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## Comedy, Context and Unsaid Meaning: A Case Study in Conversational Implicature

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Received: 15 May, 2016

Accepted: 17 July, 2017

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### Abstract

Pragmatics moves away from the word level and sentence level study of language towards the study of language in real-world context and at discourse level whereby two or more participants take part in conversation. There are moments when the speaker explicitly says something but the listener may have other interpretations and inferences from their statements. The aim of this study was to demonstrate that in some special situations or contexts, especially in comedy, conversational implicature is more likely to take place than others are. The researcher employed qualitative and quantitative content analysis (mixed method) to do our research to increase the validity and lower the subjectivity of findings. The first and second series of a British situation comedy called 'Blackadder', containing twelve episodes along with their Persian translations were selected as a source for our critical discourse analysis. The results of this study suggested that in comical contexts we seem to witness more cases of the non-observance of Grice's Maxims than other settings. An implication of this is the possibility that the violation of the cooperative principle occurs mostly with the aim of creating the feeling of humor.

**Keywords:** Comedic genre, Cooperative principle, Critical discourse analysis, Implicature

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### INTRODUCTION

Since there would be a cause-effect relationship between context of situation and implicature, the argument could be made that the interlocutor's implicatures are attached to and caused by elements of the micro context in which they are produced. Keep in mind that the speakers can easily observe or obey maxims of cooperative principle unless there is a good *reason* not to do so. It has

not yet been established whether violating the cooperative principle is caused by a particular reason or not. There is little published data on why the non-observance or violation of cooperative principle tends to happen and in what genres of film this violation is more predominant. The non-observance or violation of maxims occurs when we fail to obey them but we do so unnoticeably that the hearer will not realize that the maxim is being violated. A simple example of this is a lie.

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Despite the fact that a considerable amount of literature has been published on the issue of ‘conversational implicature’ (Benz, Jasinskaja, & Salfner, 2013; Bilmes, 1993; Blome-Tillmann, 2008), less research has been conducted to investigate the specific contexts or situations in which implicature is more likely to be used by participants in a conversation. Most studies in the field of conversational implicature appear to have been either descriptive or exploratory in nature (Noveck, 2001; Wang, 2011; Xiaosu, 2010). To fill the gap in the literature, this study intends to explore the ‘why’ and ‘when’ of the phenomenon and provides an exciting opportunity to advance our understanding of the concept of ‘conversational implicature’.

This study aimed to contribute to this growing area of research by showing that conversational implicature could be seen both as caused by specific situations or circumstances and as causing effects on the addressees. Simply put, the speakers use implicature in a specific context (time and space) and in a specific cognitive state. However, when the context changes, they may obey maxims of quality, quantity, relation and maxim and thus may not produce implicature. This is thus an indication that the implicatures do not happen in vacuum and are conditioned by contextual factors and perhaps precedent cognitive states. This paper seeks to address the following questions:

1. Are conversational implicatures embedded in real-world context or displaced in time and space?
2. What causes conversational implicatures to occur in conversation and what is their effect on the receivers?
3. Is recontextualization of conversational implicatures possible? How?

It is possible to hypothesize that conversational implicatures are less likely to occur in other film genres than comedy. Using qualitative and quantitative content analysis approach, the original text was contrastively investigated with its target text by showing that during translation

source text tends to be decontextualized. As regards the research objectives, this research was exploratory and explanatory in nature since the author wants to explore the ‘why’ of the event and also to investigate the possible ‘effects’ of this event on the addressees. It has been shown that the observance or non-observance of Grice’s maxims is actually context-situated and context-dependent and that breaking the cooperative principle hardly occurs in every situation or circumstance. Levinson (2010) asserts that “there is no contrast between generalized and particularized conversational implicature as all implicatures are context-bound” (p. 202).

Birner (2012) states that “conversational implicature is context-dependent: if the context were different, this particular form might not give rise to the same implicature” (p. 62). To put it differently, when the speaker uses implicature, their real intention cannot be deciphered from compositional meaning of words. However, the listener can work out the indirect meaning of the utterance only in the immediate context in which the conversation takes place. Five characteristics distinguish them from conventional implicatures:

- calculability: we work out implicature based on maxims, utterance and context;
- cancellability: conversational implicature can be cancelled in the right circumstances;
- nondetachability: paraphrasing the same proposition in the same context results in the same implicature;
- nonconventionality: implicature is not carried by particular linguistic expression;
- indeterminacy: there might be any number of inferences that could be drawn based on a particular utterance in a particular context.

Because our data collection method is not probability random sampling but is purposive sampling, this generalizability of the results is subject to limitations. Another limitation of this study is that the author was unable to conduct an unstructured interview with the translators of the

subtitles regarding the translation strategies they employed. This is because we could not access their contact information.

## REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

Paul Grice carried out the first systematic study on the concept of conversational implicature in 1970. In his seminal paper, Grice (1970) proposed the concept of cooperative principle and distinguished its four categories including the maxims of quantity, quality, relevance and manner. Grice (1970) maintained that our interactions do not consist of disconnected sentences but are cooperative efforts. The Grice's four maxims are described as follows:

1. The maxim of quantity: make your contribution as informative as possible
2. The maxim of quality: try to make your contribution one that is true
3. The maxim of relevance: be relevant
4. The maxim of manner: avoid ambiguity, be brief and orderly. (Grice, 1975, pp. 45-46)

He then argues that if someone violates, flouts or opts out a maxim, conversational implicature will take place (Grice, 1975). The main weakness with this theory is that it is very prescriptive in nature and seldom explores why the speakers tend to use indirect and implied utterances instead of direct response.

In her investigation into the concept of implicature, Birner (2012) states that there are two types of conversational implicature: generalized and particularized. According to Birner (2012) "A generalized conversational implicature will generalize to an entire natural class of linguistic expressions in the default case, [...]. In contrast to the generalized implicatures discussed above, particularized conversational implicatures are unique to the particular context in which they occur" (pp. 63-64). For example the sentence "Most of the mothers were Victorian" implicates that "Not all of the mothers were Victorian" (Birner, 2012, p. 63). However, this scalar impli-

cature can be cancelled by the addition of *in fact, they all were* so we could say "Most of the mothers were Victorian; in fact, they all were". However, her examples fail to fully explain under what circumstances the scalar implicature is expected to be preserved like the former case and under what conditions it is likely to be cancelled like the later one.

Whilst Benz et al. (2013) note that "The cancellability of scalar implicatures shows most uncontroversially that they are, at least negatively, dependent on discourse context" (p. 4). Wang (2011) points out that in order to improve the listening comprehension of non-native English speakers, we need to introduce basic pragmatic theories like Grice's conversational implicature. In claiming that the application of conversational implicature could help non-native English speakers master pragmatics, Wang has failed to take into account the fact that some culture-specific items might also be used in implicature that could be challenging for listeners.

In the last few years, a great deal of attention has been paid to the empirical studies on the issue of implicature. Xiaosu (2010) claims that "the conversational implicature is one of the mechanisms which produce humor in a situation comedy. The speaker consciously and unconsciously violates conversation maxims, those fundamental rules we should obey in an ideal and frank communication" (p. 45). Here, the author makes a connection between the violation of the cooperative rules and the emergence of humor. In the words of Noveck, "children tend to not attach an upper bound when treating weak scalar terms like 'some' and 'or'; they tend to treat 'some' initially as compatible with 'all' and allow for an inclusive-or interpretation of the disjunction" (Noveck, 2001, p. 22). Noveck (2001) appears to be saying that young children around the age of seven who have mastery of modal verbs like 'might', do not make pragmatic interpretations of such weak scalar terms as 'some' or 'might' but rather consider them to be the same as 'all' or 'have to'. It has been found that not all conversational implicatures are explicitly cancellable

(Blome-Tillmann, 2008, p. 160). In essence, what Blome-Tillmann (2008) is saying is that factors like context of utterance, distance, etc. should be considered when talking about compellability of conversational implicature.

## METHODS

### Corpus

The corpus of this study comprised 22 dialogues between actors taken from the episodes I, II and IV of a British situation comedy called 'Blackadder'. *Blackadder* is a series of four BBC1 period British sitcoms, along with several one-off installments. All television episodes starred Rowan Atkinson as the anti-hero Edmund Blackadder, and Tony Robinson as Blackadder's dogsbody, Baldrick. Each series was set in a different historical period, with the two protagonists accompanied by different characters, though several reappear in one series or another, for example Melchett (Stephen Fry) and Lord Flashheart (Rik Mayall).

The first series, *The Black Adder*, was written by Richard Curtis and Rowan Atkinson, while subsequent episodes were written by Curtis and Ben Elton. The shows were produced by John Lloyd. In 2000, the fourth series, *Blackadder Goes Forth*, ranked at 16 in the "100 Greatest British Television Programmes", a list created by the British Film Institute. Also in the 2004 TV poll to find "Britain's Best Sitcom", *Blackadder* was voted the second-best British sitcom of all time, topped by *Only Fools and Horses*. It was also ranked as the 20th-best TV show of all time by *Empire* magazine.

The sampling technique used in this paper is non-probability purposive sampling because our choice of corpus is based on our predefined purpose or criteria. The main reason for choosing this comedy as corpus is that it ranks second among fifty best sitcoms in Britain. The story

was about a son who vainly tries to seize the crown from his father and brother and encounters so many misfortunes. Series I, II and III of the comedy had available Persian subtitles from which Series II and I were carefully investigated for our critical discourse analysis.

### Participants

To yield interrater reliability, one of master's students in the field of Translation Studies from Kharazmi University was asked to be the second rater for our critical discourse analysis.

### Procedure

For critical discourse analysis, the research data in this study was drawn from six episodes of a British situation comedy called 'Blackadder' together with their Persian subtitles. A few debatable dialogues, which were considered conversational implicatures, were extracted from the film for a more in-depth analysis. To control for bias, another rater who is a student of Translation studies carried out the analysis of dialogues.

To begin this process, the English and Persian subtitles of the sitcom were downloaded to achieve observable data for contrastive analysis. The comedy was then watched from the first episode of the film till the last episode of the Series I and several dialogues were found. These dialogues were either contextually embedded or contained conversational implicature. 22 cases were found which contained contextual features. Following the search for the conversational implicatures, the original contextualized dialogue were contrastively analyzed with their rendered Persian subtitles, which were mostly translated out of context. Despite focusing on the translation of words, the author also attempted to take top-down approach to see whether the translated text had really the same effect or response on the target receivers. Table 1 shows the original dialogues along with their Persian translations:

**Table 1.****Some cases of original dialogues with their Persian subtitles from Blackadder**

Dialogues	Subtitles
Harry: So, how many did you kill?	هری: پس چند نفر رو کشتی؟
Edmund: <u>Oh, four... Four...hundred. Four hundred...hand. Four hundred...hand fifty.</u>	ادموند: اوه, چهار... چهار... چهار... صد. چهار صد تا... دست. چهار صد تا... پنجاه تا دست
Harry: Four hundred and fifty! That's three times more than myself!	هری: چهارصدو پنجاه تا! سه برابر بیشتر از مال من!؟
Harry: Any nobles?	هری: نجیب زاده چه طور؟
Edmund: Ah, let me see. Nobles. I think...Lord Coverdale.	ادموند: اوه, نجیب زاده... بذار ببینم. فکر کنم... لرد کاوردیل
Harry: Who fought on our side, I believe.	هری: فکر کنم اون طرف ما بودا !
Edmund: <u>I think Lord Coverdale saw me slaying...um...Warwick.</u>	ادموند: فکر کنم لرد کاوردیل داشت منو وقتی کشتار میکردم دید وارویک
Harry: I killed him myself at one point. Anyone else?	هری: آره, خودم کشتمش کس دیگه ای هم هست؟
Edmund: <u>Um... Er... Now, let me see. Er... I'm just trying to put names to faces.</u>	ادموند: ممم... بذار ببینم... دارم سعی میکنم اسما رو با چهره ها یکی کنم.
Harry: Oh damnation, though, I don't think I'm going to have enough time to attend to the drains. Edmund, you'll have to look into those as well.	هری: لعنتی! وقت ندارم تا به آب آوردن رسیدگی کنم, به این رسیدگی میکنی دیگه؟
Edmund: <u>Er...yes...yes. Fine, fine, I'd be honoured!</u>	ادموند: ااا...آره...آره, خوبه, خوبه, باعث افتخاره!
Harry: Good! You won't let me down, now, will you?	هری: خوبه! نا امیدم که نمیکنی؟
Edmund: <u>No, no, no, I'm really looking forward to it already.</u>	ادموند: نه,نه,نه. از قبل منتظر این لحظه بودم !
Rev. Lloyd: Are you Edmund, Duke of Edinburgh?	آقای لیوید: آیا تو, ادموند, دوک ادینبورگی؟
Edmund: No, I'm a <u>bowl of soup</u>	ادموند: نه پس یه کاسه سوپم!
Buyer: And the privies?	خریدار: توالت ها چی؟
Blackadder: <u>When the master craftsman... was looking at the sewage, he said to himself: "Romeo, let's make them functional, and comfortable."</u>	بلک آدر: وقتی که استاد بنا به سیستم فاضلاب نگاه کرد به خودش گفت: "رومنو کاری کنیم هم عملی باشه و هم راحت"
Buyer: What about the privies?	خریدار: دستشویی چی؟
Blackadder: <u>Well, what we're talking about in privy terms...is the very latest in front-wall, fresh-air orifices... combined with a wide-capacity gutter installation below.</u>	بلک آدر: خب در مورد دستشویی... آخرین تکنولوژی هواخوری با ظرفیت بالا در قسمت پایین برای تخلیه

**Analytical Framework**

Although this study is mainly a qualitative content analysis, it was considered that the use of quantitative measures would usefully supplement and extend the reliability of the results of research. The unit of analysis in this study is the sentences or utterances of dialogues since we

deal with the overall quality of translation. To put it another way, the author does not restrict himself to the level of language but goes beyond it to account for extra-linguistic and contextual factors. The author decided to assign numerical codes to textual elements at the level of word or phrase, which were translated literally. However,

other possible factors above the word level were also accounted for which may affect the quality of translation as a whole like contextual factors. Statistical significance was analyzed using SPSS

software. Cohen's kappa coefficient was used to estimate inter-rater agreement. The data are given in Table 2 below.

**Table 2.**  
*Data related to inter-rater agreement*

		Coder B	
		Literal Translation	Communicative Translation
Coder A	Literal Translation	14	1
	Communicative Translation	3	4

**Table 3.**  
*Symmetric measures*

		Value	Asymp. Std. Error <sup>a</sup>	Approx. T <sup>b</sup>	Approx. Sig.
Measure of Agreement	Kappa	.546	.196	2.631	.009
N of Valid Cases		22			

a. Not assuming the null hypothesis.

b. Using the asymptotic standard error assuming the null hypothesis.

The value of kappa for this data is .54, which indicates that inter-coder reliability is moderate or there is moderate agreement between coders in analyzing the data. However, these dialogues are context-situated and are thus meaningful only at the time and place that the dialogues were made. It is apparent from the data that 'Edmund' the protagonist character, frequently violates the maxims of quantity and quality by speaking more than is required and by deceiving his brother 'Harry'. In fact, the protagonist character implicates that he has not killed anybody and he just pretends. In the last dialogue, he violates the maxim of relevance by uttering something irrelevant *No, I'm a bowl of soup!*. It is understood that interjections like *Oh* and *Ah* and words like *Duke* and *Lord* seem to be borrowed into TT. The written literal translation, which is distant from the time, and local space at which the discourse was spoken, falls short of the original text as regards pragmatics.

## RESULTS

In this study, simple statistical method was used to produce objective results. The results gained from the analysis of the dialogues by coders clearly shows the breakdown of the translator in transferring the unstated meaning or conversational implicature of the speaker. By translating the utterances literally, the target addressee with different context and experience could hardly have the same impression of film as the original addressee had. It is apparent that conversational implicatures being spoken discourse in a specific context or situation lose their meaning and effect when translated literally in written language. In the context of the film 'Blackadder', factors like family position, anxiety and other psychological and situational pressures cause *Edmund* to use implicature and, for the most part, the effect of which is humor.

The most remarkable finding to emerge from the dialogues is that the British context with its

different cultural values becomes decontextualized in Persian subtitles and thus the quality of translation is rather low. In some cases, translator borrows those items that do not have equivalent in Persian like *Lord* or *Duke*. The benefits in terms of the mixed method that was employed far outweighs the disadvantages of our study with regard to the relatively small sample size. An alternative method, though less exhaustive might be to use frequency in order to analyze the text. By calculating Cohen's kappa coefficient in SPSS, it was found that two coders have come to this point that translator adopted the strategy of word-for-word translation.

The results highlight that Persian subtitles being removed in time and location or in context from the original dialogues, could rarely have the pragmatic effects of the sitcom like implicatures and presuppositions. Seen in this light, the subtitles simply transferred the physical features of dialogues leaving out the micro context or context of situation, which seem to be the cause of implicatures in the comedy.

## DISCUSSIONS

Significantly, the situatedness and context-dependency of implicatures is something that this study attempted to explore further. In reviewing the literature, very few data were found on the effect of 'context of situation' on the implicature or what 'causes' implicature to take place. The present study took an initial step towards revealing some unidentified facts about implicature. Participants in a conversation are assumed to disobey Grice's cooperative principle only when they are in a particular kind of context, at a particular time or location, which causes them not to talk directly and explicitly to each other. In addition, that an implicature can or cannot be cancelled and whether or not weak terms in scalar implicatures could be extended in meaning to stronger terms, all are controlled by extralinguistic or contextual causes. In this study, the causality of environment or micro context was accounted for in clarifying the concept of implicature.

It was hypothesized that participants in a comedy genre or in the context of satire tend to use implicature more often than other genres. The role of participants in a comedy film is to make people laugh. In order for this effect to be made on the audience, the participants break the maxims of cooperative principle, especially the maxims of quantity and quality to achieve their aim of creating the sense of humor. In *Blackadder*, as was analyzed before, the literal rendition of the words of characters can be considered a blatant mistake, which distorts the intended meaning of the utterances in dialogues. The Persian translator was able to recodify only the linguistic and semantic elements of the dialogues. However, when it comes to pragmatics and the use of language in real context, the translator fails to pass the limits of linguistic meaning and thus their translation loses the effect of humor existing in the original dialogues.

The results of this study are consistent with those of Bilmes (1993) who studies the concept of conversational implicature from the point of view of ethnomethodology. He argues that "shared knowledge, paralinguistic features like tone of voice and prosody, facial expression and other contextual matters may enable or obstruct the operation of an implicature-producing principle" (Bilmes, 1993, p. 406). Also our findings match those obtained by those scholars like Sperber and Wilson (1995) who assert that "there is no contrast between generalized and particularized conversational implicature as all implicatures are context-bound" (Levinson, 2010, p. 202). Levinson (2010) noted that "generalized conversational implicatures promise a wealth of generalizable insights into how inferential meaning is constructed around the basis of coded or lexical meaning" (p. 202). Our results do not appear to corroborate his argument; in fact even the meaning of lexical cohesive markers like *and*, *or*, *but*, *etc.* may change with micro context.

Given that these findings are based on a limited number of cases, the results from such analyses should thus be treated with the utmost caution. Surprisingly, few cases of conversational

implicature were found in the Series II of *Blackadder* and thus the number of implicatures are slightly fewer than what was expected. One downside factor regarding our methodology is that the number of cases, which are the sentences of dialogues, are rather small. The discrepancies between the number of implicatures in Series I and II are negligible. This is due to the fact we concluded that comedy genre could be described as that which includes considerable cases of implicatures. To the best of our knowledge, very few authors have found that the comedy genre can be said to include plenty of implicature-inducing contexts. However, more research on this topic needs to be undertaken before the association between implicature and comedy is more clearly understood.

## CONCLUSION

This article has discussed the reasons for the occurrence of conversational implicature applying the tenets of causal model. The researcher claimed that the way participants use language to convey their message in a particular time and space either directly or indirectly, is triggered by a specific cause or also is carried out for some purpose. If we look at this subject from the point of view of pragmatics, the field, tenor and the mode of interaction also varies noticeably depending on the situation or context in which participants interact with each other. This study has found that in the comedy genre, we can witness so many contexts giving rise to implicature. These implicatures are assumed to be produced for the purpose of humor. Simply put, the function or the domain of conversational implicatures in comedy is operative or appellative in order to attract the attention of addressees.

The results of this study indicate that when an individual utters a sentence in a specific context, their speech is affected by some previous causes or conditions. These causal conditions may be different depending on the context of situation and the existing ambience. In one sequence of *Blackadder*, the fear of being deported from royal family, causes 'Edmund' to violate the maxims of quantity and quality by saying to his father that he has not killed the King Richard III. In another sequence, 'Edmund' also violates these two maxims by saying to his brother 'Harry' that he killed 'four hundred and fifty persons in war' because of his standing in the royal family. The state of hastiness and lack of time causes 'Edmund' to say *No, I'm a bowl of soup* which is the violation of relevance maxim.

This research extends our knowledge of pragmatics and especially conversational implicature by allowing for causal model. In this study, the author accentuated both the role of context in which the interaction takes place and the causal conditions, which yield to unsaid or implicit meanings. This study has demonstrated, for the first time that decontextualized and literal translation of conversational implicatures in a comedy film leads to a product, which seldom matches the source text in terms of function. Such out-of-context translations hardly appeal to the target addressees and are mere linguistic and semantic renditions of original text. The small number of cases, thus making these findings less generalizable, limits the study. On a wider level, research is also needed to determine whether comedy genre with its distinctive characteristics could be recognized as the genre rich with regard to conversational implicature.



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**Bio data**

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