

The Portrayal of Conversational Narcissism in The Short Film *Pemean*

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Abstract. This qualitative study intends to show how Mbak Sum's utterances in the short film *Pemean* flout Grice's conversational maxim (1975) and lead to the portrayal of conversational narcissism proposed by Vangelisti et al. (1990). Based on the findings, the maxim of quantity is the most frequently flouted maxim in Mbak Sum's utterances, followed by the maxim of quality and the maxim of relevance. The main conversational implicatures interpreted from the thirteen utterances said by Mbak Sum reveal the act of boasting about Mbak Sum's wealth to provoke admiration and envy from Dek Asih. This study succeeded in revealing a strong connection between the flouting of Gricean maxims and the concept of conversational narcissism in the film. This is proven by the utterances from Mbak Sum that reflect 6 out of 9 important features of conversational narcissistic behaviour as stated in the previous study by Vangelisti and colleagues (1990).

Keywords: conversational narcissism, cooperative principle, flouting of maxims, conversational implicatures, film

1. Introduction

As humans live in a communal environment, socializing has become one of the basic needs in our lives. The continual interactions that happen between people have contributed largely to the occurrence of social phenomena in society. A realistic example of a social phenomenon can be seen in a short film entitled *Pemean* which was published in 2020. The 11 minutes movie succeeds in depicting a common interaction among Indonesian people that is rich in meaning and quite popular as it has been watched more than 2.9 million times so far. The story focuses on the conversation between two women, Mbak Sum and Dek Asih, who live across from each other in a rural Javanese neighbourhood. Most of their interactions happen when Mbak Sum and Dek Asih dry their clothes in front of each house. Mbak Sum loves to talk about her wealth and always dominates the conversation, not letting Dek Asih make an equal contribution to their interaction.

In 2021, a similar study was conducted by Indrayana et al. to reveal ethical representation through the characters' speech and language use in the film *Pemean*. The

researchers employ a sociolinguistics perspective to analyse the characters' dialogue and link it to the current ethics in Indonesian society, based on people's reactions from questionnaires and interviews. According to the result, a person's speech can depict his behaviour and attitude, just like how Mbak Sum's utterances represent herself as a "pretentious and arrogant" person (Indrayana et al., 2021, p. 17). It is also found that most people prefer to remain silent or even ignore someone like Mbak Sum in real life.

Indrayana et al. (2021) suggest further research to reveal how a person's speech can reflect his behaviour, which inspires the current study to be carried out. Contrasting with the previous research, the researchers of the current study choose a pragmatic perspective to analyse the character's behaviour through her speech in the film. Pragmatics is chosen as it focuses on studying the relationship between languages and their speakers (Britannica, n.d.).

If we take a closer look, the film *Pemeen* not only portrays social phenomena but also signals psychological issues. Seeing from the psychological view, Mbak Sum's behaviour shows a correlation with narcissism, a mental condition that tends to focus on oneself, craves attention and admiration from others, and at the same time shows little empathy for other people (Mayo Clinic, 2017). Narcissist characteristics can be detected through numerous aspects, particularly psychology. Yet this study only focuses on the language use of Mbak Sum which represents narcissistic features, later known as conversational narcissism.

Conversational narcissism is characterized by a very self-focusing conversationalist who shows no concern for others (Vangelisti et al., 1990, p. 251). Although it is not a dangerous behaviour in social interaction, "extremely self-focused behaviour is considered maladaptive (Barrett, 1986), pathological (Catt, 1986; Weintraub, 1981), and the cause of negative impressions by others (Godfrey, Jones, & Lord, 1986)" (p. 252). According to the psychological literature and the interaction literature, the narcissistic conversation can be identified through these important features:

- (1) statements made by self or elicited from others that confirm one's self-importance;
- (2) the defense of one's grandiose self-image against any suggested flaws;
- (3) attempts to gain conversational control or power over others;
- (4) exhibitionistic behavior;
- (5) maintaining distance from close interpersonal relationships, but effectively manipulating superficial relationships that are of value to the self;
- (6) overuse of "shift-responses" and minimal use of "supportive-responses" during interaction with others;
- (7) overuse of first person singular pronouns and underuse of first person plural pronouns;
- (8) unwarranted self-disclosures; and
- (9) inappropriately frequent and lengthy speech. (as cited in Vangelisti et al., 1990, p. 255)

If narcissism is shown to an excessive degree, it may cause conversational problems due to the imbalanced contribution between the narcissist and the other speaker in communication. Hence, excessive self-focused tendencies in conversation should not be considered a common phenomenon in social interaction as it may lead to inharmonious intercourse between people.

On the contrary, people expect an ideal communication that can be formed by a balanced contribution between speakers. The main goal of efficient communication is also suggested in Grice's Cooperative Principle where "individuals expect a certain balance in conversational participation" (Vangelisti et al., 1990, p. 252). Grice sets the principle to be followed by speakers so that they can have effective communication. There are four types of conversational maxims proposed by Grice (1975): quantity, quality, relevance, and manner.

However, ideal communication cannot be achieved if a speaker flouts such principles and consequently creates conversational implicature. Implicature holds an implicit meaning behind the speaker's explicit utterance (Grice, 1975, p. 45; Lyons, 1977, p. 592). When people try to interpret implicatures, at the same time they also try to understand the speaker's thoughts and intentions which are reflected in his utterances. In other words, implicature may suggest the speaker's behaviour. Therefore, Gricean maxims are used in this study to indicate the flouting of maxims from Mbak Sum's utterances and the implicatures that depict narcissist characteristics.

This study attempts to answer three main questions:

- 1) What are the Gricean maxims flouted by Mbak Sum?
- 2) What conversational implicatures can be identified from the flouted maxims?
- 3) What are the key features of narcissistic conversational behaviour reflected in the conversational implicatures?

In the end, the researchers hope to raise people's awareness of the relationship between one's behaviour and one's language use. By reading this paper, people can learn to identify conversational narcissistic behaviour through language use. In that sense, people may anticipate any possible problems that occur when interacting with uncooperative speakers, like conversational narcissists, and accordingly can give a proper contribution to such interaction with the hope of creating harmonious and effective communication.

2. Method

This study was conducted in a qualitative descriptive method that aims to analyse the matter of research thoroughly. Creswell (2007) stated that qualitative research is initiated by setting hypotheses, mapping a theoretical framework, and formulating research problems that seek to find meaning behind social or human problems. Additionally, the researchers become the key instruments in the study, as they will collect the data and interpret them using their senses to form an inductive data analysis (Creswell, 2007, pp. 38-39).

The data themselves were taken from a short film entitled *Pemean* created by Paniradya Kaistimewan and published on YouTube in November 2020. The study centred on the utterances of Mbak Sum to reveal the representation of conversational narcissist behaviour. Hence, the data for this research were in a form of spoken utterances that were transcribed into written utterances. In total, there were 13 written utterances selected as the data for this research.

The data were collected in several steps, following the same technique shown in Sapalakkai's study (2018). Firstly, it began with an observation of watching the short film

Pemean on YouTube multiple times. Secondly, the spoken dialogue between the characters was transcribed to ease the data selection process. At this stage, since the original language in the video is Javanese, the researcher made sure the transcript was validated by a Javanese speaker before moving on to the next step. Thirdly, the researchers read the transcript while playing the film to check the transcript's accuracy. The researchers resumed the process by translating the Javanese transcript into Indonesian and English. Lastly, the researchers identified the utterances from Mbak Sum that flouted the conversational maxims to be chosen as the data.

As for the data analysis, the researchers implemented a similar method that was demonstrated in Loveday's (2018) and Zhou's (2022) studies to analyse the character's portrayal in literary works. The analysis started with determining the types of flouting maxims of each data based on the conversational maxim theory from Grice (1975). The identification result of the flouting maxim in Mbak Sum's utterances was discussed in different subsections based on the type of maxim that is flouted. The data of the utterances were listed in the table to form a concise analysis. In each table, there would be some words in bold to show the indication of the implicature. The analysis proceeded by unveiling the conversational implicature from the flouted maxim, mainly utilizing the researchers' cognitive and interpretation. Following that, the overall discussion of each type of flouting maxim was described below each table. After that, the researchers observed the key features of conversational narcissism that were reflected through the implicatures based on the conversational narcissism theory from Vangelisti et al. (1990).

3. Results and Discussion

Based on the observation of the movie, there are 13 utterances from Mbak Sum which are selected to be the data in this study. After identifying the data, Mbak Sum's utterances seem to flout three types of conversational maxims, namely maxims of quantity, maxim of quality, and maxim of relevance. The analysis is divided into three subsections as per the category of the flouted maxim, provided in the following:

3.1. Flouting Maxim of Quantity

Grice (1975, p. 45) stated two maxims under the quantity category: "(1) Make your contribution as informative as is required (for the current purposes of the exchange) and (2) Do not make your contribution more informative than is required". Based on the identification, nine data that fall into this category as listed in Table 1 below:

Table 1. Data of Flouting Maxim of Quantity

No.	Utterance	Implicature
1	Why are you still sweeping at noon? Don't you feel tired? While I can still buy this shirt, look, isn't it nice? It only costs 700.000 rupiahs. No discount. There won't be any discount on this shirt. And this shirt, it's only 300.000 rupiahs.	Bragging
2	Obviously! And this one, this underwear is 150.000 rupiahs because I can't wear cheap stuff. I would feel embarrassed if I did, you know what I mean.	Bragging
3	I'm sure you know that my husband likes to buy me branded stuff. He bought a batik shirt yesterday from Czechoslovakia. This is the shirt, looks great, right? I need to wash it carefully because this is from Czechoslovakia.	Bragging
4	Wait, my husband is calling me. I think he just wants to drink coffee, but he doesn't want the cheap one. He only drinks expensive coffee. Do you know expensive coffee? I doubt you know it, you only know the cheap ones, right.? I'll be right back.	Bragging
5	Turns out, he only asked me to put a hot patch on his body. He got sprained when carrying his boss's bags when they were playing golf. One day, I'm sure my husband could be like his bosses, playing golf in wide and green grass fields. It'd be amazing.	Bragging
6	My husband doesn't like to eat that kind of rice, he said it's tasteless. Well, I get it because he usually eats expensive rice.	Bragging
7	Umm all right then, maybe next time. I'll just go to the supermarket and buy rice from there. There is a lot of affordable rice with good quality, right?	Bragging
8	Obviously, as you can hear the honk clearly. Do you know why? Because I purchased it at once. I didn't do credit.	Bragging
9	Why don't you believe me? If she didn't do it, she wouldn't be able to buy a motorcycle like mine. My husband gets a big salary, so we can buy a nice motorcycle, unlike her husband. Anyway, I'll have to go inside.	Bragging

The nine data in Table 1 show Mbak Sum's utterances which flout the maxim of quantity as she provides more information than what is required. The tendency of giving too informative utterances reflects a conversational narcissist feature that is producing inappropriately frequent and lengthy speech. This characteristic appears to be the most dominant one compared to the other characteristics in the quantity category.

In data (1), Mbak Sum asks Dek Asih whether she feels tired of sweeping the floor at noon. However, before Dek Asih responds to her question, Mbak Sum keeps talking and brings up a new topic about her clothes. From this point, Mbak Sum seems to shift the focus of attention back to herself by changing the topic discussion before letting Dek Asih deliver her utterance. This action shows her narcissistic feature to gain conversational control or power over others by not giving the other speaker a turn to talk. Besides, Mbak Sum also overuses "shift-responses" and minimizes the use of "supportive-responses" in this utterance which is shown through her action of asking questions to Dek Asih but

immediately responding with her statement. When Mbak Sum brings up a new topic, she shows her clothes to Dek Asih and states the price, even adding that she bought the clothes for full price without getting any discount. Sharing too detailed information about her clothes seems unnecessary since Dek Asih does not specifically ask about that matter to Mbak Sum, but she does that to create an image of a wealthy person who can afford to buy expensive clothes, even without getting a discount. In other words, it implies the action of bragging about Mbak Sum's wealth to Dek Asih which reflects her exhibitionistic behaviour of a narcissist.

Furthermore, in data (2) Mbak Sum also states the price of her underwear and adds that she cannot wear cheap stuff because she would feel embarrassed. The additional information about her opinion regarding the cheap stuff is unnecessary to be shared, knowing that Dek Asih might not be able to afford expensive stuff like her. However, Mbak Sum does it as an attempt to emphasize her image as a wealthier person compared to Dek Asih. Her utterance implies the action of bragging and at the same time shows her exhibitionistic side as a narcissist who not only likes to brag about herself but also supports the idea of being more grandiose than others.

In data (3), Mbak Sum tries to strengthen her image as a wealthy person by saying that her husband likes to buy her branded stuff. She also shows her new batik shirt from her husband and purposefully adds that it was bought from Czechoslovakia, implying that the shirt is high-priced since it was bought from a foreign country. Moreover, she emphasizes the value of the shirt by saying that she needs to wash it carefully because it is an imported product. Sharing too informative utterance about her batik shirt implies the action of bragging and reflects the exhibitionistic behaviour of a narcissist.

Data (4) shows that Mbak Sum also tries to build her husband's image as a wealthy person. It can be seen from how Mbak Sum talks about her husband's preference for coffee, explaining that he doesn't like to drink cheap coffee but only likes drinking expensive coffee. Mbak Sum displays her exhibitionistic side by not only bragging about her husband but also underestimating Dek Asih, specifically when she says that Dek Asih wouldn't know expensive coffee and she would only know cheap coffee. This also reflects another narcissistic feature of overusing "shift-responses" and minimizing the use of "supportive-responses" by asking questions to Dek Asih but choosing to respond with her statement.

In data (5), Mbak Sum is still trying to strengthen her husband's image as a wealthy person. She says that her husband got sprained after carrying his bosses' bags when they were playing golf. She intends on saying this to brag that her husband works for wealthy people, who tend to play golf. Again, this utterance implies the action of bragging to support her grandiose image and displays her narcissistic feature of unwarranted self-disclosure – self-disclosure is the act of giving one's personal information to other people (APA Dictionary of Psychology, n.d.) – as she shares unnecessary information about her husband's soreness.

Moreover, in data (6) Mbak Sum informs that her husband doesn't like to eat free rice which was exchanged from a coupon. She adds that her husband thinks the rice is tasteless because he usually eats expensive rice. Mbak Sum deliberately says this although she

knows that Dek Asih and her family get the free rice. Mbak Sum's utterance emphasizes the gap between her wealthy image and Dek Asih, thus it reflects the exhibitionistic feature of a conversational narcissist.

In data (7), Mbak Sum says that she will buy rice from a supermarket after Dek Asih refuses to tell her how to get the free rice. She adds that she could get affordable rice of good quality from the supermarket instead, which is said as an attempt to protect her wealthy image from any flaws; to avoid Dek Asih's suspicion about her wealthy image. Mbak Sum's utterance reflects a conversational narcissist feature of defending one grandiose self-image against any suggested flaws.

As in data (8), Mbak Sum shows Dek Asih her new motorcycle and tries to impress Dek Asih by saying that she paid it all at once. She shares this information to brag about her wealth and shows her narcissistic feature of unwarranted self-disclosure, which is giving her personal information unwarrantedly to create her grandiose image.

Last, data (9) shows Mbak Sum's exhibitionistic character when she tries to convince Dek Asih that she could purchase a new motorcycle from her husband's big salary. At the same time, Mbak Sum also tries to destroy Warsi's image by spreading rumours about her just because Warsi got a similar motorcycle to Mbak Sum's. By saying that, Mbak Sum implies that she is wealthier than Warsi so that she can keep her grandiose image in front of Dek Asih.

3.1.1. Flouting Maxim of Quality

In the quality category, Grice (1975, p. 46) suggested a speaker make an honest contribution by following these maxims: "(1) Do not say what you believe to be false and (2) Do not say that for which you lack adequate evidence". After classifying the data, three utterances that fall into this category as shown in Table 2:

Table 2. Data of Flouting Maxim of Quality

No.	Utterance	Implicature
10	You know what, the golf equipment costs the same as a motorcycle	Bragging
11	Do you know how can Warsi get the motorcycle? She could buy the motorcycle because she made deal with the devil	Protecting self-image
12	Why would I borrow it? Of course not, I'm not borrowing the motorcycle	Protecting self-image

In data (10), Mbak Sum tells Dek Asih that the golf equipment costs the same as a motorcycle. However, she cannot provide any evidence to support her statement and thus Dek Asih doubts the rightness of the information. Mbak Sum says this utterance to strengthen her husband's grandiose image by informing Dek Asih that he works with wealthy people, as the bosses own the golf equipment that costs the same as a motorcycle. Therefore, Mbak Sum means to brag about her husband's image which also reflects her exhibitionistic side.

In data (11), Mbak Sum says that Warsi could buy a motorcycle by making a deal with the devil although she cannot give any evidence to support this statement. She gives this information to Dek Asih after knowing that Warsi also has a similar motorcycle to hers.

Thus, Mbak Sum seems to spread rumours about Warsi to protect her self-image as a wealthier person. This implication reflects her narcissistic side as someone who constantly wants to appear better than others by defending her grandiose self-image against any suggested flaws.

In data (12), Mbak Sum says that the motorcycle is not borrowed from anyone else right after her husband returns the motorcycle to the owner. Thus, Mbak Sum is lying by giving a statement that opposes the fact. However, she still tries to deny the fact that she only borrows the motorcycle because she wants to protect her image as a wealthy person in front of Dek Asih, exposing her conversational narcissist feature to defend her grandiose self-image against any suggested flaws.

3.1.2. *Flouting Maxim of Relevance*

The third category is the maxim of relevance where Grice (1975, p. 46) prompted a speaker to give a relevant contribution. There is only one data that falls into this category as shown in Table 3 below:

Table 3. Data of Flouting Maxim of Relevance

No.	Utterance	Implicature
13	Uh, I got a new rice cooker, come to my house and see it!	Bragging

Data (13) shows that Mbak Sum flouts this maxim when she suddenly talks about her new possession to Dek Asih, which is not relevant to the previous topic in the conversation. By doing so, Mbak Sum intends to brag about her wealth which illustrates her exhibitionistic behaviour as she wants to attract Dek Asih's attention to herself by exposing her wealth.

3.1.3. *The Portrayal of Conversational Narcissism*

Based on the findings in this study, the flouting of maxim quantity, maxim of quality, and maxim of relevance show a strong correlation with conversational narcissist characteristics that are portrayed in 6 out of 9 features, as listed in Table 4:

Table 4. Conversational Narcissist Characteristics of Mbak Sum

No.	Conversational Narcissist Characteristics	Data Number												
		1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12	13
1	Statements made by self or elicited from others that confirm one's self-importance													
2	The defense of one's grandiose self-image against any suggested flaws							✓				✓	✓	
3	Attempts to gain conversational control or power over others	✓												
4	Exhibitionistic behavior	✓	✓	✓	✓		✓			✓	✓			✓
5	Maintaining distance from close interpersonal relationships, but effectively manipulating superficial relationships that are of value to the self													
6	Overuse of "shift-responses" and minimal use of "supportive-responses" during interaction with others	✓			✓									
7	Overuse of first person singular pronouns and underuse of first person plural pronouns													
8	Unwarranted self-disclosures					✓			✓					
9	Inappropriately frequent and lengthy speech	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓				

From Table 4, the portrayal of a conversational narcissist in the film *Pemean* is mainly characterized by the character's behaviour of producing inappropriately frequent and lengthy speech. This feature appears when Mbak Sum flouts the maxim of quantity by giving too informative utterances about her personal information, specifically her wealth, to Dek Asih. Bragging is done to attract the attention of Dek Asih and it illustrates the next dominant characteristic which is exhibitionistic behaviour, as someone who attracts attention through her action (Cambridge dictionary, n.d.). Aside from that, Mbak Sum also seems to defend her grandiose self-image against any suggested flaws. It is seen from the way she creates a grandiose image by consistently bragging about her wealth and she attempts to protect this image from any flaws, for instance, suspicion from Dek Asih, even if she needs to lie or give uncertain information to protect her grandiose image.

4. Conclusion

This research suggests that a person's behaviour can be reflected through his speech. In a sense, when a person speaks he is also voicing the thoughts in his mind. And the way a person thinks will be influenced by his behaviour. As Lyons (1977, p. 121) said that "Language was a particularly important kind of behaviour for the psychologist to investigate; for it enable him, in theory at least, to treat even thought as behaviour". Thus, we can identify a person's behaviour based on the distinct characteristics that appear in his language use. As demonstrated in this study, Mbak Sum's utterances at a glance depict her arrogant behaviour, while at a deeper level it reveals the behaviour of a conversational narcissist, mainly observed from her lengthy utterances that flout the maxim of quantity. Surely, an in-depth observation or even scientific research will be required to conduct a valid identification of a person's behaviour. This study can be used as an example of how a pragmatic perspective is implemented to reveal psychological themes such as human behaviour that are depicted in literary works. In addition, further research can give academic contributions by applying the same methods and theories to conduct field research to examine human behaviour in real life, as this research is still limited to analysing the same topic in literary works.

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