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Functions of Conversation in Detective Fiction: An Analysis of Smiley's *Duplicate Keys* From Grice's Theory of Conversational Implicature

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Abstract

Duplicate Keys, published in 1984, is a detective novel written by Pulitzer Laureate Jane Smiley. The novel develops around a murder discovered by Alice, the heroine, in Manhattan, in which two band members, Denny and his adopted brother Craig, were shot dead in Denny's apartment. Since besides Alice, some of their other friends, and even their friends' friends have duplicate keys, it's extremely distracting and difficult for Police Detective Honey to solve the case. With suspense resolved and mystery unraveled, it turns out that the killer is Denny's girlfriend and Alice's best friend Susan, who pretends to be on a trip far away at the occurrence of the murder. The novel contains an abundance of conversations, which play a crucial part in plot advancement as well as characterization. Guided by Paul Grice's theory of conversational implicature, the paper analyzes some conversations from *Duplicate Keys*, especially the disobedience of the cooperative principle in the conversations, deciphers the reasons behind the disobedience, while at the same time exposes characters' inner world, and exhibits their personality traits. In so doing, functions of conversation in detective fiction are revealed.

Key words: Conversational implicature; Cooperative principle; Conversation; Plot advancement; Characterization

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INTRODUCTION

The twentieth century witnessed a "linguistic turn" in Western philosophy. After World War II, the Oxford School of ordinary language philosophy became a mainstay of this turn in Britain. Such exponents of the School as Gilbert Ryle, John Austin, Peter Strawson, John Searle, and Paul Grice made contribution to the ordinary language philosophy, among which Grice's theory of conversational implicature and its cooperative principle are greatly influential and pose profound impact on the development of pragmatics.

In his essay "Meaning" published in 1957, Grice proposes two types of meaning—"natural meaning" and "non-natural meaning" or "meaning_{NN}" (Chapman, 2003, pp.124-125). Natural meaning, in Grice's own words, is "the natural sense, or senses, of the expressions in question" (Grice, 1957, p.378). Natural meaning has the nature of fact. As for non-natural meaning, "the speaker produces an utterance with a particular intention in mind, whether to inform (as is generally the case with declaratives) or to produce a result (as with imperatives) (Chapman, 2003, p.125)." The differentiation between the two types of meaning is helpful in analyzing the information and meaning contained in conversations.

In "Logic and Conversation", one of his lectures delivered in Harvard University in 1967, Grice puts forward the theory of conversational implicature and cooperative principle. For Grice, our talk exchanges must consist of a succession of connected remarks, and to certain degree result from cooperative efforts. In order to guarantee that our talk can go on smoothly, we will be expected to follow a general principle, labelled as the cooperative principle by Grice—"Make your contribution

such as is required, at the stage at which it occurs, by the accepted purpose or direction of the talk exchange in which you are engaged (Grice, 1957, p.26).” There are four main categories of maxims under the cooperative principle—Quantity, Quality, Relation, and Manner.

Under the category of quantity, there are two maxims: “1. Make your contribution as informative as is required (for the current purposes of the exchange). 2. Do not make your contribution more informative than is required (Ibid.).” Under the category of quality, there is a supermaxim—“Try to make your contribution one that is true”, and two specific maxims—“1. Do not say what you believe to be false. 2. Do not say that for which you lack adequate evidence (Grice, 1957, p.27).” Under the category of relation falls one maxim—“Be relevant (Ibid.).” Under the category of manner, there is a supermaxim—“Be perspicuous”, and four specific maxims—“1. Avoid obscurity of expression. 2. Avoid ambiguity. 3. Be brief (avoid unnecessary prolixity). 4. Be orderly (Ibid.).” However, people don’t always observe the cooperative principle in real talk exchanges. Rather, people even deliberately break the cooperative principle out of different intentions. Grice emphasizes the discrepancy between what people say and what they implicate by introducing “a type of conversational implicature, an element of utterance meaning which can often be very different from the literal meaning of the sentence uttered (Chapman, 2003, p.109).”

Grice’s theory of conversational implicature has been developed and applied to such fields as linguistics, literature, and translation. Nevertheless, little academic research has been done on detective fiction from Grice’s theory of conversational implicature. Similarly, the research on Smiley’s *Duplicate Keys* is far from being enough: “When the Sharing Had to Stop” by Lois Gould is a brief book review of the novel published in *The New York Times* in 1984; Jane S. Bakerman’s essay “Renovating the House of Fiction: Structural Diversity in Jane Smiley’s *Duplicate Keys*” published in *Midamerica* in 1988 compares *Duplicate Keys* with *The Great Gatsby*; Neil Nakadate’s book *Understanding Jane Smiley* also contains an essay on *Duplicate Keys*. None of these three essays focus on the conversations in *Duplicate Keys*, not to mention Grice’s theory of conversational implicature.

The detective novel *Duplicate Keys* written by Pulitzer Laureate Jane Smiley develops around a murder in an apartment in Manhattan. The heroine Alice is entrusted with watering the plants regularly by her best friend Susan who is on vacation far away. With a duplicate key, Alice opens the door of Susan’s apartment and finds two corpses in sofa—Susan’s boyfriend Denny and Denny’s adopted brother Craig. Since besides Alice, some of their other friends, and even their friends’ friends have duplicate keys, it’s extremely distracting and difficult for Police Detective Honey to solve the case. One suspect is Ray. Denny, Craig, Ray, and Noah are band members

who move from Mid-western America to New York with a hope of achieving success. Unfortunately, for all their years’ efforts, the band remains unknown. In order to develop the band, they need financial support. By chance Ray provides cocaine worth ten thousand dollars to Craig and Denny to sell. However, it is hard to dispose of the cocaine, and Craig and Denny can’t pay off the loan till their death. Another suspect is Noah, for Noah’s wife Rya is Craig’s mistress for a long time. Though Noah knows their adultery, he has to endure, for he can’t leave his wife or his band. Moreover, on the night of the crime, Noah is in the apartment with Denny and Craig at the beginning. The case is too complex to be solved until the murderer appears again. Alice is almost killed in her own apartment by her best friend Susan. In the end it turns out that Susan kills Denny and Craig. Suspense goes on throughout the novel and gets resolved at last. Finally the truth comes to light, so do the characters’ rich and mysterious inner worlds.

No matter whether in plot development or in the portrayal of characters, conversations between characters play an indispensable role. The analysis of the conversations is helpful in exposing the characters, and exhibiting the functions of conversation. Guided by Paul Grice’s theory of conversational implicature, the paper analyzes a few successive conversations in the novel, with special attention to the violation of the cooperative principle in conversations, and digs out the reasons for the violation as well as the conversational implicature. Accordingly, characters’ inner worlds are uncovered from a new angle. Meanwhile, the functions of conversation in detective fiction are exhibited.

UTTERANCE ANALYSIS OF CONVERSATIONS IN *DUPLICATE KEYS*

Detective fiction is “a subgenre of crime fiction and mystery fiction in which an investigator or a detective—either professional, amateur or retired—investigates a crime, often murder.”¹ A detective novel often starts on the crime spot and develops around an investigation to find out who the murderer is. The truth isn’t disclosed until the end of the novel where layers of mysteries are peeled off. In the detective novel *Duplicate Keys*, conversations between characters play an important role in creating suspense. Through these conversations, especially characters’ violation of the cooperative principle, rows of barriers are set up, with various suspects constructed and suspense created. At the same time, the characters’ inner world and personality are exposed. Different clues from the conversations draw the reader closer and closer to the truth till the final revelation of the mystery. The following conversations are cases in point:

¹ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Detective_fiction

Case 1:

"I HAD a key. I was there to water Susan's plants, but I've always had a key. Each of the guys in the band would have one, and other friends, too." Across from Alice, Police Detective Honey jotted something on a pad. ...She said, "Once on the subway I overheard a guy with a suitcase say to someone else, 'Richie knows a place where we can sleep. He's got a key.' I didn't know any Richie, but I can't say I was surprised when the guy on the subway turned up at Susan's apartment a day or so later, and let himself in. He wasn't a bad kid. I mean, he came to Manhattan to take a management trainee job with RCA, but nobody knew him, and he did have a key (Smiley, 1996, p.3)."²

Conversation 1 appears at the beginning of the novel. In reply to Detective Honey's inquiry, Alice explains how she enters the apartment and why she is there. However, the latter part of her utterance obviously breaks the second maxim under the category of quantity for it is more informative than required. Part of the reason for Alice's reiteration of a wide range of duplicate-key possessors, from friends to strangers, is to provide more clues to the detective while at the same time extricating herself from suspicion. Her worries can be found in some other places after this conversation. For the reader, the conversation not only sketches the background of the story, but also covers it with a veil of mystery. It is tremendously difficult to find the real killer among such a long list of duplicate-key holders. The disobedience of the maxim of quantity helps to add complexity to the crime by providing much more information than required. Accordingly, suspense is well built and thus readers' curiosity is roused via the conversation.

Case 2:

Ray puffed a couple of more times, then said, "Rya's been sleeping with Craig for over a year now."
"Says who? Ray, you always think that about everybody! Is that the big secret?"
"It's not a secret." He spoke briskly, stung.
"Is this something you've intuited or something you know?"
"Both."
"I really can't believe that Rya has registered any other man since Noah. In the first place, she wouldn't know how to keep it a secret, and in the second, they are an advertisement for passion, which is why they seem so simple minded."
"In the first place, it was never a secret, or at least, wasn't for long, and in the second, I don't know that they do maintain the hottest fever."
"You're telling me that Noah knew?"
"He found out. I'm not sure when."
"And she kept it up? And Craig kept it up? Noah's been Craig's bass player from the beginning! This is simply preposterous! Did Denny know? Did Susan know? The mere fact that I don't know, and I would if Denny knew, is evidence that this is all a figment of your imagination. Did Noah or Craig or Rya tell

you?"

"No."

"Then I don't believe it. I really don't." (pp. 22-23)

Conversation 2 is between Ray and Alice on the phone. On the one hand, Ray's utterance disobeys the second maxim under the category of quality and tells the adultery to Alice without sufficient evidence. The reader don't know whether Ray is telling the truth or not yet, but Ray's violation of the maxim of quality brings out another suspect Noah and adds another clue to follow. On the other hand, Alice's responding utterances obviously break the maxim of relation—"Being relevant". Instead of asking Ray further details about the adultery, Alice keeps on questioning the credibility of the news. Alice's reluctance to believe her friends' immoral relationship reflects her good nature, while at the same time indicates her lack of perspicacity and her naiveté, which well explain her blindness to Susan's distortion and scheme. By contrast, Ray is sensitive, observant, and realistic. According to what Rya later confesses to Alice, she and Craig do betray Noah. This conversation increases mystery to the story, and sets another obstacle to finding the killer.

Case 3:

"I had a wonderful time. Hardly any rain, but this afternoon I was just ready to come home, so I came home. Denny must have a gig somewhere, because I called over there and there wasn't any answer, so I stopped here and let myself in. I figured that if you hadn't fallen in love the last two weeks, you'd get in sometime, and here you are!" She bounced across the bed and reached for Alice's hand. "Are you all right?"
"There were crumbs on the table."
"I made myself some toast."
"I saw them, but they just didn't register. I'm all right. I missed you."
"Was I sleep? I must have been asleep. What time is it? Jesus, it's after twelve. I must have been asleep. The cabin was lovely. This is the perfect time. There were tons of wildflowers and deer and badgers and chipmunks, it was almost warm, no summer visitors. Is something the matter?"
Alice shook her head. (p.29)

Conversation 3 takes place in Alice's flat. After returning home and making two phone calls in the living room with Ray and her ex-husband Jim Ellis, Alice is shocked at Susan's unexpected appearance on her bed. It is under such condition that the two good friends start the above conversation. It's not hard to find that Susan also has a duplicate key to Alice's flat. In this conversation, on the one hand Susan violates one specific maxim of quality under cooperative principle—"Do not say what you believe to be false" by lying about her travel and her ignorance of Denny's death. Alice doesn't see through Susan yet, and takes it for granted that Susan observes the cooperative principle in their communication. Without a second thought, Alice believes Susan's absence on the day of the murder. Moreover, through Alice's conversation with other friends and Detective Honey, Susan's absence

² All the quotations from the novel in this paper come from the version: Smiley, Jane. *Duplicate Keys*. London: Flamingo An Imprint of HarperCollinsPublishers, 1996; hereafter the quotations from the novel will be marked only by page number.

is accepted as a fact, which keeps Susan far away from being suspected. Accordingly, Susan's violation of the maxim of quality well blinds those around her as well as the reader.

In fact, it is just because criminals' disobedience of cooperative principle, esp. the maxim of quality, that mystery can be guaranteed and suspense can be maintained in detective fiction. In addition to the function of keeping suspense, Susan's violation of cooperative principle well exposes her disposition. Susan is extremely calm, highly intelligent, and cruelly cold. Though she kills two men (not to mention that one is her boyfriend for over ten years), Susan doesn't feel guilty or nervous in front of her close friend to whom she is supposed to open her heart. On the contrary, she makes use of her close friend to cover up her crime.

On the other hand, Alice also breaks the maxim of relation under cooperative principle in this conversation. Faced with Susan's questions, Alice keeps on changing topics and avoids answering directly. Alice's utterances are often irrelevant with the questions. Alice is worried that if Susan knows about the death of her boyfriend, she can't bear and is bound to be heartbroken. Alice's hesitance derives from her sympathy and care for Susan. Alice's purity, thoughtfulness, kindness, as well as credulousness form a sharp contrast to Susan's sophistication, possessiveness, callousness, and cunning.

Case 4:

"How did you get along with Mr. Shellady, Miss Gabriel?"

"Fine."

"Did you have your ups and downs?"

"Craig was a very moody person, with a hot temper, but also rather charming."

"Did you see much of him?"

"Yes, he was at our apartment most of the time."

"That was a satisfactory arrangement?"

"We were used to it, and it is a large apartment." Susan took the long bobby pin out of her hair and replaced it with deliberation.

"Do you have brothers, Detective Honey?"

"Yes, two." Alice tried to imagine them.

"Craig was very much my boyfriend's brother. I had to accept that a long time ago." She paused, thinking, and then, apparently, decided to go on. "I liked Craig, but I understood his limitations. Denny loved him in spite of them, or maybe because of them, and I had to accept them, too. Denny and Craig were a package deal."

"What were these limitations?"

"His hot temper wasn't just a hot temper. It was a kind of psychotic interlude. He would become very, very abusive and paranoid. And he couldn't manage his money very well." (p.49)

Conversation 4 takes place between Detective Honey and Susan, with Alice there listening to them. In response to Detective Honey's question about her relationship with Craig, Susan obviously disobeys one specific maxim of quality under cooperative principle—"Do not say what you believe to be false" by lying. When Detective Honey asks Susan if there're any ups and downs, Susan

doesn't answer him directly but comments about Craig's temper, which is a violation of the maxim of relation under cooperative principle. Furthermore, Susan also breaks the maxim of quality by describing Craig as "rather charming", which is definitely a lie. The primary reason for Susan's disobedience of the maxims of cooperative principle is to conceal her dislike of Craig and her motive for the killing, so as not to arouse any suspicions from the detective. However, Susan doesn't always disobey the cooperative principle in the conversation. Despite her efforts to hide, Susan can't help revealing her abhorrence of Craig through such negative comments as hot temper, psychotic interlude, abusive, paranoid, and a lack of the ability to manage money. These characteristics about Craig are verified in the later conversation between Alice and Rya, and in Susan's last confession to Detective Honey and Alice. Furthermore, the conversation uncovers the intimate relationship between Craig and Denny, and Denny's love for his adopted brother Craig, which later prove to be continuously disturbing and fatally damaging to Denny and Susan's relationship, and partly responsible for the tragedy.

Case 5:

"Does Mr. Reschley take drugs in any form?"

"I've never seen him." But of course she had seen him reach for joints, inhale, pass them on. She had seen herself do the same thing. Lying. She bit her lip.

"Have you seen Mr. Reschley lately?"

"He called me on the phone yesterday, but I didn't see him. I went to meet him, but he had gone home."

"You haven't heard from him since?"

"No." (p.97)

Conversation 5 happens when Detective Honey finds Alice for investigation about Ray's disappearance. As for Honey's first question, Alice's answer violates the specific maxim of quality under cooperative principle—"Do not say what you believe to be false", as well as the supermaxim under the category of manner—"Be perspicuous". The answer is expected to be as simple as "Yes" or "No". However, Alice doesn't want to give away her friend's and her own history of drug, so she lies about it in a roundabout way. She gives an obscure answer to the detective with an implication that at least she doesn't see Ray take drugs with her own eyes. With respect to the second question, Alice breaks the maxim of quality too by lying. In fact, Ray and his gay lover hide in Alice's apartment for several days before their disappearance. Alice would rather lie to the detective than betray her good friends. She thinks it is the best way to protect her friends. Nevertheless, her constant violation of the maxim of quality in her conversations with Detective Honey sets a lot of obstacles to cracking the case. Her lack of sense and insight draws herself to the imminent danger. As a matter of fact, to a large extent, it is because Alice hardly sees through to the truth and holds one-sided fancy for

as well as excessive reliance on her friends that layers of suspense come into being. In the limited third-person point of view, the reader follows Alice's conversations to know characters in the novel little by little, and wind their way towards the final revelation.

Case 6:

"Does what you told me today mean that I can worry about you and check up on you?"

"I don't know. Try it and see what happens."

"What are you doing this evening?"

"Watching television and writing letters."

"What kind of letters?"

"Business correspondence to clothing wholesalers."

"Sounds innocent enough. Can I come over?"

"It's nearly eleven. You don't need to worry about me." Her tone was extremely firm. (p.257)

Conversation 6 takes place in a phone call from Alice to Susan. Faced with Alice's question about whether she can go over to see her, Susan doesn't answer directly but points out the late time, which is a disobedience of the maxim of relation that contains conversational implicature. It indicates that Susan is unwilling to see Alice coming over. However, Alice is unaware of that and still has a naïve feeling that Susan loves and needs her the same. Out of care and interest, Alice keeps on asking Susan specific questions. By contrast, Susan only answers the questions briefly and doesn't have any questions for Alice, which in a large sense shows her lack of interest and her intention of keeping distance. The conversation paves the way for the coming climax of the novel—the murderer's second killing. After the conversation on the phone, Alice goes to bed and falls asleep, while Susan sneaks into Alice's apartment with her gun. Nonetheless, the murder turns out to be an attempted one, resulting from Alice's timely awakening and hiding. At the end of the novel, Susan confesses that she doesn't know if she will really kill Alice with her gun that midnight when she enters the flat, just as she doesn't know if she will really kill Denny and Craig when she approaches them from behind with her gun. With regard to the motive for the second killing, Susan can't bear Alice's increasing reliance on her, for she abhors falling into another intimate relationship and experiencing the past pains and struggles.

In addition to the above six conversations, there is another conversation near the end of the novel that also contains important conversational implicature. Due to its long length, the conversation isn't quoted here. After her escape from Susan's attempted murder, Alice runs to Detective Honey for help. The detective and Alice go to confront Susan about it. In the conversation with Susan, Detective Honey violates the second maxim of quality—"Do not say that for which you lack adequate evidence"

on account of his inference about how Susan commits the first murder. Finally Susan breaks down with Honey's accurate step-by-step deduction and Alice's face-to-face question. She pours out her long suppressed misery. Her utterances also disobey the maxim of quantity under cooperative principle. However, it is through her abundant utterances that the main causes behind the murder come to light: years' over-intimate relationship between Craig and Denny leaves little space for Denny and Susan; the band still holds unrealistic illusion after years' failure in their pursuit of dreams in New York; Susan and Denny's savings are continuously spent by Denny to support Craig; Craig and Denny show no respect for Susan; and Craig and Denny can hardly pay off the loan for they can't sell out the cocaine worth ten thousand dollars. Susan's disobedience of the maxim of quantity not only helps the reader to fully know her motives for killing, but also arouses readers' sympathy for her and readers' rethinking of friendship, love, and values.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, conversation plays an important role in developing plot and depicting characters for detective fiction. It is inevitable that characters in detective fiction deliberately disobey the cooperative principle in their conversations, especially the maxim of quality and the maxim of relation. The characters' violation of the cooperative principle guarantees the mystery and suspense throughout detective fiction, while at the same time leaving one possible clue after another to the reader till the final solution of the case. As a result, the plot moves forward in conversations, esp. the violation of the cooperative principle. Besides, characters' thoughts, feelings, disposition, and attributes are gradually revealed through conversations in detective fiction. In short, with the help of Grice's theory of conversational implicature, conversations get interpretation from a new perspective, and the functions of conversation in plot advancement and characterization for detective fiction are fully demonstrated at the same time.

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