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Unravelling Unsaid Meaning: A Study of Conversational Implicatures in Mahesh Dattani's *Tara*

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Abstract:

It has not been long since the study of dramatic dialogue as discourse has caught the attention of researchers. A defining moment regarding this was the publication of Herbert Paul Grice's "Logic and Conversation" and his notion of 'conversational implicature' in 1975. A characteristic feature of dramatic dialogues is the gap between what is uttered and what is conveyed, and this raises the issue of using the Gricean approach in studying this aspect of dramatic dialogues. The present paper first outlines the theoretical framework of Grice's notion of 'conversational implicature' before discussing the contribution that conversational implicature makes to the understanding of dramatic dialogues. The paper then analyses some selected conversational passages from Mahesh Dattani's *Tara* (1990) using the theoretical insights from Grice's notion of 'conversational implicature' and shows how conversational implicature affects the reader's interpretation of the characters' speech.

Keywords: Conversational implicature, conventional implicature, cooperative principle, maxims, interpretations

The study of dramatic dialogue as discourse has caught the attention of researchers very recently. Compared to other genres of literature like poetry and fiction, drama has in general received comparatively less attention from the twentieth-century stylisticians (Culpeper et al. 3). The main cause of this negligence lies in the fact that spoken conversation has been generally viewed as an unstable form of language for several centuries (Culpeper et al. 3) and thus plays, having affinity with speech, were undervalued. The early stylistics of the 1960s tended to concentrate on the analysis of poetry by examining foregrounded features and achieving its goals by skilful handling of phonology, grammar and lexis – areas of linguistic organisation which are often considered as the core of linguistics. However, it did not pay enough attention to dramatic texts and the dynamics of interaction involved in dramatic dialogues (Culpeper et al. 3). This gap started to be filled by the growth and

development of Pragmatics and Discourse Analysis since the late 1970s and the early 1980s. These approaches equipped stylisticians with tools and techniques to analyse the meanings of utterances in dramatic texts. One such tool is Herbert Paul Grice's notion of 'conversational implicature' (1975), which he introduced in his essay titled "Logic and Conversation", where he tried to shed light on how speakers mean more than what they actually say in a conversational exchange. The purpose of this paper is to outline the theoretical framework of Grice's notion of 'conversational implicature' and to analyse some selected conversational passages from Mahesh Dattani's play *Tara* (1990) using the theoretical insights from Grice's framework of 'conversational implicature'. The paper also aims at exploring the relationship and characterisation of the different dramatic characters in Dattani's *Tara* using Grice's notion of 'conversational implicature'.

In his seminal essay titled "Logic and Conversation", Herbert Paul Grice, a British philosopher of language, first suggested the term 'implicature'. According to Grice, the word 'implicature' generally means to suggest or convey some meaning indirectly through language (Cooper 57). Grice's basic intention behind developing the concept of implicature is to explain how speakers mean more than what they actually say in a conversational exchange. Grice states that implicature is "what a speaker can imply, suggest, or mean as distinct from what the speaker literally says" (Brown and Yule 3). Grice categorises implicature into two kinds, namely, conventional implicature and conversational implicature (Levinson 126-29).

Conventional implicatures deal with the conventional features of the words used in utterances. These are not based on inferences derived from pragmatic principles like the maxims, but are simply attached by convention to a particular lexical item or expression (Levinson 127). According to Yule, conventional implicatures do not have to occur in conversation and they do not depend on special contexts for their interpretation (45). He also opines that conventional implicatures are associated with specific words and result in additional conveyed meanings when those words are used. The words like 'but', 'even', 'yet', etc are generally recognised as the words having this kind of implicature. Grice states that the word 'but' has the same functional content as the word 'and', with an additional conventional implicature to the effect that there is some contrast between the two conjuncts (Levinson 127). When the word 'even' is included in any sentence describing an event, there is an implicature of 'contrary to expectation'. Moreover, the conventional implicature of the word 'yet' is that the present situation is expected to be different, or perhaps the opposite, of a later time. On the other hand, conversational implicatures are basically the implicatures which are derived from a general principle of conversation and a number of maxims which speakers generally obey in a conversational exchange (Brown and Yule 31). Unlike conventional implicatures, conversational implicatures depend on contexts for their interpretation. Since the present paper deals with conversational implicature in Mahesh Dattani's play *Tara*, the following section will outline Grice's theory of 'conversational implicature' and how the conversational implicatures are employed in Dattani's said play.

Conversational implicature, an important phenomenon in Discourse Analysis, is generally used to explain how speakers mean more than they literally say in conversation. It facilitates the understanding of unsaid meaning which the hearer is supposed to infer. According to Levinson, conversational implicature is a kind of pragmatic inference related to some general principles of cooperative conversation (97). He also states that it means more than what is expressed literally (100). Adding to what Levinson has said, Keith Allen suggests that conversational implicatures are the tools that allow speakers to minimise the quantity of language expressed (192). The addressee is supposed to use them to intensify what is said in order to understand what is meant. Gazdar, on the other hand, characterises implicature as a proposition that is implied by the utterance of a sentence in a context (49). Grice has suggested the following characteristics which are necessary for an implicature to be considered conversational:

- (i) Conversational implicatures depend on everyone concerned recognising the Cooperative Principle and its maxims.
- (ii) The implicatures will not be the part of the meaning of the words in the sentence. First, it should be possible to understand the sentence literally and then to work out the implicatures.
- (iii) The stress put on the Cooperative Principle by some utterances may be relievable by more than one implicature. As a result, the implicature generated is often indeterminate.
- (iv) Working out an implicature depends on assumptions shared by the participants in a particular conversational exchange.
- (v) Implicature is cancellable. It should be possible to say something following an utterance that generates an implicature which denies the implicature without any contradiction. (Fasold 132)

Grice has provided the theoretical framework of 'Cooperative Principle' and its four maxims to explain what it means to conversationally implicate. He has developed his theory mainly to illustrate how various kinds of implicatures are used to interpret the appropriate message in conversation. Grice suggests that conversation does not consist of a series of broken utterances but they are characteristically logical and cooperative events. He claims that interlocutors normally cooperate in the process of communication in order to reduce misunderstanding (Grice 45). Grice calls this general principle of cooperative interaction the 'Cooperative Principle' (45). He further states that interlocutors are supposed to follow this basic principle which governs conversation. It is based on the assumption that the participants, in a conversation, cooperate with each other while making their contribution.

Grice classifies the following four maxims and nine sub-maxims which jointly constitute the 'Cooperative Principle' (hereafter CP):

1. The maxim of Quantity

Sub-maxim: Make your contribution as informative as is required.

Sub-maxim: Do not make your contribution more informative than is required.

2. The maxim of Quality

Sub-maxim: Do not say what you believe to be false.

Sub-maxim: Do not say something for which you lack adequate evidence.

3. The maxim of Relation

Sub-maxim: Be relevant

4. The maxim of Manner

Sub-maxim: Avoid obscurity of expression.

Sub-maxim: Avoid ambiguity.

Sub-maxim: Be brief.

Sub-maxim: Be orderly. (45-46).

The main function of these maxims and sub maxims is to limit the behaviour of interlocutors so that the conversation becomes orderly, efficient and meaningful. The interlocutors, in a conversation, rarely fail to observe the maxims casually for no reason. However, they do sometimes fail to observe these maxims intentionally for a variety of reasons (Cooper 57). The most interesting reason for failing to observe a maxim is to say something indirectly. Grice calls this way of generating meaning an 'implicature' (Cooper 57). Other reasons for failing to observe the maxims are: (a) to mislead hearers by flouting the maxims, where the flouting of the maxims will be hidden from hearers, (b) to opt out the maxims of the conversation in which the participants do not want to participate and (c) to avoid clash with another maxim. Sometimes, interlocutors may unintentionally flout the maxims because of incompetence, negligence or absent mindedness. The existence of the maxims, therefore, makes conversational implicatures possible. According to Meulen, Gricean maxims are essential to any linguistic theory which aims to explain how inferences are drawn from what is said in conversation (440-41). Thus, it can be said that Gricean maxims occupy a significant place in the study of conversational implicatures. This following section is devoted to the application of the framework of conversational implicature discussed above to analyse the selected conversational passages from Mahesh Dattani's *Tara*.

Mahesh Dattani's *Tara* is a play which primarily deals with, as Prasad points out, how "we Indians discriminate between male and female children" (135), we being a country with a long history of female feticide and material discrimination against the girl child. However, there are many other issues that the play raises like, for instance, the way our society treats the differently-abled people and also what we, as individuals, do to one another and to ourselves "in our familial relationships, our first community" (Prasad 135). In addition, there have been other interesting ways of looking at the play. For instance, Sen views the Chanan-Tara Siamese twins as a "metaphoric representation of the spirit of androgyne, the primordial combination of the male and the female in the psyche" and attempts to show how "the politics of dissociating the male and the female within the androgynes leads to their professional, personal and creative decay" (52-53). The story line of the play is something like this: Chandan and Tara are two conjoined twins of the Patel family and they must be separated to survive. The problem begins when it is realised that the operation has been an unfair one. Even though the doctor, Dr Thakkar, and the family members of the Patel family

know that the third leg of the conjoined twins would suit Tara better, they involve themselves in a conspiracy and give it to Chandan. As a result, Chandan gets the second leg which does not survive on him though, thereby leaving both the children crippled. Bharati, the mother of Tara and Chandan, is very much concerned about the future of her daughter. She is afraid that the world will not accept her daughter with her physical deformity when she grows up. Her concerns towards Tara bear evidence to the burden of guilt that she possesses. Chandan enjoys a great preference, while Tara is left to the position of a subaltern. Tara has dreams and aspirations, which she cannot fulfil because of her physical deformity. Bharati's father also adds to the complexity of the situation by leaving his property to Chandan after his demise. When it comes to give education to the children, Mr. Patel, Tara and Chandan's father, prefers only Chandan. If Tara had been provided moral support by her parents, her life would not have been the same. It is interesting to note that the discrimination against Tara continues even after her death. Chandan changes their story into his own tragedy and he apologises to Tara for doing this. Social and cultural factors have been responsible for the pitiable condition of the girl child. Tara is finally killed by the social system which seems to control the minds and actions of the people. Since the play exhibits a wide range of characters involved in intense conflictual situations, it would be interesting to note how the different characters use Grice's notion of 'conversational implicature'.

The first conversational passage occurs at the beginning of Act I of *Tara*. The passage contains the encounter between Tara, Bharati and Mr. Patel. Tara, at first, initiates the conversation by asking Bharati a question about her thatha's (i.e., grandfather's) 'brass tumblers' and then the conversation between Bharati and Mr. Patel regarding the use of Bharati's father's things follows. The place is Patel's living room. Chandan and Tara can be seen playing a game of cards. Mr. Patel is checking the contents of his briefcase and is ready to leave for work. Bharati asks Tara to finish her milk, while Tara talks about the slowing down of her 'peristalsis'. Chandan gives a new pinch to Tara for using a 'new word' and then Tara asks the question about her thatha's 'brass tumblers'.

Conversational Passage One

TARA. Where are thatha's brass tumblers?

BHARATI. They have yet to be unpacked.

PATEL. It's getting late for me. (*Gets up and moves to the children to pat them goodbye.*)

BHARATI. Your father doesn't want us to use them. (*Patel looks at her.*) He doesn't want us to use any of your grandfather's things.

PATEL. What are you saying, Bharati?

BHARATI. Now that we've moved out of his house, he doesn't...

PATEL. Just a minute. It was you who didn't want to unpack them. You said so yourself. You said...

BHARATI. Me? Why would I not want to use my own father's gifts to us? (Dattani 325)

Tara thinks that Bharati might know where the 'brass tumblers' have been kept after unpacking them, but Bharati gives an indirect reply. Tara asks, "Where are thatha's brass tumblers?" and Bharati answers, "They have yet to be unpacked". Here, Bharati's reply to Tara's question seems irrelevant as a relevant reply could have been telling her the place where the brass tumblers have been kept after unpacking them. Thus, she seems to be uncooperative by violating the maxim of relation. However, if her reply is taken to be cooperative, it seems to implicate that Bharati has not unpacked the 'brass tumblers' sent by her father. Had she unpacked them, she could have told Tara where the brass tumblers have been kept after unpacking them. In other words, Bharati wants to suggest that she has not unpacked the 'brass tumblers' as her husband, Mr. Patel, does not want her to use them. Then Mr. Patel enters the conversation. He gets up from his position and moves to the children to bid them good bye. He says, "It's getting late for me" and also listens to the conversation between Tara and Bharati. After listening to the conversation, Mr. Patel asks Bharati, "What are you saying, Bharati?" and Bharati replies, "Now that we've moved out of his house, he doesn't" Here, Mr. Patel seems to ask this question only for the sake of saving himself from Bharati's allegation. He seems to violate the maxim of quality as it is not a sincere question. Being Bharati's husband, he is supposed to know a little better as to why his wife is blaming him in this manner. However, this question can be taken to implicate that they do not share a healthy relation as they have a lack of understanding regarding their familial concerns. Bharati also seems to violate the maxim of quantity as her reply provides insufficient information. Nevertheless, if her reply is interpreted as cooperative, it seems to implicate that Bharati is not interested in discussing the matter with Mr. Patel. Therefore, instead of stating the exact reason regarding why she is saying so, she suggests to Mr. Patel that since they had moved out of her father's house, Mr. Patel did not want them to use her father's things. Bharati also realises that Mr. Patel is asking the question for the sake of saving himself from the allegation; therefore, she does not give a reply to it seriously. Mr. Patel, then, says, "Just a minute. It was you who didn't want to unpack them. You said so yourself. You said" and Bharati responds, "Me? Why would I not want to use my own father's gifts to us?" Here, Bharati's reply to Mr. Patel's statement seems irrelevant as a relevant reply could have been either accepting or rejecting what Mr. Patel has said. Thus, she seems to be uncooperative by violating the maxim of relation. However, if her reply is taken to be cooperative, it seems to implicate that it does not solely depend on her whether to unpack the 'brass tumblers' or not. If it had been her sole decision, she would have unpacked them without bothering about the consent of her husband. In other words, Bharati wants to suggest that it is not only her own decision not to unpack the 'brass tumblers', but Mr. Patel is also equally responsible for this.

The above passage seems to implicate that Bharati and Mr. Patel do not share a healthy familial relationship. While answering Mr. Patel's question, Bharati seems least interested in providing any kind of detailed information. Her replies indicate her apparent indifference to what Mr. Patel is asking for. Thus, the analysis of conversational implicatures

portrays the characters as less involved in their familial relationship which ultimately brings unhappiness in their lives.

The second conversational passage chosen for analysis has been taken from Act I of *Tara*. Here, Tara and Chandan share contrary opinions regarding doctors and nurses. Chandan is lying on his back on the floor and listening to the music. He is deeply lost in the music that is being played. Tara then enters the living room where Chandan is already lying and the conversation between them begins.

Conversational Passage Two

TARA. Oh, I hate those girls!

CHANDAN (*waving his hands to the music*). What? Made friends already?

TARA. You must be joking. (*Listens to the music.*) Oh! I love this part.

CHANDAN. How was physio?

TARA. Nice doctor. Rotten nurse. Not like Bangalore.

CHANDAN (*jovially*). Doctors. Nurses. A painful necessity in our lives. (*Referring to the music.*) Now comes the best part.

TARA. Mind you, some of the doctors aren't so painful to look at. This one's called Dr Gokhale. He's handsome in a 'ghati' sort of way. I love Maharashtrians! (Dattani 332-33)

In the above passage, Tara initiates the conversation by saying, "Oh, I hate those girls!" and Chandan responds, "What? Made friends already?" Here, Tara expresses her opinion regarding some kind of girls whom she does not like and expects Chandan to contribute to the topic by asking her the reason for her dislike. However, Chandan's response does not seem to fulfil Tara's expectations and, therefore, it can be considered to be irrelevant. But if it is supposed that Chandan is being cooperative in giving such a reply, it may be taken to implicate that Chandan wants to suggest to Tara that she has the habit of getting friendly with anyone within no time and very easily. Thus, he seems to comment on the friendly nature of Tara and his comment implicates that he does not like this aspect of her character. Tara then says, "You must be joking... Oh! I love this part.". In his reply, Chandan reacts by saying, "How was physio?". In this utterance, Chandan seems to ask an unnecessary question which shows his resentment. It also implicates that he is not interested in continuing with the topic raised by Tara and, therefore, he attempts to divert the attention from the topic with the question "How was physio?". Tara gives a seemingly positive reply to Chandan's question by saying, "Nice doctor. Rotten nurse. Not like Bangalore.". Here, Tara seems to violate the maxim of quantity by giving more information than is required by Chandan. Thus, she seems to be uncooperative by violating the maxim of quantity, i.e., by providing additional information. However, if the utterance is taken to be cooperative, it seems to implicate that Tara wants to make Chandan realise, by providing additional information about the nurse, that she is not ignoring the topic raised by him although he ignored the topics raised by her a while ago. This throws light on the kind of relationship that they share.

Chandan next makes the comment, "Doctors. Nurses. A painful necessity in our lives...", and Tara responds to this by saying, "Mind you, some of the doctors aren't so painful to look at. This one's called Dr Gokhale. He's handsome in a 'ghati' sort of way. I love Maharashtrians!". Here, Tara violates the maxim of quality by telling Chandan to mind his words which are categorically false. However, if Tara's reply is taken to be cooperative, it seems to implicate that Tara is not happy with Chandan's comment about the doctors as she has a soft corner in her heart for those doctors who are handsome to look at. Referring to the music that is going, Chandan says, "... Now comes the best part", but Tara, here, does not respond at all. Thus, it can be said that Tara is opting out of the maxims of the conversation which seems to implicate that she is no more interested in the conversation and, therefore, does not want to participate in it.

The above analysis of conversational implicatures highlights the kind of relationship that exists between Tara and Chandan. Chandan could be considered to be a rather self-centered person who has his own opinion about Tara. He does not seem to pay much importance to Tara's feelings and emotions. On the other hand, Tara responds to the issues raised by Chandan with diligence, exhibiting a greater amount of intelligence than her brother.

The third conversational passage has been extracted from Act II of *Tara*. In this piece of conversation, Roopa abuses Chandan for harassing her and tries to complain about it to Tara, while Chandan tries to save himself from the allegation. Chandan lies on the ground near the music system. He is engrossed in the music. Roopa comes to him slowly and sits beside him. She looks at him. Chandan feels Roopa's presence. He looks at her. He cannot ignore her. He slowly puts his hand on her shoulder and she freezes. He awkwardly starts moving his hand on her body till it is almost on her chest. Then the conversation between them starts.

Conversational Passage Three

ROOPA (*rises immediately*). Aagh! Stay away from me! Stay away from me, you horrible thing!

CHANDAN. You led me on!

ROOPA. How dare you say that!

Tara enters in the street.

CHANDAN (*fighting tears*). You were leading me on all the time!

ROOPA. You actually believe that I would want you to ... You have some hopes!

CHANDAN. You are a cheat! A fraud!

Tara is at the door.

ROOPA (*tearfully*). Oh! Tara! You've come just in time!

CHANDAN. Tara, don't listen to anything she...

ROOPA. Oh, my God! How can I even begin to...?

CHANDAN. Shut up! (Dattani 366-67)

Roopa goes near Chandan and sits beside him. Being attracted by her, Chandan puts his hand on her shoulder and starts moving his hand over her body. As Chandan's hand reaches almost her chest, Roopa makes the comment, "Aagh! Stay away from me! Stay away from me, you horrible thing!". In this utterance, on account of 'what is said', Roopa seems to comment on the nature and character of Chandan. On the other hand, on the account of 'what is meant', Roopa seems to suggest to Chandan that she did not expect such ill-treatment from him. In other words, she wants to suggest to him that he should not have behaved with her in this manner. Thus, in uttering the statement she is not only telling Chandan to stay away from her, but commenting on the 'horrible' behaviour of Chandan. However, as Chandan says "You led me on!", he seems to violate the maxim of quality as he blames Roopa solely for this. Although he is the one to put his hand first on her body and touch her, he does not admit it. This violation of the maxim of quality by Chandan can be taken to implicate his aggressive sexual behaviour as well as his tendency to prove himself right. She does not like this humiliating comment by Chandan and, therefore, denies accepting it and says, "How dare you say that!" Here, Roopa's reply seems to be irrelevant as a relevant reply could have been either accepting or rejecting what Chandan has said. Thus, she seems to be uncooperative by violating the maxim of relation. However, if her reply is taken to be cooperative, it seems to implicate that she has not led Chandan to touch her body. If she had led him, she would not have argued with Chandan. In other words, Roopa wants to suggest that the fault lies with Chandan, not with her. But as Chandan is hard to convince, Roopa gets irritated and says, "You actually believe that I would want you to ... You have some hopes!". Here, Roopa seems to violate the maxim of quality as she does not have sufficient evidence to prove that she did not want it; rather, it can be considered to be an instance of false information. Therefore, she seems to be uncooperative by not being genuine. However, if she is taken to be cooperative, her utterance can be interpreted as implicating that she doesn't feel comfortable in getting physical with Chandan. She wants to suggest that she was not interested in whatever Chandan has done to her. Moreover, her reply can be taken to implicate that she does not like such sympathetic pleading by Chandan; therefore, to discourage and disappoint him, she deliberately provides false information. Roopa's reply makes Chandan angry and he calls her "a cheat", "a fraud". In this utterance, Chandan violates the maxim of quality by calling her names which are categorically false. If this utterance is interpreted as a comparison in which he compares Roopa to a cheat and a fraud, it can be taken as cooperative. Chandan here applies the qualities of a cheat and a fraud to Roopa to suggest that she is not genuine and honest. In other words, Chandan is abusing her for her dishonesty. When Tara appears in the scene and Roopa is about to start describing what has happened, Chandan asks Roopa to 'shut up' and not to tell anything to Tara. His utterance can be taken to implicate that she should not complain about him only as she is also equally responsible for what has happened between them.

The above analysis shows that there is a vast disparity between what Roopa says and what she means about Chandan. Chandan gets hurt due to Roopa's harsh comment and tries to save himself. In fact, he expects that Roopa would agree that she was also interested in

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what has happened between them, but he is disappointed due to her bitter comments. Therefore, Chandan exhibits a sheer lack of respect for Roopa by calling her 'a cheat' and 'a fraud'. The implicatures arising out of the analysis hints at the illicit and obscene nature of relationship which exists between Chandan and Roopa.

To conclude, it can be said that the present paper has analysed the selected conversational passages from Mahesh Dattani's play *Tara* by applying Grice's notion of 'conversational implicature'. Grice's framework has helped to a great extent in understanding Dattani's *Tara* in a better way. It has also helped us in drawing inferences from the selected conversational passages. The discourse analysis of the selected conversational passages has helped to demonstrate various important aspects like unhappy familial relationship, victimisation of the girl child in a male-dominated society and the illicit nature of the Chandan-Roopa relationship in Dattani's *Tara*.

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