

## **The Motives for Flouting Maxims in Edward Albee's Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?**

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### **ABSTRACT**

This study investigates the motives for flouting Grice's conversational maxims in Edward Albee's *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* focusing on the psychological dynamics among the main characters: George, Martha, Nick, and Honey. This research employs a descriptive qualitative approach, using the play script as the primary data source. The data were collected through close reading and identification of utterances that indicate flouting of the maxims of Quantity, Quality, Relation, and Manner. The data were then analyzed using Grice's Cooperative Principle and categorized into four types of communicative motives: competitive, convivial, collaborative, and conflictive. The findings reveal a total of 101 instances of maxim flouting. Competitive motives were the most dominant (65 instances), reflecting power struggles and attempts to control conversations, particularly between George and Martha. Conflictive motives followed (33 instances), characterized by the use of false or exaggerated statements to provoke confrontation. Convivial (2 instances) and collaborative (1 instance) motives were less frequent, serving to maintain social harmony and mutual understanding. These findings demonstrate that the flouting of conversational maxims functions as a strategic linguistic tool to express emotional tension, manipulation, and relational conflict. This study contributes to the understanding of pragmatics in literary discourse by highlighting how language is used to reveal psychological complexity and intensify dramatic interaction.

**Keywords:** Conversational Maxims; Maxim Flouting; Pragmatics

### **INTRODUCTION**

In the field of pragmatics, Grice's theory of conversational maxims provides a fundamental framework for understanding how effective communication is achieved. The four maxims Quantity, Quality, Relation, and Manner guide speakers to provide sufficient information, convey truth, remain relevant, and express ideas clearly. However, in actual communication, these maxims are not always strictly followed. Speakers may deliberately flout them to convey implied meanings, create irony, or express attitudes indirectly. According to Pramita and Pradipta (2025), flouting occurs when a speaker intentionally violates a maxim while expecting the listener to infer an underlying meaning.

In literary discourse, the flouting of conversational maxims plays an important role in revealing deeper layers of meaning. Authors often use this strategy to construct complex characters, develop conflict, and express psychological tension. Previous studies have shown that flouting can function as a tool to negotiate social relationships and convey implicit messages. For example, Kwon et al. (2020) highlight how irony and humor in dialogue reflect underlying social dynamics, while Mar and Gómez (2024) emphasize the role of flouting in shaping communicative intent. These findings suggest that maxim flouting is not merely a deviation from conversational norms, but a meaningful strategy that reflects speakers' intentions and emotional states.

Edward Albee's *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* provides a rich context for examining the use of maxim flouting in literary dialogue. The interactions among George, Martha, Nick, and Honey are characterized by tension, manipulation, and emotional conflict. Through their conversations, the characters frequently flout conversational maxims to assert dominance, avoid confrontation, or express hidden feelings. These floutings contribute to the dramatic intensity of the play and reveal the complexity of interpersonal relationships.

Although previous research has explored the types of maxim flouting in films and other media, limited studies have focused on the motives behind such floutings in literary texts, particularly in relation to psychological and relational dynamics. Most studies tend to identify categories of flouting without examining the underlying communicative purposes in depth. This indicates a gap in understanding how and why characters use maxim flouting as a strategic tool in literary discourse.

Therefore, this study aims to analyze the motives for flouting conversational maxims in Edward Albee's *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?*. Specifically, this study seeks to (1) identify the types of maxims that are flouted and (2) explain the communicative motives behind these floutings, categorized into competitive, convivial, collaborative, and conflictive. By doing so, this research contributes to a deeper understanding of how language is used to reflect psychological complexity and relational conflict in literary works, as well as to the broader field of pragmatics in literary discourse.

## **LITERATURE REVIEW**

### **Previous Related Study**

Research on the flouting of Grice's conversational maxims has been widely conducted in various contexts, including movies, talk shows, and other forms of media, providing a solid theoretical foundation for examining how conversational norms are manipulated for rhetorical purposes. One relevant study by Ida Ayu Popy Wulandari Pratiwi, Ni Made Verayanti Utami, and Ni Nyoman Deni Ariyaningsih (2021) titled *The Types of Flouting Maxim Found in Alice in Wonderland Movie* aimed to identify the types of maxim flouting used by characters in the film. The

researchers applied Grice's (1975) Cooperative Principle, using a descriptive qualitative method to analyze the characters' dialogues. They identified 25 instances of maxim flouting, with the maxim of relevance being the most frequently flouted. This study, while focused on a fantasy movie, provided valuable insight into how flouting maxims, particularly through topic shifting, can be used to convey indirect communication. Similarly, this research shares Grice's framework and explores maxim flouting but focuses on a modern American play, Edward Albee's *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?*, where maxim flouting reveals deeper psychological and emotional tensions, an aspect not deeply explored in Pratiwi, Utami, and Ariyaningsih's (2021) study.

Another notable study by Nurul Hamidah, M. Bahri Arifin, and Setya Ariani (2022), *Analysis of Flouting of Conversational Maxims by Characters in The Help Movie*, also relied on Grice's (1975) Cooperative Principle. This research expanded upon the earlier study by not only identifying the types of flouting but also analyzing the reasons behind them, categorizing them as competitive, convivial, collaborative, and conflictive. The study found that conflictive flouting, often expressed through sarcasm, was the most frequent, particularly in response to sensitive topics such as criticism. Like the present research, this study examines the functions of maxim flouting in dialogue. However, while Hamidah, Arifin, and Ariani's (2022) study focuses on film characters and the roles of sarcasm and humor, this research delves into the psychological dimensions of maxim flouting within *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?*, where language becomes a tool for manipulating and escalating interpersonal conflict.

A third relevant study by Mery Wahyuni, M. Bahri Arifin, and Indah Sari Lubis (2019) titled *An Analysis of Flouting of Maxims Done by Main Characters in La La Land Movie* investigates how the main characters flouted conversational maxims in their dialogues, particularly focusing on the romantic tension between Mia and Sebastian. Using Grice's Cooperative Principle, the study found that the maxim of quantity was most frequently flouted, as the characters often provided excessive explanations, especially related to jazz music. This study also highlighted how implied meanings, derived from flouting maxims, conveyed emotions such as affection and tension. While this study and the present research both explore how maxim flouting reflects emotional depth and character interaction, the present study shifts focus from romantic relationships to the psychological power struggles in *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* Here, maxim flouting serves not to convey affection, but to expose the emotional manipulation and vulnerability within the characters' tumultuous marriage, highlighting the complex interpersonal dynamics that drive the play.

### **Pragmatics**

Pragmatics is a branch of linguistics that focuses on how meaning is constructed and interpreted in context. Unlike semantics, which deals with the literal meaning of words and sentences, pragmatics examines how speakers use language in real

communicative situations to convey intended meanings that are often implied rather than explicitly stated. Yule (1996) defines pragmatics as the study of speaker meaning, emphasizing that understanding language involves interpretation based on context, assumptions, and shared knowledge between speakers and listeners. Similarly, Huang (2017) explains that pragmatic meaning depends on contextual factors such as the situation, participants, and cultural background. In this sense, pragmatics is closely related to concepts such as implicature, presupposition, and speech acts, which help explain how meaning goes beyond the surface level of language.

Context plays a crucial role in pragmatic interpretation because it influences how utterances are understood. According to Levinson (1983), meaning cannot be fully interpreted without considering who is speaking, to whom, and in what situation. For example, a simple expression such as “You’re late” may convey different meanings depending on tone, relationship, and context, such as anger, concern, or humor. Therefore, pragmatics highlights that communication is not only about what is said, but also about how and why it is said.

### **Cooperative Principle and Conversational Maxims**

Grice (1975) introduced the Cooperative Principle, which explains how effective communication is achieved through cooperation between speakers and listeners. According to this principle, participants in a conversation are expected to make contributions that are appropriate to the purpose of the interaction. Grice further proposed four conversational maxims that guide communication: Quantity, Quality, Relation, and Manner. The maxim of Quantity requires speakers to provide sufficient information without being too brief or too detailed. The maxim of Quality emphasizes truthfulness, meaning that speakers should not provide false or unsupported information. The maxim of Relation requires relevance, ensuring that contributions are related to the topic of conversation. Finally, the maxim of Manner focuses on clarity, encouraging speakers to avoid ambiguity and express ideas in an orderly way. These maxims function as general guidelines that help maintain effective and meaningful communication in everyday interactions.

### **Flouting Conversational Maxims**

Although conversational maxims are expected to be followed, speakers often intentionally violate them in communication. This phenomenon is known as flouting maxim. According to Cutting (2002), flouting occurs when a speaker deliberately breaks a maxim while expecting the listener to recognize the implied meaning behind the utterance. In this case, the violation is not meant to deceive, but rather to convey additional or indirect meaning. Grundy (2000) further explains that flouting is closely related to implicature, where listeners must infer meaning based on context and shared knowledge.

There are four types of flouting based on Grice’s maxims. Flouting the maxim of

Quantity occurs when a speaker provides too much or too little information. Flouting the maxim of Quality involves saying something that is not literally true, often for the purpose of irony or exaggeration. Flouting the maxim of Relation happens when a speaker gives an irrelevant response to imply a different meaning. Meanwhile, flouting the maxim of Manner occurs when a speaker uses ambiguous or unclear expressions. Rather than causing communication breakdown, flouting often enhances communication by allowing speakers to express humor, politeness, sarcasm, or emotional nuance (Hamidah et al., 2022).

### **Functions and Reasons for Flouting Maxims**

In pragmatic studies, flouting maxims is not random but motivated by specific communicative purposes. Leech (1983) classifies these motivations into four main categories: competitive, convivial, collaborative, and conflictive. Competitive flouting occurs when the speaker's goal conflicts with social harmony, such as in ordering or demanding. Convivial flouting supports social relationships, as seen in offering, thanking, or showing politeness. Collaborative flouting is neutral and focuses on exchanging information, such as explaining or reporting. In contrast, conflictive flouting occurs when the speaker intentionally opposes social norms, such as in criticizing, accusing, or threatening. These categories are useful for understanding how speakers strategically use language to achieve their goals. In literary discourse, especially in dramatic texts, flouting maxims often reflects characters' psychological states, interpersonal conflicts, and power relations. Therefore, analyzing the reasons for flouting maxims can provide deeper insight into character behavior and the underlying meaning of dialogue.

## **METHOD**

### **Design and Sample**

This study employed a descriptive qualitative research design to analyze the flouting of conversational maxims in Edward Albee's *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?*. This approach was selected because it allows an in-depth interpretation of dialogue and helps uncover the implied meanings behind character interactions (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Qualitative descriptive research is suitable for exploring language use in context without manipulating variables, focusing instead on understanding meaning and patterns in natural data (Maxwell, 2013). The data of this study consist of utterances words, phrases, and sentences spoken by the main characters in the play: George, Martha, Nick, and Honey. These characters were selected because they dominate the dialogue and exhibit frequent instances of maxim flouting. The primary data source is the full script of Edward Albee's *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?*, which provides rich material for analyzing pragmatic phenomena.

## Instruments and Procedures

In qualitative research, the researcher serves as the primary instrument for data collection and analysis (Fraenkel, Wallen, & Hyun, 2012). In this study, the researcher conducted a close reading of the play to identify and interpret instances of maxim flouting. The script of the play functioned as the main data source, and no additional instruments were required. The data collection procedure was carried out in several steps. First, the researcher conducted a comprehensive reading of the play, focusing on the dialogues among the four main characters. Second, relevant utterances that indicated flouting of Grice's maxims Quantity, Quality, Relation, and Manner were identified. Third, these utterances were collected and compiled as the primary data for analysis. The selection of data was based on clear indications of maxim flouting in the dialogue, ensuring relevance to the research objectives.

## Data Analysis

The data were analyzed using a pragmatic approach based on Grice's (1975) Cooperative Principle. The analysis involved several systematic steps. First, each identified utterance was categorized according to the type of maxim flouted: Quantity (Qn), Quality (Ql), Relation (R), or Manner (Mn). Each datum was then assigned a code (e.g., Qn1, R4) to facilitate organization and analysis. Second, the researcher interpreted each instance of flouting by examining its communicative intent, context, and the interpersonal dynamics between characters. This step aimed to identify the underlying motives for flouting, such as competitive, convivial, collaborative, or conflictive purposes. Finally, the findings were analyzed and interpreted to draw conclusions about the reasons for flouting maxims in the play. This process provided insights into how language is used strategically by characters to express psychological tension, social relationships, and power dynamics.

## RESULT AND DISCUSSION

### The Reason for Flouting maxims in Edward Albee's *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf*

Table 2 provides the reasons for flouting maxims in *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf*? based on the characters' dialogue in the script. It categorizes the motivations behind the floutings of Grice's maxims into four main types: Competitive, Convivial, Collaborative, and Conflictive, along with their respective frequencies.

*Tabel 2. The Reasons for Flouting Maxims*

<b>Reason for Flouting Maxims</b>	<b>Count</b>
Competitive	65
Convivial	2
Collaborative	1
Conflictive	33
<b>Total</b>	<b>101</b>

The findings indicate that maxim flouting in the play is predominantly driven by competitive and conflictive motives, reflecting strong interpersonal tension and psychological conflict among the characters.

### **Competitive Flouting**

Competitive flouting is the most dominant type, occurring 65 times. This type reflects the ongoing power struggle between characters, especially George and Martha. Through flouting, they attempt to dominate the conversation, challenge each other, and assert control. This is evident in the flouting of the maxim of Quantity. For example:

George: *"You're obsessed with that phrase, Martha ... It's ugly."*

Martha: *"You stay right where you are ... you stay right at the ... meat of things."*

Martha does not respond directly to George's opinion but instead issues a command. This shift from response to control indicates competitive behavior, as she redirects the conversation to assert dominance rather than engage cooperatively.

Similarly:

Nick: *"She really shouldn't drink."*

George: *"Martha? Oh, no, Martha hasn't been sick a day in her life..."*

George dismisses Nick's concern through sarcasm and exaggeration, demonstrating how flouting is used to reject others' viewpoints and maintain conversational control.

### **Conflictive Flouting**

Conflictive flouting occurs 33 times and represents the second most frequent type. This type is used to provoke confrontation and intensify emotional conflict.

For example, in flouting the maxim of Relation:

Martha: *"What's the name of the picture?"*

George: *"What actor? What scar?"*

George avoids answering Martha's question and instead disrupts the conversation. This irrelevance creates tension and reflects intentional resistance, which is characteristic of conflictive interaction.

Another example:

Martha: *"Back when I was courting George..."*

George: *"Oh, now, Martha..."*

George interrupts and blocks Martha's attempt to speak, demonstrating how flouting is used to suppress others and escalate interpersonal conflict. These examples show that conflictive flouting functions as a tool to challenge, reject, and destabilize communication, contributing to the play's intense emotional atmosphere.

### Convivial Flouting

Convivial flouting occurs only 2 times and is used to maintain politeness and social harmony. Unlike competitive and conflictive types, this form of flouting supports positive interaction.

For instance:

George: *“Well, I think that’s very nice.”*

Nick: *“Yes.”*

Here, both speakers maintain a polite and agreeable tone. Although the utterance may not fully adhere to conversational maxims, it serves to preserve harmony and avoid conflict. This indicates that convivial flouting functions as a strategy to sustain social balance.

### Collaborative Flouting

Collaborative flouting is the least frequent, occurring only once. This type involves cooperative interaction where speakers aim to maintain mutual understanding rather than create tension. For example, in some exchanges, characters correct or clarify information without escalating conflict. These moments reflect a temporary shift from confrontation to cooperation. However, such instances are rare, as the overall interaction in the play is dominated by tension rather than collaboration.

### Flouting Across Maxim Types

The analysis also shows that flouting occurs across all four conversational maxims Quantity, Quality, Relation, and Manner. For instance, flouting of the maxim of Quality is evident when characters use exaggeration or false statements:

George: *“Martha is a hundred and twenty-five years old...”*

Nick: *“Your wife weighs...?”*

Nick’s response challenges the exaggeration, turning the interaction into a competitive exchange. Similarly, flouting of the maxim of Manner appears in emotionally charged expressions:

George: *“DO YOU HEAR ME?”*

Nick: *“I hear you. You come in loud.”*

Here, ambiguity and tone shift the focus from content to delivery, illustrating how language is used to negotiate power and control.

The findings demonstrate that flouting maxims in *Who’s Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* is not random but strategically used by characters to express dominance, conflict, and emotional tension. Competitive and conflictive motives dominate, highlighting the unstable and confrontational nature of the relationships, particularly between George and Martha. Meanwhile, convivial and collaborative flouting occur less frequently, indicating that harmony and cooperation are not

central to the characters' interactions. These patterns confirm that maxim flouting functions as a key linguistic strategy to reveal psychological complexity, interpersonal conflict, and power dynamics within the play.

The findings of this study reveal that the flouting of conversational maxims in *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* is not random but serves specific communicative purposes closely related to the characters' psychological conditions and interpersonal dynamics. The dominance of competitive and conflictive motives indicates that language in the play functions primarily as a tool for power negotiation and emotional expression rather than cooperative communication.

The most prominent finding is the dominance of competitive flouting, which reflects the ongoing power struggle between George and Martha. As shown in the results, characters frequently flout maxims by exaggerating, interrupting, or redirecting conversations to assert control. This supports Grice's (1975) notion that maxims can be intentionally violated to generate implicature. In this case, the implicature is not only meaning, but also dominance. The examples of Martha commanding George or George dismissing Nick's concern demonstrate how language is used strategically to challenge authority and maintain superiority. This finding is consistent with Leech's (1983) concept of competitive speech acts, where the speaker's goal conflicts with social harmony. It also aligns with previous studies that highlight how maxim flouting can reflect interpersonal tension and power relations in dialogue.

The second major finding is the high occurrence of conflictive flouting, which further emphasizes the role of language in expressing emotional conflict. The results show that characters often provide irrelevant responses, interruptions, or contradictory statements to provoke confrontation. For instance, George's interruptions and Martha's insistence on controlling the conversation illustrate how flouting disrupts communication rather than maintaining it. This supports Cutting's (2002) view that flouting can function as a strategy to convey implied meaning, particularly in emotionally charged contexts. In this study, the implied meaning often relates to frustration, anger, or resistance. These findings also reinforce Lugea's (2022) argument that conversational strategies in literary texts are shaped by interpersonal dynamics and emotional tension.

In contrast, convivial and collaborative flouting appear only minimally in the findings. Convivial flouting, which aims to maintain politeness and social harmony, is observed in limited instances where characters respond politely or avoid direct confrontation. Similarly, collaborative flouting occurs when characters briefly cooperate to clarify meaning. However, the rarity of these types suggests that harmonious interaction is not a central feature of the play. This imbalance highlights the dominance of conflict over cooperation, which is a defining characteristic of the relationships portrayed in the narrative.

Another important finding is that flouting occurs across all four maxims Quantity, Quality, Relation, and Manner indicating that characters manipulate different aspects of communication depending on their intentions. For example, exaggeration reflects flouting of Quality, irrelevance reflects flouting of Relation, and ambiguity reflects flouting of Manner. This supports Grundy's (2000) argument that flouting is closely linked to implicature and allows speakers to convey meanings beyond literal expressions. In this study, such strategies are used to express sarcasm, challenge others, and create dramatic tension.

The findings demonstrate that maxim flouting in the play functions as a strategic communicative tool that reveals deeper psychological and relational meanings. Rather than facilitating smooth communication, flouting is used to intensify conflict, assert dominance, and expose emotional vulnerability. This confirms that pragmatic analysis can provide valuable insights into literary texts, particularly in understanding how language reflects character behavior and interpersonal relationships.

## CONCLUSION

This study concludes that the flouting of conversational maxims in Edward Albee's *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* serves as a strategic linguistic device to express the characters' psychological states and interpersonal dynamics. The analysis shows that all four maxims Quantity, Quality, Relation, and Manner are frequently flouted, indicating that the characters consistently deviate from cooperative communication to convey implied meanings. The findings reveal that competitive flouting is the most dominant motive, followed by conflictive flouting. These two types reflect the intense power struggles and emotional conflicts, particularly between George and Martha, where language is used to assert dominance, challenge others, and control the interaction. In contrast, convivial and collaborative flouting occur very rarely, suggesting that harmony and cooperation are not central to the characters' relationships.

The study highlights that maxim flouting in the play is not merely a violation of conversational norms, but a meaningful strategy to reveal deeper emotional tension, manipulation, and relational instability. Through pragmatic analysis, this research demonstrates how language functions as a tool to construct character identity and intensify dramatic effect in literary discourse. However, this study is limited to a single literary work and focuses only on the motives for flouting maxims. Therefore, future research is recommended to explore different literary texts, compare genres, or examine other pragmatic aspects such as implicature or speech acts to provide a broader understanding of language use in literature.

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