

BREAKING THE RULES: AN ANALYSIS OF FLOUTING MAXIM IN JOKER (2019)

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Abstract

This study examines the flouting of conversational maxims in the film *Joker* (2019) using Grice's Cooperative Principle. Pragmatics highlights that speakers do not always communicate meaning directly, and maxim flouting becomes a strategy to express hidden intentions, emotional states, or social criticism. Although several studies have explored maxim flouting in various films, limited research focuses on how linguistic flouting in *Joker* reflects psychological instability and social conflict. This research uses a mixed-method descriptive qualitative method by analyzing selected utterances from the *Joker* transcript that demonstrate deliberate flouting of the Maxims of Quantity, Quality, Relation, and Manner. Each utterance was examined based on context and the type of maxim flouted to uncover its pragmatic implications. The findings show that the Maxim of Relation is the most frequently flouted (43.5%), followed by Quantity (22.6%), Quality (19.4%), and Manner (14.5%). These patterns indicate that characters often respond irrelevantly or shift topics, suggesting avoidance, emotional distancing, or attempts to challenge social norms. The maxim flouting reflects Arthur's psychological tension, expresses sarcasm or concealed messages, highlights power relations between characters, and strengthens the film's social critique. By violating expected conversational norms, Arthur and other characters communicate meanings that cannot be expressed directly, such as frustration, resistance, or emotional pain. In conclusion, flouting maxims in *Joker* functions as a narrative device that conveys character development and thematic depth. The study contributes to pragmatic research by showing how linguistic strategies in film dialogue reveal complex psychological and social dimensions.

Keywords: Flouting Maxim, Maxim, Linguistics, *Joker* (2019), Pragmatics

INTRODUCTION

Language serves as a bridge between minds, transforming private thoughts into shared understanding. It allows individuals to express feelings, convey intentions, and build the social relationships that shape human life. According to Noam Chomsky, language is not merely a set of arbitrary symbols but a natural cognitive system that develops in every human through environmental interaction (Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy, n.d.). This view implies that language is both a mental faculty and a social practice, one that enables people to think, share, and cooperate within society. In this sense, language becomes the foundation of every human interaction, and its use reflects both cognitive ability and cultural awareness.

In the study of linguistics, pragmatics plays a crucial role in understanding how people use language in real-life contexts. Rather than focusing solely on grammatical correctness or literal meaning, pragmatics explores how meaning is shaped by situation, intention, and shared understanding between interlocutors (Yule, 1996). It highlights that what a person says is often different from what they mean, and that the listener must infer intended meaning from context. Through this lens, communication becomes a complex interplay of linguistic choices and social signals, which makes pragmatics an essential tool for analyzing not only daily conversation but also language use in media, literature, and film.

One of the most influential theories within pragmatics is H. P. Grice's Cooperative Principle (1975). Grice proposed that successful communication relies on cooperation between speaker and listener, which he explained through four conversational maxims: the Maxim of Quantity (be as informative as required), the Maxim of Quality (be truthful), the Maxim of Relation (be relevant), and the Maxim of Manner (be clear). When these maxims are followed, communication proceeds effectively and smoothly. However, real-life communication rarely follows these principles perfectly, as speakers often have multiple motives, emotional, social, or strategic, that lead them to deviate from these norms. When speakers deliberately violate these conversational principles, they engage in what Grice called flouting maxims. Flouting occurs when someone intentionally breaks a maxim to imply a meaning that differs from the literal one. For instance, replying "What a

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brilliant idea!” sarcastically to a bad suggestion flouts the Maxim of Quality. Levinson (1983) notes that flouting is not about misleading others but about stimulating inference, inviting the listener to read between the lines. This phenomenon demonstrates that meaning is not fixed within words but emerges dynamically from interaction. Thus, flouting maxims becomes a pragmatic act that enhances expressiveness, irony, and emotional depth in communication.

Several scholars have studied how flouting maxims operates across various forms of media and conversation. Nursanti (2015) analyzed maxim flouting in *The Hunger Games* and discovered that characters often flout the Maxim of Relation to express rebellion and critique societal power. Similarly, Sunggu and Afriana (2020) examined *Wonder Woman* and found that the Maxim of Relation was the most frequently flouted, used to express emotional resistance or avoidance. Meanwhile, Holifatunnisa and Wuryandari (2023) analyzed *The Adam Project* and concluded that the Maxim of Manner was most dominant, often used to create humor or conceal information. These studies illustrate how maxim flouting can serve diverse functions ranging from satire to emotional tension, depending on genre and context. The current research expands on this body of work by examining *Joker* (2019), a film that uses language not for humor or heroism but for psychological complexity and social critique.

Film serves as a powerful medium for studying language because it combines dialogue, gesture, and context into a single communicative experience. As Bordwell and Thompson (2013) argue, films construct meaning through the interplay of verbal and non-verbal codes that reflect human behavior and emotion. Every line of dialogue can reveal character traits, power relations, or ideological messages. Thus, examining film language pragmatically allows researchers to interpret not only what characters say, but why they say it, and how it shapes the audience’s perception of reality. Through this lens, a film becomes a rich site for investigating how linguistic phenomena like flouting maxims contribute to characterization and thematic depth.

In *Joker* (2019), directed by Todd Phillips, these pragmatic dynamics are especially prominent. The film follows Arthur Fleck, a struggling comedian who experiences social rejection and a mental breakdown until he transforms into the infamous Joker. Arthur’s speech frequently violates Grice’s maxims: he speaks ambiguously, over-explains, or makes ironic remarks that contradict reality. His linguistic deviations are not random; they reflect his psychological disintegration and his alienation from society. Every instance of flouting carries emotional weight, whether it is a plea for recognition, a sign of frustration, or a rebellion against societal hypocrisy. In this way, language becomes a reflection of Arthur’s fractured identity and his gradual descent into chaos.

Moreover, the film’s use of maxim flouting extends not only beyond Arthur’s individual struggle but also functions as a commentary on society’s failure to listen. When characters ignore or mock Arthur, communication breaks down, and irony becomes his only means of expression. His sarcastic tone and distorted jokes flout conversational norms as a way of reclaiming agency in a world that dismisses him. This aligns with the idea that flouting maxims can serve as a tool of social resistance, where speakers use indirectness to challenge authority, expose injustice, or express emotional pain that cannot be stated directly.

Given these observations, this research aims to identify and analyze the types and functions of flouted maxims in *Joker* (2019) by using Grice’s Cooperative Principle (1975) as the theoretical framework. Specifically, it seeks to answer two questions: (1) What types of conversational maxims are flouted by characters in *Joker* (2019)? And (2) what pragmatic purposes do these flouting serve in conveying the film’s message? By addressing these questions, this study contributes to understanding how pragmatic strategies shape cinematic narratives and how linguistic flouting can reflect psychological and social realities.

Ultimately, this study argues that flouting maxims in *Joker* (2019) is not a linguistic error but a deliberate narrative and psychological device. Through irony, ambiguity, and exaggerated dialogue, the film reveals inner conflict and critiques societal indifference. By examining these pragmatic choices, the study highlights how language can function as both a mirror and a weapon, exposing the hidden emotions behind madness, isolation, and the desperate human need to be heard. Thus, *Joker* becomes more than a story of transformation; it is a study of communication itself, about how language, when broken, still speaks volumes.

Furthermore, pragmatics highlights that communication is not merely about transferring information but also negotiating social identities, power dynamics, and emotional positions. As Thomas (1995) emphasizes, speakers use indirectness, ambiguity, or exaggeration not because they cannot speak directly, but because indirect forms often carry richer social meaning. In *Joker*, this is evident when characters use flouting to mask vulnerability or assert dominance. For instance, Arthur frequently uses overelaboration or ironic statements when confronting authority figures, signaling feelings he cannot express overtly. This demonstrates that maxim

flouting can serve as a psychological shield, enabling speakers to navigate uncomfortable or oppressive environments by shaping meaning beyond literal language.

Moreover, the complex nature of communication in film aligns with the view that meaning is constructed through a multilayered interplay of speech, tone, gesture, and situational cues. McNeill (1992) argues that gesture and speech form a unified communicative system, producing meaning together rather than separately. This concept is particularly relevant in *Joker*, where Arthur's non-verbal expressions, awkward laughter, strained smiles, and hesitant pauses, interact with his linguistic flouting to reveal inner conflict. His tendency to violate the Maxim of Manner, for example, is reinforced by gestures that obscure his intentions, creating an unsettling communicative style. Thus, analyzing maxim flouting in film requires attention not only to words but also to how physical expression amplifies pragmatic meaning.

In addition, psychological instability in characters can influence how conversational norms are followed or broken. According to Culpeper (2011), deviations from expected linguistic behavior often signal emotional strain or interpersonal conflict in dramatic narratives. Arthur's inconsistent adherence to conversational maxims, sometimes overly detailed, other times evasive or fragmented, reflects fluctuations in his mental state. His disorganized responses, such as singing instead of answering questions, demonstrate how mental distress can manifest through pragmatic breakdown. This aligns with the broader notion that pragmatic failure or deliberate flouting can indicate deeper psychological themes within a narrative, making it a valuable tool for understanding character development.

The film's socio-economic backdrop further intensifies the role of pragmatic flouting. As Fairclough (2001) notes, language practices are shaped by social structures, including inequality, marginalization, and institutional power. *Joker* depicts a society marked by economic collapse, inadequate healthcare, and widespread apathy, conditions that influence how characters communicate. When individuals feel ignored or oppressed, they may resort to indirect or subversive forms of expression. Arthur's flouting of maxims, particularly Relation and Manner, becomes a linguistic reaction to systemic neglect. His deviations highlight not only personal instability but also the broader failure of social systems to support vulnerable individuals. Pragmatic analysis, therefore, reveals how language use reflects structural injustice embedded within the narrative.

Finally, the significance of analyzing maxim flouting in *Joker* extends beyond linguistic curiosity; it offers insight into how films construct critique through communication. As Bordwell (2008) explains, narrative cinema often embeds psychological and ideological messages within dialogue patterns, making language a key site of thematic revelation. By examining how characters in *Joker* intentionally violate conversational norms, the study uncovers layers of meaning related to alienation, social disconnection, and moral ambiguity. These patterns show that the film's message is not conveyed only through plot events but also through the subtle ways language breaks down. Thus, exploring maxim flouting enriches the understanding of *Joker* as a text that uses pragmatic distortion to portray societal decay and the fragile boundaries between sanity and chaos.

Pragmatics is the study of meaning as communicated by a speaker and interpreted by a listener in a specific context (Yule, 1996). It explores how utterances convey implied meanings or can be called implicatures, rather than literal interpretations. Pragmatics considers context, speaker intention, tone, and shared background knowledge, making it essential in understanding indirect or ironic communication, such as maxim flouting. In this sense, pragmatics moves beyond the structural form of language and focuses on how meaning emerges dynamically through interaction. It highlights how speakers often rely on subtle cues, such as hesitation, emphasis, or deliberate vagueness, to shape interpretation. Because meaning is negotiated, not fixed, pragmatics shows how listeners constantly infer what the speaker truly intends, especially when the literal words seem insufficient or misleading. This framework becomes particularly important in analyzing dialogues where characters use language to hide emotions, express sarcasm, avoid confrontation, or challenge social expectations. Moreover, the pragmatic perspective reveals how interpersonal relationships, power dynamics, and psychological states can be reflected through the ways speakers choose to follow or deviate from conversational norms. As a result, pragmatics provides the conceptual foundation for understanding why flouting maxims can be a powerful communicative strategy, allowing characters to express meanings that are deeper, more complex, or more emotionally charged than their surface-level utterances suggest.

Grice (1975) proposes four conversational maxims: Quantity, Quality, Relation, and Manner that guide cooperative communication and shape how meaning is constructed in interaction. The Maxim of Quantity requires speakers to provide information that is sufficiently informative without being excessive, while the Maxim of Quality emphasizes truthfulness and prohibits saying what one believes to be false or lacks evidence for. The Maxim of Relation insists on relevance, expecting speakers to contribute utterances that align with the conversational context, and the Maxim of Manner concerns clarity, urging speakers to avoid ambiguity, obscurity, and disorganized expression. When these maxims are deliberately flouted, speakers intentionally violate the surface rules of conversation to generate conversational implicatures, prompting listeners to infer

meaning beyond the literal utterance (Levinson, 1983; Thomas, 1995). Flouting Quantity often produces implicatures through insufficient or excessive information, flouting Quality may generate irony or deception, flouting Relation typically signals avoidance or redirection, and flouting Manner can indicate emotional disturbance or stylistic intention (Cutting, 2002; Grundy, 2008). In cinematic dialogue, such strategic flouting enriches characterization and narrative complexity by revealing hidden motives, emotional states, and interpersonal dynamics.

Flouting maxims occurs when a speaker intentionally breaks one or more of Grice's conversational maxims to generate an implied meaning or conversational implicature. According to Levinson (1983), flouting is not a form of deception but a communicative act that invites the listener to infer hidden intentions. Scholars such as Thomas (1995) and Grundy (2000) note that flouting maxims plays an important role in everyday conversation and creative media such as film or literature. It enables characters to express attitudes indirectly, create humor, and build relationships through implied meaning. Beyond these interpersonal functions, flouting can also serve psychological and ideological purposes, such as expressing resistance, masking vulnerability, or critiquing social norms. Because speakers often flout maxims when they cannot or choose not to speak directly, these violations reveal how meaning is strategically shaped to manage emotions, protect identity, or manipulate the listener's interpretation. In this way, flouting maxims becomes a window into the speaker's inner state and the social pressures surrounding them, making it a highly valuable tool for analyzing character behavior.

Film language combines verbal and visual elements that express emotion, ideology, and culture (Bordwell & Thompson, 2013). Dialogues in films not only advance the plot but also reveal psychological depth and social dynamics. Analyzing film dialogue through pragmatic theory helps interpret character motivation, power relations, and symbolic meanings behind speech acts. This approach reveals how characters may use indirectness to negotiate dominance, challenge authority, or convey emotional turmoil that is not explicitly stated. Because films integrate tone, facial expression, gesture, and setting, the pragmatic meaning of an utterance often depends on how it interacts with visual cues. Thus, studying flouting maxims in film provides a richer understanding of not only what is said, but how it resonates within the visual narrative. This intersection between linguistic theory and cinematic storytelling enables researchers to explore how indirect communication enhances narrative impact, deepens thematic interpretation, and shapes the audience's perception of character development.

METHOD

This research employs a mixed-method approach by combining a descriptive qualitative approach to analyze the flouting of conversational maxims in the 2019 film *Joker*. The methodology centers on the in-depth examination of utterances in the film's dialogues that deliberately violate Grice's Cooperative Principle, which includes the maxims of Quantity, Quality, Relation, and Manner (Grice, 1975). The primary data source is the research is the full dialogue script of the film *Joker* (2019). The unit of analysis in this study is a single utterance defined as one character's turn in dialogue. Although dialogue from multiple characters was analyzed, particular attention was given to Arthur Fleck as the main character, as he produced the majority of maxim flouting in the film.

The data collection procedure followed several systematic steps. First, the film was watched multiple times to understand narrative context, character relationships, and situational background. Second, the transcript was examined line by line to identify utterances that potentially flouted conversational maxims. Third, each utterance was cross-checked with its scene context to confirm intentional flouting rather than accidental conversational breakdown. Fourth, confirmed utterances were recorded and categorized according to the maxim flouted.

A total of 62 utterances were selected as data. The identification and counting of data were conducted manually by examining the entire movie script line by line. Each utterance was counted once based on its dominant type of maxim flouting, resulting in 62 data items. After classification, the frequency of each type of maxim flouting was calculated. Percentages were obtained by dividing the frequency of each maxim by the total number of data items (62) and multiplying the result by 100%. These quantitative results support the qualitative interpretation presented in the discussion section.

The qualitative analysis interprets the selected utterances within their narrative and social contexts to explore how pragmatic deviations convey psychological states, social tensions, and ideological meanings. This interpretative process follows qualitative research principles emphasizing contextual meaning-making (Denzin & Lincoln, 2018; Creswell & Poth, 2018) and is grounded in pragmatic theories proposed by Grice (1975), Thomas (1995), Yule (1996), and Cutting (2002). Through this mixed-method procedure, the study ensures a systematic and transparent analysis of maxim flouting as a purposeful narrative strategy in the film.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Findings

The following table presents a summary of the flouting maxims found in *Joker* (2019). A total of 62 data items were selected based on explicit inclusion criteria. Each instance in the dataset has been classified according to Grice's (1975) four categories: flouting the maxims of Quantity, Quality, Relation, and Manner based on the theoretical framework discussed earlier. This table provides an overview of how often each maxim is flouted and serves as a basis for the analysis in the next section.

Table 1. Frequency of Maxim Flouts

No.	Flouting Maxims	Frequency	Percentage
1.	Maxim of Relation	27	43,5%
2.	Maxim of Quantity	14	22,6%
3.	Maxim of Quality	12	19,4%
4.	Maxim of Manner	9	14.5%
	Total	62	

DISCUSSIONS

Flouting Maxim of Relation

Example 1

PENNY: *He must not be getting my letters.*

ARTHUR: *It's Thomas Wayne, Mom. He's a busy man.*

In this dialogue, Penny expresses her concern about Thomas Wayne not responding to her letters, which implies she expects Arthur to comment on whether the letters might truly be reaching him or to provide reassurance. Instead, Arthur responds by stating that Thomas Wayne is a busy man, which does not address Penny's underlying worry about whether he is intentionally ignoring her. According to Grice (1975), the Maxim of Relation requires a contribution to be relevant to the preceding utterance, meaning that the response should directly connect to Penny's concern. Arthur's reply diverts the topic away from the issue, creating an interpretive gap.

As Levinson (1983) explains, flouting relevance often prompts the listener to seek an additional layer of meaning. In this case, Arthur's irrelevance implies discomfort with Penny's delusion and a desire to avoid discussing it openly. This creates an implicature: Arthur indirectly signals that he does not wish to further discuss the topic. Thomas (1995) notes that speakers often flout relevance to protect themselves emotionally or to reduce interpersonal conflict. Here, Arthur avoids confronting Penny's obsession by offering a deflective response, thus revealing his internal frustration and emotional exhaustion.

Example 2

SOCIAL WORKER: *Arthur, I have some bad news for you.*

ARTHUR: *You don't listen, do you? I don't think you ever really hear me. You just ask the same questions every week. "How's your job? Are you having any negative thoughts?" All I have are negative thoughts, but you don't listen anyway. I said, for my whole life, I didn't know if I even really existed. But I do. And people are starting to notice.*

Arthur's reply completely disregards the social worker's introduction about having "bad news." Instead of asking about the news or responding to it in any way, Arthur launches into a long expression of emotional frustration. Because his response does not address the social worker's intended message, he flouts the Maxim of Relation. According to Grice (1975), relevance is crucial for cooperative communication; deviation from it indicates a deliberate choice to break conversational expectations.

Arthur's shift from the "bad news" to an emotional monologue is meaningful. Thomas (1995) explains that flouting relevance often signals deeper interpersonal issues or emotional distress. Arthur's irrelevant response creates an implicature that the "bad news" is insignificant to him compared to the lifelong psychological pain he wants to express. Levinson (1983) adds that such violations guide the listener to infer meaning beyond the literal words, in this case, Arthur's accumulated resentment and the sense of not being understood. His violation of relevance thus serves as an emotional release and an attempt to reclaim control over the conversation.

Example 3

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SOCIAL WORKER: *Have you been keeping up with your journal?*

ARTHUR: *I've been using it as a journal, but also as a joke diary. Funny thoughts or observations. I think I told you I'm pursuing a career in stand-up comedy.*

The social worker's question seeks a simple, task-oriented answer about whether Arthur has maintained his journal. Instead, Arthur introduces new topics, his joke diary, his observations, and his career aspirations. His response diverges from the narrow scope of the question, thus flouting the Maxim of Relation. Grice (1975) states that conversational contributions must be directly relevant; Arthur's shift to unrelated information breaks this expectation.

This irrelevance generates implicatures regarding Arthur's emotional state and desire for validation. As Yule (1996) notes, flouting Relation often occurs when speakers prefer to discuss topics that reflect their internal concerns rather than the one at hand. Arthur's diversion to his comedy dreams suggests insecurity and a need to be seen beyond his mental condition. Thomas (1995) argues that speakers flout relevance when the original topic provokes discomfort or when they seek to reveal something indirectly. Arthur's response suggests avoidance of the therapeutic evaluation and instead redirects the conversation toward his personal fantasies and coping mechanisms.

Example 4

MURRAY: *But in all seriousness, I mean, these rats are...*

ARTHUR: *I love you, Murray!*

Murray introduces a serious continuation of their conversation, signaling a shift from humor to a meaningful remark. Arthur's sudden outburst, "I love you, Murray!", is completely disconnected from the topic of rats and derails the conversational direction. This is a direct violation of the Maxim of Relation because his response bears no connection to the preceding utterance (Grice, 1975).

The irrelevance here is intentional and meaningful. Levinson (1983) argues that when a speaker deliberately offers an irrelevant response, the hearer must infer a hidden meaning or emotional motive. Arthur's unrelated expression of affection suggests an attempt to impress Murray or gain approval, revealing his deep-seated desire for recognition. According to Thomas (1995), such flouting often expresses emotional vulnerability or attempts to manage social identity within an interaction. Arthur's remark, therefore, functions as an implicature of admiration and longing for acceptance, masking insecurity through irrelevance.

Example 5

PENNY: *Did you hear that noise?*

ARTHUR: *I'm watching an old war movies.*

Penny asks a clear, specific question about whether Arthur heard a particular noise. Arthur's response does not address the noise but instead shifts to a different topic, informing her what he is watching. This lack of relevance constitutes a flouting of the Maxim of Relation, as the response does not answer the question posed (Grice, 1975).

The irrelevance here creates a meaningful implication. Levinson (1983) explains that flouting relevance often signals avoidance or concealment. Arthur's response indirectly suggests that he does not want Penny to know the real source of the noise, which, in the context of the film (his gun dropping), would alarm her. This aligns with Yule's (1996) view that speakers sometimes flout the maxim of relation to prevent uncomfortable consequences. Thus, Arthur's irrelevant response is a protective strategy, masking the dangerous truth while forcing Penny to draw her own inferences.

Flouting Maxim of Quantity

Example 1

PENNY: *You sure you looked? Sometimes I don't know where your head is.*

ARTHUR: *Yes I'm sure. And my head's right here.*

In this interaction, Penny expects Arthur to give an informative, detailed answer about whether he actually checked what she asked. Instead of providing the necessary clarification, Arthur responds with a short, literal joke. His reply gives *less information than required*, which violates the Maxim of Quantity, since Grice (1975) states that speakers should make their contribution "as informative as required" for the purposes of the exchange. Arthur's minimalism forces Penny to infer that he is avoiding the topic or refusing to engage seriously. According to Thomas (1995), speakers often flout Quantity when they want to evade responsibility or deflect emotional tension. Arthur's joke functions as such an avoidance strategy, masking discomfort through

under-informativeness.

Example 2

ARTHUR: *I want to get it right. Knock, knock*

MURRAY: *Who's there?*

ARTHUR: *It's the police, ma'am. Your son's been hit by a drunk driver. He's dead.*

Here, Arthur provides *far more information than a typical knock-knock joke requires*. Instead of giving a short, predictable punchline, he delivers an overly detailed and shocking statement. This violates the Maxim of Quantity by providing *too much* information. Levinson (1983) notes that over-informativeness is a common flouting strategy used to create irony or dramatic impact. Arthur's excessive detail creates a disturbing contrast with the expected structure of a joke, producing dark humor. His over-disclosure also functions as a form of provocation, highlighting his resentment toward Murray and the audience. As Yule (1996) explains, speakers sometimes flout Quantity to generate strong emotional or social implications, which Arthur clearly intends here.

Example 3

MURRAY: *One more, Bernie. Let's see one more. I love this guy.*

ARTHUR: *It's funny, when I was a little boy and told people I was gonna be a comedian, everyone laughed at me. Well, no one's laughing now.*

MURRAY: *You can say that again, pal!*

Arthur provides a lengthy personal anecdote that goes beyond the conversational requirements. Murray's cue only invites a short performance, yet Arthur responds with an emotionally charged narrative. His contribution exceeds what is needed, thus flouting the Maxim of Quantity. According to Thomas (1995), speakers often flout Quantity to reveal deeper feelings indirectly. Arthur's excessive explanation implies his long-standing bitterness at being mocked, reinforcing the emotional undertone of the scene. Levinson (1983) emphasizes that such over-informative statements push the audience to interpret the underlying psychological significance rather than the literal meaning. Here, Arthur's oversharing reveals his resentment and desire to reclaim dignity.

Example 4

HOYT: *Kenny's Music... the guy said you disappeared. Never even returned his sign.*

ARTHUR: *No. I got jumped. Didn't you hear?*

Hoyt's question calls for a full explanation about why Arthur failed to return the sign. Instead of giving a complete account, Arthur offers a very brief and vague answer. His response is *under-informative*, leaving significant gaps about what happened. Grice (1975) asserts that insufficient detail constitutes a flouting of Quantity. By withholding information, Arthur signals reluctance to disclose the truth. As Yule (1996) notes, speakers flout Quantity when the actual explanation is embarrassing or incriminating. Arthur's short reply creates an implicature that something more complicated or shameful occurred, which he does not want to elaborate.

Example 5

PENNY: *Did you check the mail?*

ARTHUR: *Yes, Ma. Nothing. No letter.*

Arthur responds with minimal, clipped statements that provide only surface-level information. Penny may expect details about when he checked or what he found, but Arthur's reply restricts the amount of information. This brevity flouts the Maxim of Quantity. Thomas (1995) explains that speakers use such minimalism to shut down further conversation or avoid emotionally charged topics. Here, Arthur conveys fatigue or irritation by refusing to elaborate, creating an implicature that the conversation is unwelcome or distressing.

Flouting Maxim of Quality

Example 1

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PENNY: *Happy, what makes you think you could do that?*

ARTHUR: *“What do you mean?”*

PENNY: *I mean, don’t you have to be funny to be a comedian?*

Penny’s comment implicitly states that Arthur is *not* funny, though she has no objective evidence to support such a claim. Her utterance is sarcastic and intentionally hurtful. According to Grice (1975), the Maxim of Quality requires speakers to avoid saying what they believe to be false or lacking evidence. Penny’s sarcastic insinuation is a form of flouting because she communicates meaning indirectly through irony rather than literal truth. Thomas (1995) highlights that speakers often flout Quality to express criticism indirectly. Penny’s utterance therefore functions as an implicature of disapproval, revealing her dismissive attitude.

Example 2

PENNY (O.S.): *Arthur? What was that noise?*

ARTHUR: *I’m watching an old war movie.*

PENNY: *Turn it down!*

ARTHUR: *I know. The Americans are really giving it to the Japs.*

The noise Penny hears is actually Arthur dropping a gun, but he lies to conceal this fact. His response is deliberately false, directly violating the Maxim of Quality. Grice (1975) states that giving information believed to be untrue constitutes a clear flouting of this maxim. Arthur extends the lie by adding exaggerated details about the “war movie,” suggesting his awareness of the need to make the lie believable. Levinson (1983) argues that speakers often embellish lies to reinforce false implicatures. Arthur uses over-description to distract Penny, creating the implicature that nothing unusual occurred.

Example 3

GENE UFLAND: *Did you hear what happened on the subway? Some clown got killed.*

JOKER: *No. I hadn’t heard.*

Arthur is fully aware of the subway incident because he was the one who committed the murders. His statement is intentionally false. Grice (1975) identifies lying as a direct violation of the Maxim of Quality, and Arthur’s denial exemplifies this. Thomas (1995) notes that such flouting is used to conceal guilt or avoid consequences. Arthur’s lie is strategic, signaling his desire to maintain anonymity and avoid detection.

Example 4

ARTHUR: *Everyone says my stand-up is ready for the big clubs.*

Arthur exaggerates by claiming universal praise without any evidence. Such overgeneralization violates the Maxim of Quality. Yule (1996) states that speakers flout Quality when exaggeration or overstatement is used to express insecurity or fantasy. Arthur’s inflated claim reveals his desire for validation and his fragile self-esteem, creating an implicature about his psychological state.

Example 5

ARTHUR: *I don’t know what you’re talking about, Randall.*

Arthur clearly knows what Randall means by the gun incident, but he pretends ignorance. His insincere denial is a deliberate flouting of Quality. Levinson (1983) emphasizes that strategic lying often serves to escape accountability or conflict. Arthur’s false statement creates the implicature that he wants to distance himself from the consequences of being exposed.

Flouting Maxim of Manner

Example 1 RANDALL: *You okay?*

ARTHUR: *It was just a bunch of kids. I should have left it alone.*

RANDALL: *No, they’ll take everything from you if you do that. All the crazy shit out there, they’re animals.*

Randall responds with disorganized, emotionally charged language. His vague expressions (“crazy shit out there,” “they’re animals”) create ambiguity and lack clarity. The Maxim of Manner requires speakers to avoid obscurity and be orderly (Grice, 1975). Randall’s unclear phrasing forces Arthur to guess his meaning, showing a flout in this maxim. According to Thomas (1995), speakers often violate Manner when overwhelmed

emotionally, resulting in imprecise language that conveys fear or aggression rather than clarity.

Example 2

ARTHUR: (*Arthur talking to his neighbor Sophie in the elevator and after that makes a gun gesture with his hand and pretends to shoot himself*).

Arthur uses an ambiguous nonverbal gesture instead of clear speech. Because the gesture can be interpreted in multiple ways, humor, despair, or violence. It violates the Maxim of Manner by creating intentional obscurity. Grice (1975) highlights that unclear or ambiguous communication constitutes a flout of Manner. As Yule (1996) notes, speakers may flout this maxim to communicate emotions indirectly. Here, Arthur's gesture externalizes his inner turmoil in a symbolic, rather than explicit, form.

Example 3

MURRAY: *How's that goin' for ya?*

JOKER: [*just smile silently, gives no answer*].

Arthur's silence replaces the expected verbal answer. His ambiguous expression offers no clarity or structure, violating the Maxim of Manner. Thomas (1995) argues that silence can be a powerful flouting strategy, forcing the listener to interpret emotional or relational meaning. Arthur's wordlessness suggests tension, unpredictability, or hidden intentions.

Example 4

RANDALL: *You didn't kill those guys on the subway, did you?*

ARTHUR: [*singing while smiling strangely*] *isn't it rich? Are we a pair?*

Instead of giving a clear response to a serious question, Arthur sings a cryptic line. This creates obscurity and confusion, directly flouting the Maxim of Manner. Levinson (1983) notes that speakers sometimes respond with theatrical or coded language to mask their true intentions. Arthur's musical reply implies emotional instability and dark amusement, creating an implicature that he finds the question irrelevant or ironic.

Example 5

SOCIAL WORKER: *Arthur... is something funny?*

ARTHUR: [*Still laughing, struggling to breathe, hands her the laughter card silently*].

The social worker expects a verbal explanation, but Arthur uses a nonverbal card while still laughing uncontrollably. His meaning becomes unclear until the card is read, suggesting intentional ambiguity. According to Grice (1975), failure to provide clear and orderly information violates the Maxim of Manner. Arthur's method of communication forces the listener to interpret the situation and reinforces his inability to express himself through conventional language.

CONCLUSION

This study concludes that flouting conversational maxims in *Joker* (2019) plays a crucial role in revealing the psychological tension and social disconnection experienced by the characters, especially Arthur. The frequent flouting of the Maxim of Relation demonstrates how Arthur often avoids direct answers or shifts topics in ways that force the listener to infer unstated meanings. This pattern aligns with Grice's explanation that relevance violations encourage the hearer to search for deeper implicatures beyond the literal utterance, which in Arthur's case often reflect emotional discomfort, confusion, or an attempt to escape confrontation.

Flouting the Maxims of Quantity and Quality further reflects Arthur's attempt to manage or conceal information, either by providing too little, too much, or by giving untruthful statements. These strategies reveal how Arthur negotiates his social reality by controlling how much truth he exposes. His speech often functions as a protective shield, either to hide vulnerability or to craft a version of himself he wishes others would see. Levinson's view that speakers manipulate informational content to shape interpretation is strongly evident here, as Arthur's inconsistent or exaggerated responses become a window into his unstable sense of identity and shifting grasp on reality.

Meanwhile, violations of the Maxim of Manner highlight Arthur's ambiguity, unclear responses, and nonverbal communication. These disorderly or indirect expressions create complex implicatures that contribute to the portrayal of Arthur's mental fragmentation. His gestures, silences, and unusual ways of responding show

that his communication is not merely linguistically deviant but deeply tied to his psychological struggles. Thomas' argument that meaning depends not just on what is said but how it is delivered is reflected in the film's portrayal of Arthur's deteriorating communicative stability. His unclear manner of expression mirrors his growing inability to navigate social norms or maintain coherent interactions.

Overall, maxim flouting in *Joker* is not random but serves as a carefully crafted narrative device that communicates Arthur's emotional instability, identity struggle, and increasing detachment from society. These pragmatic violations enrich the film's psychological depth by revealing motivations, fears, and frustrations that Arthur cannot express directly. The flouting also underscores broader themes of alienation, societal neglect, and the consequences of being repeatedly dismissed or misunderstood. Through indirect, exaggerated, ambiguous, or irrelevant responses, the film illustrates how language can fail or be deliberately disrupted when individuals are pushed to the margins of society.

In essence, this study demonstrates that conversational maxims provide a powerful analytical framework for understanding how film dialogue creates layered meaning. The pragmatic deviations found in *Joker* show that even when language breaks down, it still communicates powerful messages about character development, social identity, and emotional experience. By examining how Arthur flouts these maxims, we gain deeper insight into his transformation and the film's critique of a society that overlooks suffering until it erupts into chaos.

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