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# КОГНИТИВНЫЕ СТРАТЕГИИ: ОТ СЛОВА К ТЕКСТУ

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## ON SOME PRAGMATIC AND COGNITIVE THEORIES APPLICABLE TO LITERARY DISCOURSE\*

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The aim of this paper is to expatiate upon the significance of conversational maxim, frame and schema theories and their applicability to literary works written in the tradition of absurd drama. In this vein, a close collaboration between linguistics and literature studies is established. In the age of interdisciplinarity, this seems not only possible but also vital. The methodological approaches underlying a linguistic analysis of absurd drama will be presented. These comprise Grice's theory of the Cooperative principle and maxims, frame theory by Pätzold, Minsky and Lakoff and schema theory by Short and Cook. The paper shows a possible application of the given linguistic concepts to selected excerpts from Alan Ayckbourn's play *My Wonderful Day* and signposts formation of linguistic elements symptomatic of the modern Theatre of the Absurd.

**Key words:** cooperative principle; conversational maxims; frame theory; schema theory; absurd drama.

### INTRODUCTION

Language being the foundation upon which literature is constructed, this paper will explore some linguistic ways in the light of pragmatic and cognitive theories which contribute to a deeper understanding of the workings of literary discourse. The present paper aspires to review the relationship between linguistics and literature, transgressing the conventional "lang-lit" divide and signposts benefits arising from the perspective of a combined approach. Borrowing first and foremost from Grice's theory of the Cooperative principle, maxims, frame and schema theories, the paper aims to analyse selected excerpts from A. Ayckbourn's contemporary absurd play *My Wonderful Day* (2011). The source of inspiration for this paper comes from American critic Stanley

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Fish who holds the view that “reading is not a process of discovering what the text means, but a process of experiencing what it *does*” [qtd. in 11. P. 211]. This succinct description of Fish’s position has also important pragmatic-cognitive implications which will be explored in this paper. As Fish implies, there can be as many literary interpretations of a text as there are readers. For this reason, I will abstain from this attempt in this paper and will focus primarily on the pragmatic-cognitive linguistic analysis embedded in literary discourse.

### 1. GRICE’S COOPERATIVE PRINCIPLE THEORY

The theory put forwarded by Herbert Paul Grice in 1975 has been of revolutionary significance for the field of pragmatics. Its overriding idea is that the conventional meaning is not arrived at through an analysis of sentence structures and its components but rather from what is being implied by an utterance at a “a deeper level”. Thus, the distinction between “what is said” and “what is meant” by the utterance was called into attention. Grice introduced a whole spectrum of linguistic notions into pragmatic theory. Most importantly, he worked out a comprehensive theory based on mutual cooperation between interlocutors of a conversation called the Cooperative principle. This is a set of guidelines for the efficient and effective use of language in conversation to further co-operative ends [7. P. 101]. The Cooperative principle (commonly abbreviated as CP) has become the basis for Grice’s well-known theory of conversational maxims according to which people form their utterances. These maxims specify what participants of a conversation have to do in order to converse in a maximally efficient, rational, and co-operative way; they should speak sincerely, relevantly and clearly, while providing sufficient information. In Grice’s own words, according to the Cooperative principle, one “should make [their] conversational contribution such as is required, at the stage at which it occurs, by the accepted purpose or direction of the talk exchange in which [we] are engaged” [5. P. 45].

There are four maxims proposed within Grice’s theory, noticeably the maxim of quality, quantity, relevance and manner, which are said to be embedded in human consciousness for the purpose of communicating to others and being understood. Moreover, Grice lists two rudimentary rules for each and every maxim. These are given in Table 1 below.

Table 1

**GRICE’S CONVERSATIONAL MAXIMS**

Maxim of Quality	Don't say what you believe to be false
	Don't say what you lack adequate evidence for
Maxim of Quantity	Make your contribution as informative as required
	Don't make your contribution more informative than is required
Maxim of Relevance	Make your contribution relevant
Maxim of Manner	Avoid obscurity of expression
	Avoid ambiguity
	Be brief
	Be orderly

The purpose of conversational maxims is to make an interlocutor's exchange truthful, sufficiently informative, relevant to the topic at hand and not ambiguous in terms of meaning. However, as Levinson [7. P. 102] observes, "no one actually speaks like that the whole time", which offers a breeding ground for the exchanges in the spirit of the Theatre of the Absurd.

In line with what conversational maxims stand for, Pätzold [9. P. 173] suggests that they should be apprehended as a device to move from what people say to what they actually mean. This means that even if maxims are oriented towards preserving the meaning, it is also possible to hide the meaning by not abiding them. Thus, conversational maxims can come into conflict with each other. While one maxim is being abided by, the other might be not. The process where a maxim is being broken or being not abided by is referred to as "flouting" a maxim.

The possible effect of not abiding by a maxim is, however, still considered to be understandable by the hearers, the reason being that "frequently interactants will deliberately 'flout' a maxim, on the well-founded assumption that the co-interactants(s) will be able to spot the violation and fill in the communicative 'gap' for themselves" [12. P. 204]. The implication is that even when the talk does not proceed according to their specifications, hearers assume that, contrary to appearances, the principles are nevertheless being adhered to at some deeper level [7. P. 102]. What has been further suggested is that the understanding of the communicative intentions is done by making logical sense of what has been said through interpreting the background knowledge known to the interlocutors themselves. However, it is far more common to come across the maxims being not adhered to in casual conversations than being followed. Despite not adhering fully to Grice's maxims, people will nonetheless interpret what has been said as if it is conformed to the maxims on at least some level [ibid: P. 103]. The cooperation between participants can only be granted if they are willing to infer the meaning according to the presupposed background knowledge and purpose of cooperative communication.

However, with regard to absurd drama, playwrights have frequently made use of uncooperativeness in order to arrive at unique effects. The characters of plays seldom adhere to given linguistic rules. As the case may be, humorous effects in conversation arise from flouting the maxims. Summing up, the credits of Grice's maxims and the cooperative principle are that they make it possible to analyse characters' unstated intentions beneath the surface level of the utterance.

Another great asset of Grice's theory is the elaboration of the notion of conversational implicature. This is the kind of meaning, where the hearer can easily infer the unstated meaning of the speaker. Implicature has a dual character where the message is implied by the speaker while, at the same time, it is being inferred by the hearer. According to Grandy [4, P. not given], what happens during conversations is not fully realized by the participants of conversation as people process conversational implicatures all the time and are mostly unaware of them.

## **2. FRAME THEORY**

The subject of the theory of frames forms a relatively recent study carried out by psychologists, linguists as well as technicians taking an interest in artificial intelligence.

As research into storing information in the human mind shows, it is unlikely that the facts we know about the world work as a disorganized list in our brain [see: 10. P. 227]. In this connection, a sharp line of demarcation should be drawn between two particular units of the memory system, i.e. frames and schemes.

According to Pätzold [9. P. 187], frames consist of common sense knowledge about some central concept, storing all the things which belong together, but they do not specify the order in which they will be done. Schemas, on the other hand, provide order for events and states and are arranged in a progression. It is thus clear that the difference between the two lies in the sequential order, present in schemas. In a contextual situation people often react according to information stored in their memories. It is frequently the background knowledge of the patterns that distinguishes actions towards cooperative exchanges of conversation. This makes the significance of interpreting the meaning of an utterance focus on the context in which it appears [see: 10. P. 222].

Tracing the interpretation of frames, a laboratory report *A Framework Representing Knowledge* by Minsky (1974) should not pass unnoticed. According to Minsky [8. P. 2], “when one encounters a new situation [...] one selects from memory a structure called a frame. This is a remembered framework to be adapted to fit reality by changing details as necessary”. The data is thus a stereotyped situation which is possible to be extracted from memory at any time and applied to a possible situation. Cognitively-speaking, frames collected into related systems are all joined and generate an event through which it is possible to recognize particular situations and react accordingly with occasional changes. Besides, Minsky sees a frame as a network of nodes and relations. While the “top levels” of a frame are fixed, and stand for things that are always true about the supposed situation, the lower levels have many “slots” that must be filled by specific instances or data [ibid.]. This means that packets of information stored as frames fill specific slots to which they are directed in specific situations. Frames are not inborn qualities in human beings but are learnt and categorized in the memory into hierarchies of importance and usage.

A significant treatment of frames has also been made by Lakoff (2007) in his work with a flamboyant title *Don't Think of an Elephant*. As he contends, “framing is about the ideas expressed by language and how well these ideas accord with reality and moral values”. Lakoff makes an important observation that every word evokes a frame and even the negation of a frame may evoke the frame in question.

### 3. SCHEMA THEORY

Although briefly touched upon in section 2, schemas are also of considerable importance within cognitive theories and deserve more detailed mention. Schemas are “organized representations of background knowledge” [10. P. 227] and are formed through experience with objects, people and events in the world. They had been recognized as structures already in Plato's old Greek philosophy and further developed as mental patterns by Kant.

As far as the representation of a scheme is concerned, Short compares the scheme to a “file” which can be inevitably found in a “filing cabinet” [Ibid.] This metaphorical

comparison epitomizes the organizational nature of schemas to preserve situations experienced previously. Similarly to frames, schemas may become up-dated from time to time as new information takes its shape.

Seen from a perspective of literary studies, an analysis of schemas has been an object of study of a good many linguists and many agree on the significance of applying their experimentation to literary works. Not only may the patterns of real life be seen as fictions, but also many fictions play a vital role in the establishment of our schemas. According to Cook [2. P. 23], certain uses of language may alter our representations of the world. This implies that certain texts may alter our schemata. That said, in the literary context, absurd drama may be seen as a sort of literature which is able to shift people's commonplace schemas. With its unexpected dialogue sequences, nonsensical situations and irrational plotlessness it disrupts conventional expectations of a dramatic performance. The schema theory as a helpful tool for analysing absurd drama is also acknowledged by Emmot and Alexander (2011). As they admit, "in the analysis of absurdist texts, schema theory can explain how alternative and bizzare worlds are created" [3. P. not given].

All in all, schemas play a vital role in the act of perception as they are stereotypical mental representations of reality which make sense of a particular fact, thus allowing one to grasp and come to terms with their world as well as the one presented in the realm of literature.

#### 4. SAMPLE ANALYSIS

Following is a sample analysis of three randomly selected excerpts taken from *My Wonderful Day* (2011) by a British absurdist playwright Sir Alan Ayckbourn. Before presenting an analysis, however, it ought to be emphasized that every person's scheme and frame may vary according to their background knowledge and cultural stimuli. For this reason, the ensuing analysis may be subject to varying interpretations from person to person due to their background knowledge and differing personal experience. Granted, the ensuing analysis is by no means exhaustive; its purpose is not analyse Ayckbourn's whole play in the suggested way but rather establish a close connection between linguistics and literature, which can contribute to an enhanced understanding of the workings of literary discourse.

##### Extract 1

- 1 *Tiffany: You must be so proud of her.*
- 2 *Laverne: (modestly) Yes, well ... I don't tell her that, though!*
- 3 *Tiffany: I bet her daddy's proud of her too. (to Winnie) I bet you're your daddy's pride and joy, aren't you?*
- 4 *Winnie: Non, mam'selle.*
- 5 *Tiffany: No? Non?*
- 6 *Winnie: Mon père n'est pas ici. Il depart depuis quelques mois.*
- 7 *Laverne: Her dad's gone.*
- 8 *Tiffany: Oh, I am so sorry. Was he very young?*
- 9 *Laverne: No, but she was. The one he went off with.*

- 10 *Tiffany: Oh. (realising) Oh, I see. I'm so sorry, I thought you meant he was...*
- 11 *Laverne: He was old enough to know better.*
- 12 *Tiffany: (Laverne's condition) And now you're -? Oh dear, how difficult for you. When's baby due?*
- 13 *Laverne: Another ten days.*
- 14 *Tiffany: Oh dear. Shouldn't you be...? I mean...?*
- 15 *Laverne: I can manage. Soon as he's arrived, we're off, aren't we girl? Soon as he's arrived...*
- 16 *Tiffany: Your husband?*
- 17 *Laverne: No, the baby! Not my husband, not him. We're best off without him, aren't we, Winnie?*
- 18 *Winnie does not reply. A short silence [in: 1. P. 18—19].*

As is evident from Extract 1, the conversation between the play's characters, Laverne and Tiffany involves the lack of background knowledge they share together. As the case may be, this happens to create misunderstandings. A noticeable trigger in the analysed exchanges is Winnie's French speaking, which she practices to everybody that day and which is to Tiffany's delight. However, what is crucial to a pragmatic and cognitive analysis, is that Tiffany relies on her frame with regard to the structure of traditional family without discussing the matter first. By Laverne's usage of an idiomatic expression concerning Winnie's father (i.e. *Her dad's gone*), Tiffany switches to another possible frame of Laverne having been widowed as a more suitable option than having a husband who leaves for another woman. Tragically enough, this is, however, the case of Winnie's family situation. From a cognitive angle, decoding of idioms requires shared knowledge [see: 13. P. 217]. Linguistically, the perplexity is brought upon Tiffany by an ambiguous use of the personal pronouns by Laverne, who flouts the maxim of manner in this fashion. In the case presented here the use of the idiom and an ambiguously used deictic element lead to a bewilderment. Outside the theatre of the absurd, however, it would be advisable not to use them for a cooperative conversational exchange.

### **Extract 2**

- 1 *Man: Sorry to drag you out, mate.*
- 2 *Josh: No, as I say, it was Colin's leaving do last night and one thing led to another, as you'll well know... (seeing Winnie) Hallo, hallo, who's this then? Where did this little thing spring from? Who are you then?*
- 3 *Man: Her kid. The cleaner's kid.*
- 4 *Josh: Hallo. You're pretty, aren't you? Like your mummy. Your mummy's pretty too. Hallo. Want to say hallo, do you?*
- 5 *Winnie: Bonjour, monsieur.*
- 6 *Josh: Eh?*
- 7 *Man: She doesn't speak English.*
- 8 *Josh: Really?*
- 9 *Man: She only speaks French.*
- 10 *Josh: Does she?*
- 11 *Man: Apparently.*
- 12 *Josh: Her mum speaks English.*
- 13 *Man: Oh, yes, she does.*

- 14 Josh: *How come she has a kid who only speaks French?*
- 15 Man: *(slightly impatient) I don't know, do I?*
- 16 Josh: *She must speak English if her mum does.*
- 17 Man: *I've never heard her speak English, anyway.*
- 18 Josh: *Do you speak English? Parlez-vous Anglais?*
- 19 Winnie: *Non, monsieur. Je ne parle pas l'anglais, pas aujourd'hui. Je parle seulement français le mardi.*
- 20 Josh: *What did she say?*
- 21 Man: *There you are, what did I tell you?*
- 22 Josh: *I never heard of that before. A mum who speaks English and a kid who -*
- 23 Man: *So, anyway. What did you find out, then? [in: 1. P. 34].*

Moving on to Extract 2, the conversation between Josh and Kevin Tate (Man) is interrupted when Josh takes notice of Winnie. His attempt to communicate with her is hampered by her not using the same language code. Even if Josh tries his best in French, he is having a hard time understanding Winnie's replies. By using French to French non-speakers Winnie overtly violates the maxim of manner bringing about confusion with her uncooperative behaviour. In the exchange under analysis, Josh concentrates on his embedded frame that it is unusual or most improbable that an English speaking parent would have a different language speaking child. This interpretation is clearly connected to the frames of bringing up a child where communication is essential part of the concept. In line 23, Mr. Tate does not concern any of it and decides to interrupt the flow of Josh's thoughts to discuss the topic desired by him, which can be thought of as an uncooperative behaviour.

### Extract 3

- 1 Winnie *gropes in her schoolbag and produces a chocolate bar which she opens and starts to eat. Josh returns and stares at her. He sits and watches Winnie as she eats.*
- 2 Josh: *Nice? Is that nice, then? It looks nice.*
- 3 Winnie *nods.*
- 4 Josh: *My daughter, Amber, she adores those. I've seen her eat, what, four of five of those, straight after the other. Why she isn't the size of a house, I do not know.*
- 5 Winnie *munches on.*
- 6 Josh: *(eyeing the remains of her bar, longingly) Mind you, can't blame her. Bit more-ish, those. Know what I mean? They're a bit more-ish. One is never enough, is it? I bet you can't eat just one. I bet you can't. I bet you've got another one hidden away somewhere. I bet you have haven't you?*
- 7 Winnie *nods.*
- 8 Josh: *Yes! I knew it. Got another one, haven't you? Sneaky!*
- 9 Winnie *nods.*
- 10 Josh: *Yes. Tell you what. Want to share your other one, do you? With me? Want to share it, eh?*
- 11 Winnie *shakes her head.*
- 12 Josh: *No? Come on. That's a bit mean, isn't it? Bit selfish. Ah! I know! I bet your mum told you not to share sweets with strangers, is that it?*
- 13 Winnie *nods.*
- 14 Josh: *Right. She's quite right. Fair enough. That's what I always say to Amber. Never trust strangers. They may look friendly...*
- 15 Winnie *finishes the bar and, scrumpling up the paper, look for somewhere to put it.*

- 16 *Josh: (indicating) There. The bin's just under there, do you see it?*
- 17 *Winnie moves to the unseen bin and disappears from view momentarily. Josh hesitates, trying to avoid temptation. He licks his lips and then, swooping on Winnie's schoolbag, starts to rifle through it searching for other chocolate bar. Winnie returns and catches him at it. Josh stops guiltily, his hand half inside the school bag. Winnie stares at him blankly. Josh withdraws his hand to find he is holding a book which has a bookmark sticking out.*
- 18 *Josh: (covering his tracks) Just having a look to see what you're reading. What's this, then? (Inspecting the cover) The Secret Garden... [in: 1. P. 49—50].*

Finally, in Extract 3 Josh has got two options to get away from the given situation. First, and generally considered morally right would be to acknowledge his wrong-doing and offer an apology to Winnie. The second possible solution is to lie boldly and search for a self-justification of his action. This is what he actually does with an excuse which does not sound very truthful, though. What drove Josh to this situation was not only hunger but his behaviour may have also been motivated by Winnie's attitude when she flatly refused to share her chocolate bar. A lack of compliance with a request often occurs in quotidian situations. However, a traditionally preferred frame connected with it is to do it covertly, offering an excuse or an apology. In the case presented here, Winnie bluntly shakes her head in disapprobation of Josh's request, which with a view to Grice's theory, is not what happens customarily. She in a sense abides by the maxims, she does not provide more information that is relevant (maxim of quantity) nor does she say something she does not believe in (maxim of quality). Thus, it may be argued that adhering to the maxims excessively can trigger off the feeling of the absurd in a normal situation.

### CONCLUSION

To conclude, from the performed analysis it follows that a pragmatic approach to dramatic texts based on Grice's theory focuses on interactional traits, attending to language as contextualized utterance rather than isolated sentences. Another consequence of a pragmatic approach is that it enables discourse analysts to go about texts as objects located in the real world rather than independent aesthetic artefacts, and to justify the interactive relationship between texts and their recipients. With regard to the cognitive approach, it may be suggested that textual linguistic choices, as far as frames and schemas are concerned, are related to the creation of an absurdist effect by their purposeful twisting. In sum, the presence of conversational maxims with their flouting or excessive adherence by interactants make an important source of strangeness in absurd plays. All in all, the paper has shown how selected pragmatic and cognitive theories may be used methodologically to enhance one's understanding of a literary text. In this fashion, a close collaboration between two seemingly irreconcilable worlds, i.e. linguistics and literature, is encouraged by the author.

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## **О НЕКОТОРЫХ ПРАГМАТИЧЕСКИХ И КОГНИТИВНЫХ ТЕОРИЯХ ПРИМЕНИТЕЛЬНО К ЛИТЕРАТУРНОМУ ДИСКУРСУ\***

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Цель данной публикации — обсудить важность конвенциональных максим, фреймовой и схематической теорий и их применимости к литературным произведениям написанных в традициях драмы абсурда. В этом ключе устанавливается тесное сотрудничество лингвистов и литературоведов. В эпоху междисциплинарности это представляется не только возможным, но и жизненно важным. В статье представлено методологическое осмысление, положенное в сонову лингвистического анализа языка драмы абсурда. Привлекается теория Грайса и его Принцип Кооперации, фреймовая теория Патцольда, Минского и Лакофф и теория схемы Шорта и Кука. Статья показывает возможность применения названных лингвистических концепций к отдельным фрагментам пьесы Алана Айкбоума *My Wonderful Day* и тем самым свидетельствует о формировании симпоматичных лингвистических компонентов применительно к произведениям современного Театра абсурда.

**Ключевые слова:** принцип кооперации, конвенциональные максимы, фреймовая теория, теория схемы, драма абсурда.

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