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The Flouting of Grice's Conversational Maxim: Examples from Bashar Al-Assad's Interview during the Arab Spring

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Abstract: Ideally, people should apply the cooperative principle that consists of four maxims of conversation in their communication. Speakers usually obey these maxims to reach the purpose of the conversation that they are in to avoid any miscommunication. Flouting of maxims is a situation wherein a speaker manipulates a particular maxim that results in a conversational implicature. The interest of this article is to illustrate some maxims that were flouted by the Syrian leader, Bashar Al-Assad during his interview with the ARD channel. Analysis of the maxims of the Arab leader's interview revealed that the main reason for Assad's violation of the maxims was to convey meanings in his favour. It can be implicated that political leaders flout maxims to produce particular shades of meanings which may not always be conceivable to all parties in order to gain the support from masses.

Keywords: Arab Spring, cooperative principle, flouting, Grice's maxims, interview

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I. INTRODUCTION

Language is a vehicle to inform and transfer ideas and thoughts through communication. Humans have developed languages based on the need for communication. In order for communication to happen effectively, there need to be a speaker and a hearer in every turn of speech. Ideally, the speaker and the hearer need to have some kind of cooperation to convey and to understand each other's speech clearly in each turn. This is so the speaker can deliver his/her massage in an understandable fashion and the hearer can understand the speaker's intended massage. Otherwise, the speaker and hearer might misunderstand each other and finally fall into a breakdown in their communication. However, one should be aware that there are layers of meanings to a speech. Having said that, what a person means might be different from what the person says. This notion was suggested in Grice's theory in which he proposed that a hearer may receive different layers of meanings from a speaker which can either be expressed meaning or implied meaning (Thomas, 2014).

II. LITERATURE REVIEW

Grice (1975) suggested a principle called The Cooperative Principle. Grice (1975) explained that following the Cooperative Principle, one should "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 on which you are engaged" (p. 45). In accordance to that, he suggested that if people were to have a successful and smooth conversation, they should follow this principle which is associated to four conversational maxims. The conversational maxims are: Maxim of Quality, Maxim of Quantity, Maxim of Relation, and Maxim of Manner. Schiffrin (2001) explained the four maxims as the following:

- Maxim of Quality: One should not say anything about a topic in which he/she lacks adequate evidence of; one is not allowed to lie or say what he/she believe to be false; the key word of this maxim is truth or instatement;
- Maxim of Quantity: One should not make the contribution to the conversation less or more informative
 than is required. In other words, make the contribution as informative as required for the purpose of the
 conversation:
- Maxim of Relation: One is required to say something relevant to the topic;
- Maxim of Manner: One should avoid ambiguity and obscurity of expression and he/she should be brief and orderly.

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In order for a conversation to be successful, one should fulfil or observe these maxims and avoid violating the cooperative principle of the maxims. In other words, these maxims need to be observed to respect the authenticity, amount, relevance, and the way information is provided at each turn of a conversation (Grice, 1975). Despite that, in reality, not all communication fulfils the cooperative principle – people often fail to observe the maxims in many contexts of everyday life and on many occasions (Nieto, 2011). There are many reasons of why this happens, for instance, some people are incapable of speaking clearly because of nervousness, dismay, anxiety, not having the culture awareness of the context of their communication, not fluent in communicating a particular subject, or simply because they want to hide an information on purpose. On the other hand, hearers are also responsible during communication as there are possibilities that a hearer might fail to understand what a speaker intends to convey (Cheirchia & McConnel-Ginnet, 1990; Gumpers, 1982). Similarly, Davies (2007) and Thomas (1997) mentioned that when a hearer listens to a speech, what is expected of the speaker is to adhere to the four maxims. However, when the speaker is noticed to not following the maxims, the hearer needs to put on extra effort to infer the real meaning behind the speaker's speech.

What can be deduced from the previous discussion is that a speech may have different layers of meanings due to some reasons. Grice was particularly interested in how a speaker intentionally choose not to comply with the maxims – a process which he defined as 'flouting of a maxim'. Grice perceived that there are situations where a speaker purposefully flouts a maxim especially when he or she intends the hearer to receive a meaning that goes beyond or different from the expressed meaning (Thomas, 1997). This additional meaning is what Grice conceptualised as an implicature (Grice, 1975; Thomas, 2014; Thomas, 1997). One type of implicature that will be explored in this article is conversational implicature. This type of implicature is contextual in the sense that it only occurs in certain contexts. Brumark (2006), Gumpers (1982), and Cheirchia and McConnel-Ginnet (1990) pointed out that having the same background knowledge as a speaker is helpful for a hearer to understand what the speaker intends to convey. The background knowledge in concern is not just restricted to the rules for understanding linguistics items, but also to the knowledge of the world or context of the speech in concern. This knowledge is helpful for the speaker can refer to make inferences (Coulthard, 1977). In relation to this article, the first author belongs to the same community as Bashar Al-Assad. Therefore, it is argued that the author was able to understand Bashar Al-Assad's speech in his interview as both shared the same assumption about the world they live in (Kempson, 1977), or in this context, the events in the Arab world.

Several studies (e.g., Khosravizadehand & Sadehvandi, 2011; Mashudi 2007 & Rundquist, 1990) have been conducted on the flouting of Grice's maxims in several contexts such as literature, religion, and humour in both oral and written contexts. Other examples include "Flouting Grice's Maxims at Dinner" (Rundquist. 1990); "Some Instances of Violation and Flouting of the Maxim of Quantity by the Main Characters (Barry and Tim) in Dinner for Schmucks" (Khosravizadehand and Sadehvandi 2011); "The Flouting of Conversational Maxims by the main characters in Titanic Movie" (Purwanto, 2008); and "The Flouting and Hedging Maxims in the English Translation of Surah Yasin" (Mashudi, 2007). However, it has been noticed that there are limited studies on the flouting of Grice's maxims in the political context. This small-case analysis can be argued as a good beginning to analyse Grice's maxims in the political context. It is also hoped that this article can shed some light on how easily people can be manipulated by their leaders who are aware of their ability to use language to get support from the masses. The current analysis allows us to see how speakers, especially leaders can colour their choice of words to produce particular shades of meaning which are not always conceivable to all readers and/or listeners.

III. ANALYSIS

In this section, the examples of the flouting of Grice's maxims made by Bashar Al-Assad will be illustrated using excerpts from the interview.

3.1 The Context

The excerpts used in this article were taken from an interview of Syrian President, Bashar Al-Assad with Jürgen Todenhöfer from ARD Network in July 2012. The interviewed was conducted a year after the Arab Spring spread to Syria. Bashar Al-Assad succeeded his father, Hafez Al-Assad as Syrian President after Hafez's death in 2009. Before his death, Hafez persuaded the general public and government officials to accept his decision to make Assad his successor, a practice which was new to the country (Noueihed & Warren, 2012). Bashar Al-Assad is a strong supporter and member of the Ba'ath Party. Assad originates from the Alawitestes, a minority group that can be traced back to the Shiite Muslim sect.

The Arab Spring is a term that refers to the revolutionary wave of protests that have been spreading through many North African and Middle Eastern countries. Other terms used to describe this revolution include the Arab Awakening, the Arab Uprising, and the Arab Rebellion. The nature of the uprisings varies from country to country, ranging from relatively peaceful protests to civil wars. Nations involved in the Arab Spring are reacting to a general degradation of socio-economic and political conditions in the affected regions. Many

agitators use online social media tools such as Twitter and Facebook to disseminate information and coordinate large numbers of protestors, enlarging the scope of the demonstration and engaging interest from the international community. An iconic phrase from the protest that has become the slogan for the Arab Spring is "Ash-sha'b yurid isqat al-nizam" which means "the people want the downfall of the regime". The Arab Spring in Syria arose in January 2011 when the public demonstrated their dissatisfaction with the Baathist regime, a regime associated with the Ba'ath or Resurrection Party (Noueihed & Warren, 2012; Pinto, 2013). Pinto (2012) postulated that the Syrian revolution was because Syrians wanted a political reformation. This was due to the public's frustration with the ruling party's corruption and injustice which then led to pro- and anti-government protests.

3.2 Examples

Example 1: Flouting of the Maxim of Relation

Todenhöfer: Mr. President, members of the opposition and western politicians say, that you are the main obstacle for peace in Syria. Would you be ready to step down as president if this could bring

peace to your country and stop the bloodshed?

Bashar al- : The president shouldn't run away from challenge and we have a national challenge now in Assad (BA) : The president shouldn't escape the situation, but from the other side you can stay as president, stay in this position only when you have the public support. So, answering this

question should be answered by the Syrian people, by the election not by the president. I can nominate myself, I can run for the election or not run, but to leave or not to leave, this is about

the Syrian people.

The excerpt above shows how Assad flouted the maxim of relevance. What was implied by Todenhöfer through his question was that Assad's immediate step down shall bring peace and stop bloodshed in the country. It can be observed that the question directed to Assad was not about the presidency election, rather it was about him stepping down from being president. However, Assad replied that the one to decide the fate of a leader would be the Syrian people through election, not by the president himself. Supposedly, in order to follow the maxim of relevance, Assad should answer whether or not he would not step down. However, in the excerpt, it could be seen that he consciously made his answer irrelevant to the topic. He did not cooperate to answer the question about resigning himself from power and ending the bloodshed. Instead, he diverted the topic by talking about how the people of Syria could decide who would be president through a supposedly fair presidency election. It can be deduced that he flouted the maxim of relevance because the question asked by Todenhöfer was implying that Assad himself was responsible for the riot and massacre in Syria. So instead of agreeing or denying the statement, Assad diverted the focus of the question by mentioning that the people of Syria had power in deciding who would lead the country.

Example 2: Flouting of the Maxim of Quality

T : I've been to some of the demonstrations, even in Homs, in peaceful demonstrations. Isn't it legitimate that people demand for more freedom, more democracy and less power in the hands of one family, less power in the hands of secret services?

BA : Let's correct the question first to have the correct answer. We don't have power in the hand of a family. In Syria, we have the state, we have institutions, maybe, not the ideal institutions, but we don't have a family to run the country. We have a state. This is the first fault. Now we can answer the first part. Of course, they have the right, they have the legitimate right whether they are demonstrators or not. Not only demonstrators ask for freedom. Actually, the majority of the people ask for reforms, political reforms, not freedom. We have freedom but not the ideal freedom. But the reform, let's say, to have more participation in the power, in the government, in everything else in their country. This is legitimate. But the majority is not in the demonstrations. We have people who have demonstrated and who have not, but this is legitimate.

When Todenhöfer asked Assad about the people's rights to demand freedom and democracy from one family (referring to the Alawites family), Assad's answer contained the flouting of the quality maxim. Assad was seen to deny the power of the Alawites family by saying, "We don't have power in the hand of a family. In Syrian, we have the state, we have institutions, maybe, not the ideal institutions, but we don't have a family to run the country". In this country where Sunni-Muslims is the majority, Syria has been ruled by the Alawites

family. In fact, Assad's family is a part of the Alawites family. The Alawites sect represents about 12 percent of Syria's population. The Alawites control the power in Syria – holding key positions in the military and the government, and also being at the top level of business. Since the Al-Assad clan took power in the early 1960s, the Alawites became Syria's ruling class. Having being in power for five decades, the Alawites are completely entrenched in this situation. Therefore, Assad's denial in this conversation proved that he flouted the maxim of quality because he was lying. He tried to portray to the interviewer and to the public that the power was not in the hand of the Alawites family. Alternatively, he explained that the only problem in Syria was it did not have the ideal power institutions to rule the country.

Example 3: The Flouting of the Maxim of Manner

T : You think, you still have a majority behind your back?

BA : If I have—if I don't have a support in the public, how could I stay in this position? United States is against me, so, how could I stay in this position? The answer is, I still have a public support. How much, what percentage is—this is not the question, I don't have numbers now. Of course, in this position, in this situation you must have public support.

In this excerpt, it can be seen that Todenhöfer asked a clear question, whether or not Assad believed that he had major support from his people. Nevertheless, Assad's answer flouted the maxim of manner because he gave an ambiguous and lengthy reply. What can be deduced from this is that Assad did not give a clear statement because he did not have any explicit evidence to answer that question in his favour. In his utterance, Assad flouted the maxim of manner because he did not want to say that he only had minority support which was from the Alawites family. Instead, he just chose to say that he had the support from the public, but whether they were the majority or the minority, it was not revealed by him despite the straightforward question.

Example 4: The Flouting of the Maxim of Quantity and Quality

T : A question that everybody is asking in the western countries and in your country: Who has killed the thousands of civilians who died in this conflict? The opposition blames you.

BA : If you want to know who killed, you first have to know who has been killed. You cannot tell about the criminals without knowing about the victims. Those victims, you are talking about, the majority of them, are government supporters. So, how can you be the criminal and the victim at the same time? The majority are people who support the government and large part of the others are innocent people who have been killed by different groups in Syria.

The maxim of quantity was flouted when Assad stated: "If you want to know who killed, you first have to know who has been killed. You cannot tell about the criminals without knowing about the victims. Those victims, you are talking about, the majority of them, are government supporters". Here, instead of answering the question in a straightforward way, Assad chose to twist his answer by providing an overstatement. This means, instead of telling who the killers were, he provided a lengthy explanation about the victims by stating that the victims were made of government supporters and innocent people. By providing this evidence, Assad could be seen as trying to drive people into believing that he was not responsible for the people who were killed. Moreover, Assad's question, "How can you be the criminal and the victim at the same time?" is regarded as a rhetorical question. This question was asked with no intention of obtaining an answer from the hearer. In fact, it can be deduced that Assad asked that question just to get the public into thinking that he was not the one who was behind all those killings.

IV. DISCUSSION

An understanding of the context of which a speech is made is important so that the hearer is able to identify the underlying meanings produced by a speaker. Grundy (2008) stated that "knowing the speakers well enough would enable us to know what they each mean" (p. 95). Due to the author's understanding of the context, the author was able to differentiate between what was said and what was meant by Assad. The above examples showed that Assad tried to fulfil the Cooperative Principle by responding to each question asked by Todenhöfer. His blatant flouting of maxims or exploitation of maxims created implicatures (Thomas, 2014). According to Grice (1975), in some instances, a speaker blatantly choose to flout the maxims in order to mislead the hearers. It was noticed from the interview that Assad flouted the maxims because he wanted to show that he was not against his people and he wanted to send an implied message to the world that there was nothing to be worried about the state of his country. He tried to give a portrayal that the situation in his country (at the time the interview was conducted) was under control in order to prevent international interference in the situation.

V. CONCLUSION

The Syrian leader blatantly flouted the maxims during the interview because he thought that he would convince the people. In fact, he flouted the maxims in such an artistic and confident way to gain social power and public favour. Political leaders, especially always colour their choices of answers to produce particular shares of meanings which are not always conceivable to hearers unless they have some background knowledge about the context. In addition, it can be observed that leaders use words to manipulate the thoughts of the people to gain support from the masses. This skill is universal for the politicians all over the world to win the support of the public in favour of their policies and goals, which is especially true for the case of Assad.

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