think that's true.
CAROL. Why would I ...?
JOHN / I'll tell you why: you're an incredibly bright girl./ you have no problem with the..
CAROL. ... I have problems...
JOHN....every...
CAROL. ...I come from different social.../ a different economic...
JOHN...Look:/Yes. Quite... (Pause)
CAROL. I read your book. I read it. I don't under...
JOHN.... You don't understand it.
CAROL. No.
JOHN. Well, perhaps it's not well written...
CAROL. (Simultaneously with "written"): No. No. No. I want to understand it [14].

With regard to Carol's constant need in John's understanding and acceptance of her difficult situation, it is likely that the quality maxim can carry greater weight. Nevertheless, Carol complains about John that he should show "responsibility to the young" and understand that they (students) "overcome economics" to get to this school [14]. Even, we can observe the result in the other parts of final act when Carol forces confession out of John that he really thinks that her characteristic is not pleasant. In his response Carol states that "Isn't that better? And I feel that that is the first moment which you've treated me with respect. For you told me the truth." [14]. Effectively, Carol has accused John of violating quality maxim.

Similarly, John flouts Relevance maxim on the level of what is said but on the level of what is implicature he has spoken relatively. However, it makes him near to his downfall when he inadvertently questions Carol's assumption that the professor is willing and knows how to help the student [15]:

CAROL. “Virtual warehousing of the young”.../ And about “The Curse of Modern Education.”

JOHN. Look. It’s just a course, it’s just a book, it’s just a...

CAROL. No. No. There are people out there. People who came here. To know something they didn’t know. Who came here. To be helped. To be helped... So someone would help them [14].

It would be expected that John flouts that maxim to implies, regarding to his teaching schemata, that misunderstanding of books and the course is not failure for student[15]. Nevertheless, Carol’s insistence urge to understand something and be helped in response to John shows her dissatisfaction at his answer and in consequence she infers other than what was John’s purpose where purpose of cooperation is out of question.

In the middle of the play, taking a long turn of speaking to talk about his story of being called stupid and his mystery, John flouts quantity maxim which demands that the contribution should not be more informative than what is required [12]:

JOHN. I was brought up, and my earliest and most persistent memories are of being told that I Was stupid. “You have such intelligence. Why must you behave so stupidly?” Or, “can’t you understand?” And I could not understand. I could not understand.

CAROL. What?...

CAROL. What was the mystery?

JOHN. How people learn. How I could learn. Which is what I’ve been speaking of in class. And of course you can’t hear it. Of course you can’t. (Pause) I used to speak of “real people,” and wonder what the real people did. The real people. Who were they? They were the people other than myself. The good people. The capable people. The people who could do the things, I could not do: learn, study, retain ... all that garbage – which is what I have been talking of in class, and that’s exactly what I have been talking of ...[14].

According to Grice, what is considered important in flouting maxims is the implicature it emerges [12]. Thus, John has purported to “engage Carol in social awareness” and inform her that what we know is based on what we are ‘told’ by those who are recognized as authority and to sympathize with Carol that he had the same feeling as Carol has [3]. Carol’s surprise at hearing this story and mystery shows that she cannot believe past failure of professor and interprets it so differently from John’s implicature: “all your stories. All your silly weak guilt, it’s all about privilege” [14]. As Grice states, “overinformativeness is confusing since it is liable to raise side issues and also lead to indirect effect in that the hearer may be misled by thinking that there is some particular point in the provision of too much information ” [12]. Consequently, the point that Carol has taken can be indirect effect of breaking quantity maxim. Effectively, Kulmala believes that John “becomes less than a professor when divulging his current professional conflict” [3]. Moreover, John’s adherence to honesty causes him to follow quality maxim in expense of breaking quantity maxim; the preference that is called clashing by [12]. And what it yields in result is disclosing John’s unconventional attitude towards learning, “all that garbage”, which he couldn’t have learned. Indeed, John’s conversational operation can unwittingly shatter Carol’s illusion about himself as an ideal professor who lacks competence for participating in school [3].

Similarly, in the following parts, John is providing ample motivation for Carol’s reversal at the later acts by clashing quantity maxim with quality maxim. This infringement is on the assumption that John is aware that to say less than what is required would be to say what is false that will infringe quality maxim:

JOHN. “Of course I have problems/ ...with my wife...with my work...I came late to teaching. And I found it artificial. The notion of “I know and you don’t know”; and I saw an *exploitation* in the education process...I hated school, I hated teachers... I was going to fail...I was just no goddamned good...[14].

John belittles old fashioned Socratic method or what he calls ‘the notion of I know and you don’t’. It is the notion, which builds up “Carol’s teaching schema” [15]. Besides devaluing Carol’s educational value, John makes his authority vulnerable since it can disprove Carol’s assumption that professor has absolute knowledge and is helpful [15]. Therefore, Carol finds it reasonable to accuse him in this way: “you are exploitative” [14].

John’s continuous adherence to quality maxim in introducing the deceiving nature of the test and informing Carol about the invalidity of Tenure Committee will also destroy his academic position:

The tests, you see, which you encounter, in school, in college, in life, were designed, in the most part, for idiots. By idiots. There is no need to fail at them. They are not a test of your worth. They are a test of your ability to retain and spout back misinformation. Of course you fail them. Nonsense.../They’re garbage. They’re a joke...Look at me. Look at me. The Tenure Committee. The Tenure Committee. Come to judge me. The Bad Tenure Committee. The “Test.” Do you see? They put me to the test. Why, they had people voting on me I wouldn’t employ to wax my car [14].

Tracking Carol’s strong complains against John makes it evident that John has violated quality maxim since, on the one hand, he denies the value of system of testing by which Carol has attempted to be accepted in academic place. On the other hand, John has denied the value of tenure committee. Devaluing the test and the committee is in fact disproving what Carol knows as absolute and defined function [15]:

“You have the power. To transgress whatever norms have been established for us. You believe not in freedom of thought but in an elitist, in, in a protected hierarchy which rewards you. You mock and exploit the system which pays your rent/ you pick those things which you feel *advance* you: publication, tenure, and the steps to get them you call “harmless rituals” and you perform those steps...to the aspiration of your students. Of *hardworking students*..” [14].

The same scenario is still enacted when John seeks to inform Carol about the “sick game of education”. In this sense, besides criticizing “the hazing nature of education”, John is inadvertently comparing the typical “student’s undergraduate to hazing or ‘ritualized annoyance’” which devalues Carol. Carol’s accusation can illuminate this fact that while John has observed quality maxim by saying what he believes is true, Carol considers it as violating due to distorting her values [16,12]: “You call education “hazing,” and from your so-protected, so-elitist seat you hold our confusion as a joke, and our hopes and efforts with it” [14].

Next to the end of the first act, John provides more information than what is required in response to Carol’s question:

CAROL... To make me mad is your job?

JOHN...Listen: (Pause)... When I was young somebody told me, are you ready, the rich copulate less often than the poor. But when they do, they take more of their clothes off. Years. Years, mind you, I would compare experiences of my own to this dictum, saying, aha, that fits the norm, or ah, this is a variation from it. What did it mean? Nothing. It was some jerk thing, some school kid told me that took up room inside my head. (Pause) Somebody told you, and you hold it as an article of faith, that higher education is an unassailable good. This notion is so dear to you that when I question it you become angry. Good. Good, I say. Are not those the very things which we should question? [14]

John’s contribution has provided more information that is required and thus not in accordance with quantity maxim. This infringement (clashing) can be explained on the supposition that John is aware that to provide less explanation for his notion would be to say something that infringe manner maxim [12]. Therefore he has to be “overinformative” to clarify his purpose to avoid being ambiguous [12]. Moreover, John has expected Carol to make connection between his story and the

notion of “capricious system” [3]. John’s purpose is to provoke Carol to think critically and not to believe whatever is told to her [15]. However, Carol calls John “sexist” and writes down in her notebook that John has “told a rambling, sexually explicit story” [14]. It is evident that Carol couldn’t have understood John’s implicature. In every talk exchange, as Grice states, this general assumption preserved by every participant that both has the purpose of having effective exchange of information and therefore the game of conversation is still playing when the participant tried to be cooperative [12]. Nevertheless, Carol, during her conversation with the professor, while finding him unwilling to help, has uncovered sufficient reasons to suppose that the professor has been opting out from operation of Cooperative Principles, and in result, enough motives for gaining power over her professor.

Conclusions

Considering the play’s underlying, gradual occurrence of exchange of power through Grice’s Cooperative Principles, we can observe that Carol gradually inquires that her professor has not maintained the purpose of being cooperative in his conversation by violating maxims and that he is not helpful. For the purpose of making his student think critically and freely about the real nature of education and learning, John clashes quantity maxim with quality maxim. He makes his contribution more informative while trying to reveal sick game of education, testing and school system. According to Grice warning, overinformativeness of an utterance would mislead hearer by thinking that there may be particular point in the excessive provision of information. Consequently, Carol has taken this point that John “has worked twenty years to insult her” rather than understanding the real purpose of professor’ excessive information. Thus, we can observe that Carol increasingly and gradually finds John’s contribution against the maxims; uninformative, dishonest, irrelevant and finds adequate and reasonable evidences for uproar and gaining power against his professor. The salient reflection of her frustration of John’s cooperative contribution can be provided by her latest complain: “You see. I don’t think that I need your help. I don’t think I need anything you have”. /” you think you are going to show me some “light”?”

References:

- [1] Marc Silverstein, “We’re Just Human”: Oleanna and Cultural Crisis, *South Atlantic Review*. 60 (1995) 103-120.
- [2] Jr. Garner, B. Stanton, ‘Framing the Classroom: Pedagogy, Power, Oleanna, *Theatre Topics*. 10(1) (2000) 39-52.
- [3] Dan Kulmala, Let's take the mysticism out of it, shall we?": Habitus as Conflict in Mamet's Oleanna, *Journal of Dramatic Theory and Criticism*. 2 (2007) 101-124.
- [4] Pierre Bourdieu, *Field of Cultural Production*, Randal Johnson. (Ed) New York, Columbia University Press, 1993.
- [5] Christin Macleod, The Politics of Gender, Language and Hierarchy in Mamet's Oleanna. *Journal of American studies*. 95(2) (1995) 199-213
- [6] Steve Ryan, Oleanna: David Mamet’s Power Play, *Modern Drama*. 39(3) (1996) 392.
- [7] Alan Piette, The Devil’s Advocate: David Mamet’s Oleanna and Political Correctness in: Marc Maufort (Ed), *Staging Difference: Cultural Pluralism in American Theatre and Drama*, New York, Peter Lang, 1995.
- [8] C.W.E. Bigsby, David Mamet: All True Stories in: Harold Bloom(Ed), *Bloom’s Critical View: David Mamet*, Philadelphia: Chelsea House Publisher, 2004. pp.163-202. Originally published in *Modern American Drama* (Cambridge University Press, 2000).

-
- [9] Brenda Murphy, *Oleanna: Language and Power* in: Christopher Bigsby (Ed), the Cambridge Companion to David Mamet, New York, Cambridge University Press, 2004, pp. 124-136.
- [10] C. West, D.H. Zimmerman, *Gender, Language and Discourse* in: T.A. van Dijk(Ed), *Handbook of Discourse Analysis* 4, London, Academic Press, 1985, pp. 103– 24.
- [11] J. Cesar Felix-Brasdefer, *Politeness in Mexico and the United States: A contrastive study of the realization and perception of refusals*, John Benjamin Publisher, 2008.
- [12] H.P. Grice, *Logic and Conversation* in P. Cole and J. Morgan (Eds.) *Syntax and Semantics*, New York, Academic press, 1975, pp. 4-5.
- [13] R. Arundale, *Pragmatics, Implicature, and Conversation* in K. Fitch & R. Sanders (Eds.), *Handbook of language and social interaction*, Mahwah: Lawrence Erlbaum, 2005, pp. 41–63.
- [14] David Mamet, *Oleanna*, London, Methuen, 1993.
- [15] Jean Jacques Weber, *Three Models of Power in David Mamet's Oleanna* in: Janathan Culpeper, Mick Short and Peter Verdonk (Eds.), *Exploring the language of Drama*, London, New York, Routledge, 2002, pp. 112-127.
- [16] Richard Badenhausen, *The Modern Academy Raging in the Dark: Misreading Mamet's Political Correctness in Oleanna*, *College Literature*. 25(3) (1998) 1-19.