

The Role of Flouting Maxim, Context of Situation and Its Function in Supporting Elle Woods' Character Development in the Legally Blonde (2001) Movie

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ABSTRACT

This study examines the role of flouting maxim, context of situation, and their function in supporting the character development of Elle Woods in the Legally Blonde (2001) movie. The research aims to identify the types and strategies of flouting maxims used by Elle Woods, analyze their illocutionary functions, and investigate how these aspects contribute to her character development across different narrative stages. Using a pragmatic approach, the study is qualitative in nature and applies Spradley's ethnographic data analysis, which includes domain, taxonomy, componential, and cultural theme analysis. The data source is the movie script, while the data comprise 123 utterances by Elle Woods that involve flouting maxims. The study found that Elle used all four types of flouting maxims—quantity, quality, relevance, and manner—with various strategies, such as overstatement, sarcasm, and ambiguity. The flouting maxims frequently occur in the context of high power and high distance (+P +D), especially the flouting maxim of relevance. Illocutionary functions such as competitive, convivial, conflictive, and collaborative were identified, with the most dominant being competitive. The findings

show a dynamic shift in Elle's use of flouting maxims across movie stages, reflecting her transition from a stereotypical "blonde girl" to a confident, intelligent law graduate. This research concludes that flouting maxims, in tandem with social context and narrative structure, significantly support character development.

1. INTRODUCTION

One way characters convey meaning beyond literal interpretation is through flouting maxims—intentional violations of Grice's (1975) cooperative principles to generate implicature. This involves deliberately disobeying conversational maxims such as providing too much or too little information, using metaphor, hyperbole, irony, sarcasm, irrelevance, or ambiguity (Cutting, 2002). Such pragmatic choices often reflect a speaker's intentions, emotions, and social positioning, making them valuable for analyzing character transformation.

In cinematic dialogue, flouting often creates implicature—meanings not directly stated but intended to be inferred by the listener (Grice, 1975). These implicit messages are frequently tied to Leech's (1983) illocutionary functions—competitive, convivial, collaborative, and conflictive—used to assert meaning while maintaining social harmony. Understanding these functions requires considering the context of situation, which includes key social variables such as relative power (P) and social distance (D) (Brown & Levinson, 1987). Relative power refers to the speaker's authority or ability to influence the hearer, while social distance reflects the level of familiarity or solidarity between interlocutors. These variables shape how language is used and interpreted in interaction. In film, recognizing this situational context helps decode the implied meaning behind character interactions, deepening the audience's understanding of both character dynamics and the narrative as a whole (Brown & Levinson, 1987).

In *Legally Blonde* (2001), the protagonist Elle Woods evolves from a stereotypical "dumb blonde" into a competent, confident lawyer. Previous studies have examined flouting maxims in relation to illocutionary functions (Jiwalno et al., 2020; Hamidah et al., 2022; Viryani et al., 2023), speech act theory (Adiari et al., 2021), and politeness strategies (Muslimin, 2015). Others have explored flouting maxims in films (Ariwangsa et al., 2018) and novels (Noertjahjo et al., 2017), though few have addressed the role of situational context. While Tasyarasita

& Wibowo (2022) integrated context with types of flouting maxims and illocutionary acts, none have investigated how flouting maxim reflects character development across narrative stages.

This study aims to analyze the types and strategies of flouting maxims used by Elle Woods, their illocutionary functions, and how they contribute to her character development. By adopting a pragmatic approach and considering situational context, the research offers insight into how language in fictional narratives can signify personal growth, challenge stereotypes, and shape audience perception.

2. METHOD

This research employs qualitative descriptive method with pragmatic approach, focusing on how flouting maxims are used by the main character to support her character development in the *Legally Blonde* (2001) movie. The research design is based on Spradley's ethnographic analysis model, which includes four stages of analysis: domain analysis, taxonomy analysis, componential analysis, and cultural theme analysis (Spradley, 1980). The use of ethnographic analysis method can help find social values and norms behind social processes in society (Dornyei; Lazaraton; Rudestam & Newton as cited in Santosa, 2021). The subject of this research is the character Elle Woods, and the material is her spoken utterances in the movie. A total of 123 utterances were identified as data, each containing flouting maxims. The primary tool for data collection was the movie script, cross-checked with the visual and audio elements of the film to ensure accuracy and context.

The data collection procedure involved observational and note-taking techniques, where utterances conveying potential flouting of Grice's maxims were selected. These were then categorized based on the type of maxim flouted (quantity, quality, relevance, or manner), the strategy used (e.g., overstatement, ambiguity, irony), and the context of situation, particularly considering the variables of power (P), distance (D), and rank of imposition (R). Further analysis was conducted to identify the illocutionary function of each flouting maxim using Leech's theory of illocutionary goals, including competitive, conflictive, convivial, and collaborative functions. The dynamic use of maxims was then mapped across four narrative stages, orientation, complication, evaluation, and resolution. This allowed the trace of the character development of Elle Woods through the pragmatic choices reflected in her dialogue.

3. RESULT AND DISCUSSION

3.1. Result

This study examined a corpus of 123 distinct utterances delivered by the character Elle Woods within the cinematic narrative of *Legally Blonde* (2001). The primary objective of this detailed linguistic analysis was to identify and categorize instances where her dialogue demonstrated the flouting of conversational maxims, as theorized by Grice. The comprehensive findings of this investigation revealed the presence of all four established categories of maxim flouting: quantity, quality, relevance, and manner. Notably, the flouting of the maxim of relevance emerged as the predominant strategy employed by Elle Woods, occurring with the highest frequency among the observed instances. This pervasive use of relevance flouting strongly suggests a characteristic communication pattern in Elle's speech, wherein she frequently deviates from the immediate subject matter or strategically evades providing direct, on-topic responses.

The in-depth analysis of Elle Woods's dialogue further illuminated a significant and observable pattern: the strategic deployment of flouting maxims was not uniformly distributed but, rather, exhibited distinct variations across the four clearly demarcated narrative stages of the film's progression, encompassing the orientation, complication, evaluation, and resolution phases.

During the initial orientation stage, a pronounced tendency emerged for Elle to predominantly utilize both the flouting maxim of manner and the flouting maxim of relevance. This particular communicative choice consistently manifested within a relational context characterized by (+P -D), thereby serving as a subtle yet potent reflection of her underlying emotional vulnerability as she navigated unfamiliar social landscapes, simultaneously underscoring her active and deliberate efforts to resist and dismantle the pervasive stereotyping to which she was subjected.

As the narrative seamlessly transitioned into the more intricate complication stage, a discernible shift in Elle's communicative repertoire became evident. Here, the flouting maxim of quantity gained considerable prominence, surfacing with increased frequency. This often took the overt form of pronounced overstatements, a stylistic choice that proved instrumental as Elle endeavored to forcefully assert her presence and establish her intellectual credibility within the highly demanding and intensely competitive academic environment that defined her experience at Harvard.

The evaluation stage showed the highest frequency of flouting maxims, especially in contexts involving high power and distance (+P +D). Here, flouting maxim of relevance was dominantly used, reflecting Elle's increased

confidence and strategic use of language to gain social and professional recognition. By the resolution stage, the number of flouting maxim occurrences decreased significantly, but the competitive function of the flouting became dominant, particularly in courtroom scenes. Elle employed flouting of manner through ambiguous questioning to manipulate testimony and reveal the truth, which effectively contributed to the climax of her character development.

The research further revealed that Elle Woods's strategic use of flouting conversational maxims was not consistent throughout the film but instead varied significantly across its four key narrative stages: the initial orientation, the rising complication, the central evaluation, and the final resolution. During the orientation stage, Elle predominantly employed the flouting of the maxim of manner and the maxim of relevance, often in situations reflecting a positive power dynamic with low social distance (+P -D). This communicative choice subtly conveyed her emotional vulnerability and her conscious efforts to resist prevailing stereotypes. As the story progressed into the complication stage, there was a noticeable increase in her flouting of the maxim of quantity, frequently through overstatements. This pattern enabled Elle to assert herself more forcefully within the highly competitive academic environment at Harvard. This observation aligns with Firdaus's (2023) research, which suggests that power relations and social distance profoundly influence an individual's communication strategies, demonstrating how overstatement can be a powerful tool for asserting dominance or conveying confidence in interpersonal interactions.

These findings support the research assumption that the flouting of conversational maxims, when analyzed through the lens of context and illocutionary function, is not arbitrary. Instead, it reflects Elle Woods' deliberate linguistic strategy to challenge stereotypes, navigate hierarchical settings, and ultimately redefine her identity. Similar studies in different films have shown that characters tend to flout maxims in emotionally charged or power-imbalanced interactions, especially female characters who use strategic ambiguity and politeness to resist social expectations.

Overall, the results confirm that the use of flouting maxims aligns with Elle's character arc. From a misunderstood, underestimated woman to a respected legal figure, her linguistic choices evolve in tandem with her personal and professional growth, affirming the central hypothesis of this study.

3.2. Discussion

The particular communicative characteristic of Elle Woods—her frequent tendency to shift topics or avoid giving direct responses—is not merely an idiosyncratic speech pattern. Instead, it demonstrably aligns with a broader, intentional communicative strategy. This strategy, as illuminated by Tasyarasita and Wibowo (2022), serves a crucial purpose within the narrative: it allows Elle to effectively navigate the inherent power imbalances she consistently encounters and to strategically deflect or mitigate the pervasive social judgment she faces throughout the entirety of the film.

During the intricate and escalating events of the complication stage within the narrative, a notable and distinct shift was observed in the communicative patterns of Elle Woods. Specifically, the flouting maxim of quantity became significantly more prevalent in her discourse, frequently manifesting itself through the deliberate and strategic use of overstatements. This particular linguistic choice served a clear and instrumental purpose: it enabled Elle to vigorously assert her presence and establish her intellectual standing within the intensely demanding and highly competitive academic environment that characterized her experience at Harvard University. This specific analytical finding resonates strongly and demonstrates a clear alignment with the conclusions drawn by Firdaus (2023) in their extensive research. Firdaus's work, indeed, posits that the underlying dynamics of power relations and the existing degree of social distance between interlocutors exert a profound influence on the communication strategies employed. Furthermore, their research specifically suggests and illustrates precisely how characters, such as Elle, can consciously or unconsciously leverage the tactic of overstatement as an effective means to project and assert dominance, or conversely, to convey an unmistakable sense of confidence in their various interactions and exchanges.

The compelling narrative of Elle Woods's evolution, charting her journey from a seemingly superficial sorority girl into a highly competent lawyer, all while fully embracing and valuing her multifaceted identity—one that seamlessly integrates her femininity with her robust professional aspirations—is a profound character arc that receives significant emphasis and detailed illumination within the recent work of He (2024). This analysis underscores how her transformation extends beyond mere skill acquisition, truly encapsulating the comprehensive development of a whole character.

Furthermore, the character of Elle Woods serves as a powerful embodiment of challenging deeply ingrained societal expectations, particularly those linking appearance with intelligence. Her journey throughout the narrative profoundly underscores the critical importance of cultivating unwavering self-belief, demonstrating remarkable resilience in the face of adversity, and exhibiting steadfast determination in the pursuit of personal goals, even when confronted by significant societal barriers and prejudices. This interpretation is comprehensively explored

and supported by He (2024), highlighting the broader message conveyed through Elle's transformative experiences.

4. CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATION

This study aims to investigate the types and functions of flouting maxims used by Elle Woods in the *Legally Blonde* (2001) movie and how these contribute to her character development across different narrative stages. The analysis revealed that Elle utilized all four types of flouting maxims—quantity, quality, relevance, and manner—with the flouting maxim of relevance being the most frequently used. This consistent use, especially within high power and distance interactions, reflects Elle's strategic communication in resisting stereotypes and asserting her identity.

Each narrative stage showed a shift in the type and function of flouting maxims, illustrating the transformation of Elle's character from a socially underestimated figure to a confident and competent legal professional. The illocutionary functions of her flouting—ranging from conflictive in early scenes to competitive and convivial in later scenes—highlight her adaptive use of language to respond to different social contexts, ultimately reinforcing her personal growth and narrative significance.

In line with the study's objectives, the findings suggest that flouting maxims, when analyzed through pragmatic and contextual lenses, can be a powerful tool for understanding character development in fictional works. Future research is encouraged to extend this analysis across multiple characters, varying power dynamics, and gender perspectives using a sociolinguistic approach. Broader exploration of non-observance maxims in diverse genres or real-life discourse may also enrich the understanding of language use in shaping identity and social interaction.

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