

Sarcasm, Irony, and Manipulation: Non- Observance of Gricean Maxims in Teenage Interaction in *Mean Girls* (2004)

Rihmatul Marhamah¹, Virgia Eldiana², Cecep Agus³

Institut Prima Bangsa

Corresponding Author: Cecep Agus, e-mail: cecep.prodi.inggris@gmail.com

Published: February , 2026

ABSTRACT

Conversational maxim non-observance frequently occurs in adolescent interactions and plays a significant role in constructing implied meaning in everyday communication. This study examines the use of Gricean maxim non-observance in the film *Mean Girls* (2004) by focusing on how characters employ flouting, violation, and opting out strategies to negotiate power, humor, and social positioning. Unlike previous studies that mainly emphasize the identification and frequency of maxim violations, this research highlights the pragmatic functions underlying non-observance in competitive teenage discourse. The study employed a qualitative descriptive method using the film script as the primary data source. Data were collected through documentation and note-taking techniques, resulting in 16 utterances containing non-observance of conversational maxims. The findings show that flouting is the most dominant type with 11 cases (68.8%), followed by violations with 4 cases (25%) and one instance of opting out (6.3%). Flouting the maxim of Quality is commonly used to express sarcasm and indirect criticism, while violations function as tools of manipulation and false politeness. Opting out serves as a face-saving strategy in certain interactions. These findings indicate that maxim non-observance functions as a pragmatic strategy to maintain dominance, reinforce exclusion, and manage social relationships among adolescent peer groups.

Keywords: Pragmatics, Gricean Maxims, Maxim Non-observance, Mean Girls, Adolescent Discourse

© The Author(s). 2021 Open Access This article is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License, which permits use, sharing, adaptation, distribution and reproduction in any medium or format, as long as you give appropriate credit to the original author(s) and the source, provide a link to the Creative Commons licence, and indicate if changes were made. The images or other third party material in this article are included in the article's Creative Commons licence, unless indicated otherwise in a credit line to the material. To view a copy of this licence, visit <http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0>

INTRODUCTION

Language plays a crucial role in everyday communication, not only for conveying information but also for negotiating social relationships and meaning. In interaction, speakers are generally expected to cooperate to achieve mutual understanding. This principle is explained through Grice's Cooperative Principle, which outlines how effective communication is maintained (Grice, 2004). However, in real communicative situations, conversations often deviate from these cooperative norms. Such deviations are common in socially complex interactions where meaning is conveyed implicitly. Therefore, conversational behavior cannot always be interpreted solely through literal meaning.

In many social interactions, speakers intentionally do not observe conversational maxims to achieve certain communicative goals. Non-observance allows speakers to express criticism, sarcasm, or hostility indirectly while maintaining social appearance. This phenomenon is particularly evident in adolescent communication, where language is frequently used to negotiate identity, dominance, and group membership. Indirectness and implied meanings often function as tools for inclusion and exclusion within peer groups. As a result, conversational maxim non-observance becomes a strategic resource rather than a communicative failure.

Previous studies have examined conversational maxim non-observance in various discourse contexts, including movies, television series, political debates, podcasts, and service encounters (Bulain et al., 2023; Simbolon, 2024). These studies primarily focus on identifying the types and

frequencies of maxim non-observance based on Grice's framework. The findings consistently show that flouting and violating maxims are the most dominant forms. Flouting is commonly associated with humor and indirect expression, while violation is linked to deception and manipulation (Wardana et al., 2020; Oksinia et al., 2021). These results demonstrate that non-observance is a recurring phenomenon in human communication.

The solution proposed in this study is a functional pragmatic analysis that moves beyond the mere identification of types and frequencies of conversational maxim non-observance. This approach emphasizes the interpretation of pragmatic functions underlying flouting and violating maxims within adolescent social interaction. Rather than treating non-observance solely as a humor-creating device, this study examines how it operates as a strategy for power negotiation, social exclusion, and face management. The analysis is conducted contextually by examining utterances in relation to speaker intention, interactional goals, and social hierarchy. This approach allows conversational maxim non-observance to be understood as an interactional resource shaped by social dynamics rather than as a deviation from cooperative norms.

This study addresses the identified gap by examining conversational maxim non-observance as a pragmatic strategy in adolescent social interaction. Rather than merely classifying types of non-observance, this research focuses on explaining their pragmatic functions. The analysis emphasizes how flouting and violating maxims are used to maintain dominance, exclude others, and manage social positioning. By adopting a functional and contextual approach, this study extends previous research on Gricean maxims. This perspective allows non-observance to be understood as an interactional tool rather than a deviation from cooperative norms.

The aim of this study is to analyze conversational maxim non-observance in the film *Mean Girls* (2004) in order to explain the pragmatic functions of flouting and violating maxims in adolescent social interaction. The significance of this research lies in its potential to contribute to pragmatic studies by providing a contextual understanding of how conversational maxims are strategically used to negotiate power, manage social relationships, and construct implied meaning in teenage discourse.

METHOD

This study uses a qualitative approach with descriptive methods to analyze linguistic phenomena in depth. The choice of qualitative methods is based on the characteristics of pragmatic data that require strong contextual interpretation. The research design focuses on analyzing texts and speech situations that arise in interactions between characters in the script. The researcher acts as the main instrument that identifies and classifies each unit of data found. Through this approach, the data produced is in the form of a narrative description of the forms of maxim non-compliance. The use of qualitative descriptive methods is considered most effective for revealing the implied meaning behind the use of uncooperative language.

The main source of data in this study is the 2004 film *Mean Girls*. The data collected specifically consists of utterances that contain elements of non-compliance with Grice's maxims in the social interactions of the characters. The data collection process was carried out using documentation techniques through searching for film scripts on credible digital sources. The initial stage began with repeated viewings of the film to understand the situational and emotional context of each scene. Next, the researcher applied the listen and note technique to mark the parts of the script that were relevant to the focus of the pragmatic study. A total of 16 utterances were then systematically arranged as a basis for interpretation in the next stage of analysis.

The data analysis technique in this study followed the procedures of reduction, data presentation, and systematic conclusion drawing. The first step began with classifying the data into types of maxim violations, such as maxims of quality, quantity, relation, and manner. Each grouped data was then analyzed for its implicature to find the hidden meaning of the speaker. The researcher also relates these findings to social function theory to see their influence on the power hierarchy within the group. The validity of the findings is ensured through a process of consistent rechecking of the original script and the context of the scene in question. The final stage involves interpreting the findings to construct a comprehensive argument about the characters' communication patterns.

FINDING AND DISCUSSION

Finding

This section presents research findings based on an analysis of maximum non-compliance in conversations in the movie *Mean Girls* (2004) (Netflix, 2004). The data was analyzed using Grice's Cooperative Principle with a focus on violating and flouting strategies. A total of 16 utterances were identified as containing maxim violations, covering the maxims of Quantity, Quality, Relationship, and Manner. The table below shows the distribution of these strategies, followed by an explanation of the context, reasons for non-compliance, and their pragmatic functions.

a. Violating Conversational Maxims

Table 1. Violations of Conversational Maxims Found in the Movie *Mean Girls* (2004)

Data No.	Utterance	Violated Maxim
Data 1.	"I think it's in the back building." — Janis	Quality
Data 2.	"Oh my God, I love your bracelet. Where did you get it? It's so adorable." — Regina	Quality
Data 3.	"Oh my God, I love your skirt! Where did you get it? Vintage. So adorable." → "That is the ugliest f*cking skirt I've ever seen." — Regina	Quality
Data 4.	"I'm sorry that people are so jealous of me... but I can't help it that I'm popular." — Gretchen	Quality

Data 1. Janis gives Cady incorrect directions to room G14. This utterance violates the maxim of Quality because Janis deliberately provides information that she knows to be false. The implicature is that Janis wants to mislead the newcomer for her own amusement through deception. Functionally, this violation serves to assert Janis' social superiority by controlling accurate information. This positions Janis as the one in control while Cady is in a vulnerable position as an outsider.

Data 2. Regina gives excessive praise to Cady's bracelet in a conventional social exchange. This utterance violates the maxim of Quality because the praise is insincere and contradicts Regina's true assessment. The implicature suggests that Regina is pretending to be supportive despite actually harboring hidden negative judgments. This strategy functions as false politeness, allowing Regina to maintain a friendly facade while belittling others. Consequently, the violation reinforces Regina's social dominance by disguising hostility as approval.

Data 3. Regina directly compliments her classmate's skirt, but immediately labels it the "worst skirt" after the person leaves. This sequence violates the maxim of Quality because the initial compliment is a deliberate lie presented as truth. The implicature indicates that Regina's social agreement is purely performative and conceals deep hostility. Functionally, this violation aims to avoid direct public confrontation while maintaining her social authority. This is an example of how manipulative language is used to manage social reputation within group hierarchies.

Data 4. Gretchen rationalizes her emotional insecurity by claiming that others are jealous of her popularity. This utterance violates the maxim of Quality because the claim that she is envied has no factual basis in reality. The implicature reveals that Gretchen lies to herself and others to protect her fragile self-esteem. Pragmatically, this functions as an ego defense strategy to frame rejection as a form of admiration. This usage highlights how adolescents use deception to cover up their own social vulnerability.

b. Flouting Conversational Maxims

Table 2. Floutings of Conversational Maxims Found in the Movie *Mean Girls* (2004)

Data No.	Utterance	Flouted Maxim
Data 5.	“Why would we get you into trouble? We’re your friends.” — Janis	Quality
Data 6.	“That’s why her hair is so big. It’s full of secrets.” — Damian	Quality
Data 7.	“Wow, Damian, you’re so not gay anymore.” — Janis	Quality
Data 8.	“Home-schooled? That’s really interesting.” — Regina	Quality
Data 9.	“But you’re like, really pretty. So you agree? You think you’re really pretty?” — Regina	Quality
Data 10.	“I love her. She’s like a martyr.” — Regina	Quality
Data 11.	“And I’m be like, ‘Why are you so obsessed with me?’” — Regina	Quality
Data 12.	“And now you’re making me annoyed. Switch!” — Regina	Manner / Relation
Data 13.	“Explain why you forgot to invite us to your party?” — Janis	Relation
Data 14.	“Here. You can have this, it won a prize.” — Janis	Quality
Data 15.	“Oh my God, it’s her dream come true. Diving into a big pile of girls.” — Regina	Quality

Data 5. Janis states that she is a friend who would not betray Cady, even though her actions suggest otherwise. This utterance flouts the maxim of Quality because her statement clearly contradicts her previous behavior. The implicature invites the listener to recognize Janis's mockery of the norm of sincere friendship. Functionally, this emphasizes Janis' cynical attitude in a manipulative environment. Pragmatically, this utterance reinforces Janis' identity as a figure who rejects social pretense.

Data 6. Damian gossips by saying that Gretchen's hair is big because it is “full of secrets”. This hyperbolic claim flouts the maxim of Quality because it is physically impossible for hair to hold secrets. The implicature signifies that Gretchen is the center of social drama and hidden information. Pragmatically, the use of hyperbole creates humor among the characters. It shows how figurative language is used to reinforce the culture of gossip at school.

Data 7. Janis makes an ironic comment to Damian about his sexual orientation after Damian's exaggerated reaction to another student. This utterance flouts the maxim of Quality because the statement is factually incorrect and not meant to be taken literally. The implicature serves to humorously tease Damian's dramatic behavior. Functionally, this interaction strengthens their friendship solidarity through internal humor. This proves that flouting can build intimacy through an understanding of non-literal language.

Data 8. Regina responds to Cady's educational background by calling it “very interesting” using a condescending tone. This utterance performs a flouting of the maxim of Quality because Regina does not genuinely feel positively interested. The implicature shows subtle contempt for Cady's social awkwardness. Pragmatically, this strategy sets a passive-aggressive tone in their first encounter. It reinforces Regina's position at the top of the school's social hierarchy.

Data 9. Regina traps Cady by asking if she agrees that she is beautiful after just being complimented. This question flouts the maxim of Quality because the initial compliment was merely a tool to provoke Cady's arrogance. The implicature is that Regina is testing Cady's character to expose her potential arrogance. Functionally, this strategy gives Regina complete control over the dynamics of the conversation. Pragmatically, it forces the interlocutor into a vulnerable linguistic position.

Data 10. Regina describes Cady as a “martyr” in a very sarcastic tone. This utterance flouts the Quality maxim because the use of such a noble term contradicts Regina's hatred of Cady. The implicature suggests that Regina is belittling Cady's social status through an exaggerated metaphor.

Pragmatically, this creates entertainment for Regina’s inner circle while alienating the subject of the conversation. This reinforces the use of language as a tool of social exclusion.

Data 11. Regina recounts a past event by rhetorically asking why others are so “obsessed” with her. This utterance flouts the maxim of Quality because the use of the word “obsessed” is an inaccurate distortion of the facts. The implicature is that Regina is trying to validate herself as a victim while silencing the narratives of others. Functionally, this utterance generates humor for her followers while asserting her social power. This demonstrates narrative manipulation to maintain authority.

Data 12. Regina orders her friends to switch seats immediately after she feels disturbed. This command flouts the maxims of Manner and Relation due to its sudden and rude nature without explanation. The implication is Regina’s desire to have absolute priority over conversational cooperation. Functionally, this disregard for politeness reinforces Regina’s dictatorial authority within her group. Pragmatically, it signifies emotional dominance over communication ethics.

Data 13. Janis demands an explanation from Cady regarding the reason for not being invited to the party through an accusatory question. This utterance commits a flouting of the maxim of Relation because Janis is not really looking for a logical reason but wants to express her anger. The implicature indicates emotional betrayal and a rift in their friendship. Functionally, this strategy forces a direct confrontation that destroys the facade of friendship. Pragmatically, it communicates deep disappointment through rhetorical questions.

Data 14. Janis throws an object at Cady while calling it a “prize-winning gift” in a heated argument. This utterance flouts the maxim of Quality because the object is given as a form of contempt, not affection. The implicature signifies deep hatred and the total destruction of cooperation between them. Pragmatically, this use of aggressive sarcasm serves to finalize emotional distance. This action uses a physical object to reinforce a hostile linguistic message.

Data 15. Regina mocks someone’s social situation by sarcastically calling it a “dream come true.” This utterance flouts the maxim of Quality because Regina clearly does not believe that the situation is ideal or desirable. The implicature shows mockery of what she considers to be the mediocrity or absurdity of the event. Functionally, this reinforces Regina’s role as a sharp social critic within her group. Pragmatically, this utterance establishes the boundaries of her social circle’s exclusivity.

c. Opting Out Conversational Maxims

Table 3. Opting Out of Conversational Maxims Found in the Movie *Mean Girls* (2004)

Data No.	Utterance
Data 16.	“Do you think I’m stupid?” — Regina

Data 16. Regina responds to Gretchen’s point with a defensive rhetorical question about her intelligence. This utterance exemplifies the Opting Out strategy because Regina explicitly withdraws from the demands of conversational cooperation. The implicature suggests that Regina refuses to discuss the topic and chooses to protect herself from evaluation. Functionally, this action blocks further discussion and challenges her interlocutor’s intentions. Pragmatically, opting out is used as a face-saving device to maintain authority.

The following presents a summary of the overall frequency of non-observance of Gricean maxims in *Mean Girls*. The occurrences are categorized into three types: violation, flouting, and opting out, along with their respective frequencies and percentages. This summary allows for a clear comparison of which pragmatic strategies are most frequently used by the characters.

Table 4. Frequency of Types of Non-Observance in *Mean Girls* (2004)

Type of Non-Observance	Frequency	Percentage
Violating	4	25%
Flouting	11	68.8%
Opting Out	1	6.3%
Total	16	100%

Discussion

The Dominance of Flouting Quality in Constructing Sarcastic Humor

Flouting maxims of quality is the most frequently occurring strategy, appearing in 68.8% of the research data. Characters such as Janis and Damian use deliberate dishonesty to generate satirical humor and indirect criticism. For example, the hyperbole in Data 6 shows how flouting mocks school social norms. This humor functions as a social defense mechanism to resist conformity. These findings expand on previous research (Appau, 2022; Wardana Kiki et al., 2020) on the negotiation of social boundaries through language. Ultimately, this strategy shapes an individual's social position through sharp irony.

Violating the Maxim of Quality as Covert Manipulation

Quality violations reveal a crucial dimension of adolescent communication in the form of covert manipulation. Unlike flouting, these violations aim to ensure that deception succeeds without being detected by the interlocutor. Regina's insincere compliments in Data 2 and 3 illustrate the use of a facade of politeness to conceal aggression. Pragmatically, this functions as an instrument of covert aggression to control others. These findings support the theories of Tamrin et al. (2022) and Oksinia et al. (2021) regarding information manipulation strategies. Thus, deception is used strategically to maintain dominance within the group.

Opting Out as a Face- Saving Strategy

The opting out strategy illustrates how speakers withdraw from cooperation to protect their authority. Regina's rhetorical question in Data 16 shows a shift in focus from the topic of conversation to self-protection. This action blocks discussion and challenges the interlocutor's intentions, effectively rejecting cooperative dialogue. Pragmatically, opting out becomes a face-saving tool that allows speakers to avoid accountability. This strategy affirms the speaker's superior position by avoiding damaging criticism. Thus, the protection of social status often trumps the principle of cooperation.

Power Dynamics and Social Hierarchies in Adolescent Discourse

Overall, the pattern of maximum noncompliance reflects the use of language to establish power dynamics. The direct command in Data 12 disregards relevance in order to assert that personal desires justify social rearrangement. Sarcasm, deception, and withdrawal all serve to reinforce dominance and exclude others. This is in line with the Power and Solidarity theory, in which high-status speakers feel free to disregard cooperative norms. This study proves that pragmatic strategies are central to how adolescents manage their social hierarchies. Thus, maximum nonconformity has a profound social function in adolescent discourse.

CONCLUSIONS

This study aims to see the extent of the influence of conversational maxim non- observance on the construction of meaning in adolescent discourse, with social functions such as humor, manipulation, and power dynamics as intervening aspects. Based on the results of analysis that has been carried out, it can be concluded that flouting the maxim of Quality has a dominant and significant role in creating sarcasm and satirical humor in the film *Mean Girls (2004)*. Violating the maxim of Quality has a significant role in covert manipulation and false politeness used to maintain social control. Opting out of maxims, although less frequent, has a significant role in face- saving strategies that allow speakers to resist accountability. Non- observance of Relation and Manner maxims also has a significant role in establishing authority and reinforcing power hierarchies among adolescent peer groups.

It is hoped that future pragmatic studies will consider conversational maxim non- observance as one of the indicators in analyzing adolescent communication, because flouting, violating, and opting out of maxims have a significant effect on the construction of implicit meaning and social positioning. The better the understanding of maxim non- observance and the more adequate the contextual interpretation, the clearer the explanation of how adolescents use language

to negotiate identity, dominance, and solidarity. The results of this study are expected to add insight, knowledge, and experience as well as a provision in applying the knowledge obtained in lectures to real discourse analysis. For further researchers, it is expected to develop the results of this study and involve relevant variables such as politeness strategies, speech acts, or multimodal aspects in adolescent communication. To facilitate research, future researchers can also expand the data sources beyond movie scripts, such as classroom interactions or social media discourse, in the hope that the research results are more accurate and have far greater benefits.

REFERENCES

- Adena, T., Zuindra, & Mulia, H. (2024). Implicatures generated from non-observances maxim in the interview of the Indonesian president. *Vernacular: Linguistics, Literature, Communication and Culture Journal*, 3(2), 214–222. <https://doi.org/10.35447/vernacular.v3i2.837>
- Appau, A. G. (2022). *Gricean maxims in courtroom discourse: An analysis of the supreme court proceedings of the 2020 presidential election petition in Ghana*. University of Education, Winneba.
- Bulain, M., Kurniawan, Y., & Linuwih, E. R. (2023). Non-observance of maxims and the implicature in Shang-Chi movie. *Jurnal Bahasa Lingua Scientia*, 15(2), 305–330. <https://doi.org/10.21274/lis.2023.15.2.305-330>
- Du, N. T., & Linh, D. K. (2024). An analysis of the presidential live debates between Donald Trump and Joe Biden: A case study of Grice's Cooperative Principle. *TNU Journal of Science and Technology*, 229(08), 416–424.
- Fadillah, M., & Imperiani, E. D. A. (2020). An analysis of non-observance maxims in customs protection. *Advances in Social Science, Education and Humanities Research*, 430, 129–133. <https://doi.org/10.2991/assehr.k.200406.026>
- Faqabdulla, B. I. (2023). Non-observance of conversational maxims in a Kurdish Comedy Drama. *ZANCO Journal of Humanity Sciences*, 27(4), 417–433. <https://doi.org/10.21271/zjhs.27.3.26>
- Fey, T. (2004). *Mean girls*. Broadway Video.
- Grice, H. P. (2004). *Logic and conversation*. Elsevier.
- Hassan, J. S. (2022). A pragmatic study of non-observance maxims in selected political speeches. *Journal of Language Studies*, 5(2), 38–48.
- Netflix. (2004). *Mean girls*. Netflix. <https://www.netflix.com/id/title/60034551>
- Oksinia, B. Y., Jayantini, I. G. A. S. R., & Sulatra, I. K. (2021). Verbal humour created by non-observance of cooperative principle in Miranda. *Language Literacy: Journal of Linguistics, Literature, and Language Teaching*, 5(1), 80–89. <https://doi.org/10.30743/ll.v5i1.3582>
- Pertiwi, W. E. (2023). Non-observance maxims in Banyumasan humor speech. *Journal Corner of Education, Linguistics, and Literature*, 2(3), 234–243. <https://doi.org/10.54012/jcell.v2i3.124>
- Purnami, N. M. A., & Adiwijaya, P. A. (2021). A gender-based analysis of observance and non-observance of conversational maxims in front office staff's speech at restaurants in Ubud district. *Getsempena English Education Journal*, 8(1), 1–13. <https://doi.org/10.46244/geej.v8i1.1148>
- Simbolon, V. (2024). An analysis of non-observance maxims and the implicature in the podcast YouTube channel the Leonardo's "Face to Face with Onadio Leonardo - Vior." *JEES: Journal of Education and Educational Sciences*, 1(1), 26–32.
- Tamrin, Muarifuddin, & Arman. (2022). Analysis of non-observance the maxim in "Knives Out" movie script. *ELITE: Journal of English Language and Literature*, 7(1), 10–20. <https://doi.org/10.33772/elite.v5i1.1470>
- Vik, F. (2021). *Breaking maxims in a crime drama: A study on non-observances of maxims in crime drama Blindspot*. Digitala Vetenskapliga Arkivet.
- Wardana Kiki, M., Surbakti, D. A., Anayati, W., & Mayasari. (2020). Non-observance of maxim in "Coco" Movie: An analysis of flouting maxim. *The 2nd Bogor English Student and Teacher (BEST)*, 93–96.
- Zahra, T. N., & Suyudi, I. (2023). The non-observance of maxims in dialogues of Harry Potter and the cursed child book. *Journal of Language and Literature*, 11(2), 209–218. <https://doi.org/10.35760/jll.2023.v11i2.9169>