

**Flouting Maxim as Social Criticism: Rhetorical Manifestations in Wilde's *The Importance of Being Earnest***

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**Abstract**

Language is not always used literally; speakers often communicate meanings that are not explicitly conveyed. This study investigates how flouting Grice's maxims functions as a pragmatic strategy generating social criticism in Oscar Wilde's *The Importance of Being Earnest* (1895). Previous research has treated Wilde's satire and irony as literary devices without examining maxim flouting as the underlying pragmatic mechanism, leaving a gap between pragmatics and literary studies. This study identifies flouting of the four Gricean maxims and examines how their rhetorical realization through irony, repetition, hyperbole, and simile contributes to criticism of Victorian norms on class, marriage, morality, and identity. Data were collected through close reading and analyzed in four stages: identifying flouting, examining rhetorical realization, decoding implicature, and categorizing social criticism. Findings show the quantity maxim is flouted most frequently, mainly through exaggeration, repetition, and irony, followed by relevance and manner, with no quality flouting found. Linking maxim flouting to rhetorical realization, this study offers a sociopragmatic model illuminating pragmatic deviation as a literary device, contributing to interdisciplinary work bridging pragmatics and literary criticism. The study concludes that Wilde's humor is a deliberate linguistic strategy exposing the falsity of Victorian aristocratic norms, rather than mere entertainment.

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**INTRODUCTION**

In daily communication, language is not always used directly; utterances do not always convey meaning explicitly, and the true meaning is often implied beneath the words spoken. Pragmatics is the study of meaning as communicated by a speaker and interpreted by a listener (Yule, 1996, p. 3). Pragmatics explains how the context of utterance, the communicative situation, and the speaker's background enable the listener to understand intentions that are not expressed literally. As Bambini & Lecce (2025)

argue, verbal communication is frequently non-literal in nature, with language serving merely as a cue through which listeners infer the speaker's intended meaning rather than decoding it directly from the surface form of the utterance.

In pragmatic studies, the meaning of an utterance does not always lie in its literal interpretation; rather, it emerges from the implicature generated by the flouting or violating of conversational principles. Grice (1975), through his theory of the Cooperative Principle, explains that communication operates based on four maxims: quantity, quality, relevance, and manner.

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Within this framework, flouting is understood as a deliberate and transparent transgression of these maxims, not a communicative failure, but an intentional strategy designed to produce specific effects and generate implicature. By flouting a maxim, the speaker does not intend to mislead the hearer; instead, the speaker deliberately departs from what is expected to prompt the hearer to infer an implied meaning beyond the literal content of the utterance (Grice, 1975).

In literary texts such as novels and playscripts, maxim flouting is frequently employed as a systematic rhetorical strategy to produce effects such as irony and humor and, through these effects, to convey broader social messages. It is precisely this mechanism, flouting as a vehicle for implied meaning, that makes it particularly powerful for social commentary. Literary works with social themes reflect the author's sensitivity to realistic social problems (Sapitri & Tarmini, 2023).

Oscar Wilde is one writer widely recognized for using this strategy across his works. The Victorian era (1837–1901) was a period of profound social and economic transformation driven by the Industrial Revolution, which generated unprecedented wealth while simultaneously deepening class disparities and reinforcing rigid moral codes centered on piety, respectability, and domesticity (Padra, 2024). This moral framework permeated nearly every aspect of Victorian life, shaping not only family structures and gender roles but also literary production, as numerous writers used their works to expose the contradictions between the era's professed values and its lived social realities. *The Importance of Being Earnest* (1895) presents a critique of Victorian social norms, including the institutions of marriage, morality, social class, and identity, through the characters' deliberate flouting of conversational principles to expose the absurdities of the society around them. A representative instance can be found in Lady Bracknell's remark to Jack Worthing: "To lose one parent may be regarded as a misfortune; to lose both looks like carelessness" (Wilde, 1895, p. 80). This kind of humor functions as a form of social criticism embedded within the dialogue. Kumar (2022) state social criticism is a form of academic or journalistic criticism that focuses on numerous sociocultural issues in contemporary life. This sort of criticism focuses on

society's flaws and weaknesses to reform them. Social criticism functions as a form of communication that serves as a controlling mechanism within a social system (Rohma & Qur'ani, 2022).

Research on the flouting of Gricean cooperative principle maxims spans a wide range of media and analysis in film. Valentina and Suastini (2025) found that the maxim of manner is the most frequently flouted in *500 Days of Summer*, arguing that ambiguity and indirectness enrich emotional depth and relationship dynamics. In dramatic literature, Saif et al. (2025) examined *Arms and the Man*, identifying not only the most frequently flouted maxims (quality and manner) but also the rhetorical strategies employed (tautology, metaphor, overstatement, understatement, and rhetorical question), the underlying reasons for flouting (competitive, convivial, collaborative, and conflictive), and the influence of social class on flouting patterns. Comparable patterns of classification combined with implicature-based interpretation appear in other narrative texts: Winarta et al. (2022) reported that the maxims of quantity and relevance are most prominent in *Buffalo Bill*, *The Border King*, while Fatira et al. (2025) found that manner is the most dominantly flouted maxim in *Peter Pan* and *Wendy*, with flouting instances predominantly motivated by collaborative reasons that help maintain interactional flow despite apparent ambiguity.

Beyond novels and films, the scope of maxim-flouting research has been further extended by Lestari et al. (2025), who explored flouting performed by Mowgli in *The Jungle Book*, and by Ikawati (2022), who analyzed flouting of conversational maxims in the short story "A Clean, Well-Lighted Place," emphasizing how flouting guides implied meaning in literary discourse. Collectively, these studies demonstrate that prior research has predominantly focused on identifying and classifying types and strategies of maxim flouting, such as manner, quantity, and quality, across diverse media, including films, novels, short stories, and dramatic works.

Specific reference to *The Importance of Being Earnest*, existing scholarship has approached the play primarily through its satire, its tension between triviality and seriousness, and its devices

of humor. Tawfeeq (2023) explains how Wilde employs satire to criticize Victorian norms, particularly hypocrisy, vanity, marriage, wealth, and class inequality, treating irony as a key mechanism for exposing social flaws. Similarly, Hasan, Ebrahim, and Mahmud (2022) investigate how the play constructs meaning through the paradox of triviality and seriousness, showing that characters treat grave matters such as death and religion frivolously while elevating minor concerns to life-defining importance. Abdulgadir Alkhidir (2025) catalogs the humor devices, irony, sarcasm, wordplay, and double entendre, through which Wilde mocks social conventions and romantic deception. From a discourse perspective, Li (2023) examines social critique through the lens of dandyism, where linguistic politeness and characters' actions are used to satirize Victorian conventions, while Wang (2019) analyzes the reconciliation of seriousness and triviality through paradox as a central thematic device.

Collectively, these studies confirm that *The Importance of Being Earnest* has attracted substantial scholarly attention from literary and rhetorical perspectives, with satire, irony, paradox, and humor as the primary means by which Wilde critiques Victorian social norms. However, this research treats these devices predominantly as literary or rhetorical phenomena, without systematically examining maxim flouting as the underlying pragmatic mechanism through which such rhetorical strategies construct social criticism. This leaves a significant analytical gap at the intersection of pragmatics and literary social critique. The language of Wilde's drama, therefore, cannot be analyzed in isolation from the ideological forces that shaped it, and it is within this understanding that the present study examines how maxim flouting serves as a pragmatic indicator for the emergence of social criticism in its sociopragmatic context. This study departs from prior frequency-based and classificatory approaches to maxim flouting by proposing an integrated analytical model in which rhetorical devices are conceptualized not as independent stylistic features, but as the observable realization of specific maxim floutings. Rather than merely enumerating which maxims are flouted or which rhetorical devices occur, this study systematically correlates each maxim flouting with its

corresponding rhetorical realization, the conversational implicature it generates, and the social criticism it conveys, thereby elucidating the pragmatic mechanism by which Wilde's dialogue becomes a vehicle for Victorian social critique. This integrative approach constitutes the study's principal contribution to the sociopragmatic analysis of literary texts.

## METHODS

This study adopts a qualitative approach within a sociopragmatic framework, focusing on meaning, context, and linguistic phenomena, particularly the deliberate flouting of conversational maxims as a means of constructing implicit social criticism. A descriptive method was employed to identify and classify instances of maxim flouting and their rhetorical manifestations, while an interpretative method was used to analyze the conversational implicatures and social criticism generated through these linguistic strategies.

The data consist of dialogue excerpts from Oscar Wilde's *The Importance of Being Earnest* (1895). Data were collected through repeated close reading of the play, with particular attention to utterances that exhibit flouting of Grice's conversational maxims. Only utterances that simultaneously contained maxim flouting and rhetorical manifestations were selected as research data.

In this study, rhetorical manifestations are defined as rhetorical forms that emerge through maxim flouting. The rhetorical forms identified in the data include irony, hyperbole, repetition, and simile, all of which serve as linguistic vehicles for conveying conversational implicatures and social criticism.

Prior to data analysis, this study establishes a conceptual link between each Gricean maxim and its typical rhetorical realization, grounded in the communicative function each maxim regulates. Flouting the maxim of quantity is most commonly realized through hyperbole and repetition, as speakers convey more or less information to produce emphasis or absurdity. Flouting relevance is typically achieved through irony, in which a response appears disconnected from the topic yet carries an implied comment on it. Flouting manner is often realized through simile

or convoluted phrasing that obscures rather than clarifies meaning. This mapping guided, rather than restricted, the identification of rhetorical manifestations in the data, allowing emergent patterns to be captured as well.

The data were analyzed through four stages. First, instances of maxim flouting were identified and classified according to Grice's (1975) Cooperative Principle. Second, the rhetorical manifestations accompanying each instance of flouting were identified and categorized. Third, the conversational implicatures generated by the utterances were interpreted within their immediate conversational context. Finally, the resulting social criticism was categorized into broader sociocultural themes, including marriage, morality, social class, and identity. The findings were then synthesized to identify recurring patterns in Wilde's use of maxim flouting as a pragmatic strategy for social criticism.

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

In order to create a social critique of Victorian social standards, this study examined how *The Importance of Being Earnest* flouted Gricean maxims through rhetorical devices such as hyperbole, irony, and simile. Coding, classification, interpretation, and data analysis were used to produce these outcomes. The findings indicate that the quantity maxim is the most flouted, followed by the relevance and manner maxims. The most common rhetorical device is hyperbole. Since the maxim of quantity is the most frequently flouted in this study, Table 1 below provides more details on instances of its flouting as well as its rhetorical forms.

The analysis revealed that flouting of the maxim of quantity was the most frequent type associated with rhetorical manifestations, occurring seven times. Flouting of relevance occurred twice, while flouting of manner was identified only once. No instance of flouting of quality accompanied by rhetorical manifestations was found in the selected data.

**Table 1.** Flouting the maxim of quantity

| No | Dialogue                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                   | Rhetorical manifestation |
|----|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|--------------------------|
| 1  | Jack: "You had much better dine with your Aunt Augusta."<br><br>Algernon: "I haven't the smallest intention of doing anything of the kind ... <b>The amount of women in London who flirt with their own husbands is perfectly scandalous.</b> It is simply washing one's clean linen in public. Besides, now that I know you to be a confirmed Bunburyist I naturally want to talk to you about Bunburying. I want to tell you the rules."<br><br>ACT I (Page 12-13)       | Irony and hyperbole      |
| 2  | Jack: (nervously) "Miss Fairfax, ever since I met you, I have admired you more than any girl. I have ever met since . I met you."<br><br>Gwendolen: "... been to love someone of the name of Ernest. There is something in that name that <b>inspires absolute confidence.</b> The moment Algernon first mentioned to me that he had a friend called Ernest, <b>I knew I was destined to love you.</b> "<br><br>ACT I (Page 17)                                            | Hyperbole                |
| 3  | Jack: "No. He seemed to have expressed a desire to be buried in Paris."<br><br>Chasuble: "In Paris! (Shakes his head) I fear that hardly points to any very serious state of mind at the last. .... The last time I delivered it was in the Cathedral, <b>as a charity sermon on behalf of the Society for the Prevention of Discontent among the Upper Orders.</b> The Bishop, who was present, was much struck by some of the analogies I drew."<br><br>ACT II (Page 37) | Irony                    |
| 4  | Gwendolen: "Perhaps this might be a favorable opportunity for my mentioning who I am. My father is Lord Bracknell. You have heard of Papa, I suppose?"                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                     | Hyperbole                |

Cecily: "I don't think so."

Gwendolen: "Outside the family circle, Papa, I am glad to say, is entirely unknown.... And certainly once a man begins to neglect his domestic duties he becomes **painfully effeminate**, does he not? ..., has brought me up to be **extremely short-sighted**; it is part of her system; so do you mind my looking at you through my glasses?"

ACT II (Page 46)

- 5 Gwendolen: "An admirable idea! Mr. Worthing, so it is important for us to know where he is at present." Hyperbole and repetition

Jack: (slowly and hesitatingly) "Gwendolen Cecily it is **very painful for me to be forced to speak the truth**. It is the first time in my life that I have ever been reduced to **such a painful position**, and I am really quite inexperienced in doing anything of the kind. However, I will tell you quite frankly that **I have no brother Ernest. I have no brother at all. I never had a brother in my life**, and I certainly have not the smallest intention of ever having one in the future."

ACT II (Page 53)

- 6 Lady Bracknell: "Untruthful My nephew Algernon? Impossible! He is an Oxonian." Repetition

Jack: "I fear there can be no possible doubt about the matter....that he was perfectly well aware from the first that **I have no brother, that I never had a brother, and that I don't intend to have a brother, not even of any kind**. I distinctly told him so myself yesterday afternoon.

ACT III (Page 64-65)

- 7 Jack: (after some hesitation) "I know nothing, Lady Bracknell." Simile

Lady Bracknell: "I am pleased to hear it. I do not approve of anything that tampers with natural ignorance. **Ignorance is like a delicate exotic fruit; touch it and the bloom has gone**.... acts of violence in Grosvenor Square. What is your income?"

ACT I (Page 20-21)

The most prevalent form of flouting in this study is the flouting of the maxim of quantity. As Table 1 shows, this flouting primarily takes the form of hyperbole, in which characters intentionally provide more information than necessary for the conversation. This is consistent with Grice's (1975) idea that a speaker who flouts

the quantity maxim wilfully contributes more than necessary, thereby creating conversational implicature. Such disobedience serves as a means of social criticism in *The Importance of Being Earnest*, highlighting the performative and pretentious nature of Victorian upper-class conversation.

**Table 2.** Flouting the maxim of relevance

| No | Dialogue                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                     | Rhetorical manifestation |
|----|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|--------------------------|
| 1  | Jack: "You are not to talk of Miss Cardew like that. I don't like it."<br><br>Algernon: "Well, I don't like your clothes. <b>You look perfectly ridiculous in them</b> . Why on earth don't you go up and change? <b>It is perfectly childish</b> to be in deep mourning for a man who is actually staying for a whole week with you in your house as a guest. <b>I call it grotesque</b> ." | Hyperbole                |
|    | ACT II (Page 41)                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                             |                          |

- 2 Jack: "How can you sit there, calmly eating muffins when we are in this horrible trouble... You seem to me to be perfectly heartless." Irony
- Algernon: "**Well, I can't eat muffins in an agitated manner. The butter would probably get on my cuffs. One should always eat muffins quite calmly. It is the only way to eat them.**"
- ACT II (Page 55)

Table 2 displays how two rhetorical strategies, hyperbole and irony, are used to break the rule of relevance. The characters use these strategies to provide answers that seem unrelated to the subject at hand but carry deeper implications. According to Grice (1975),

disobeying this principle indicates that the speaker wants to convey something beyond the literal meaning of their words, which, in this play, functions as a satirical indictment of Victorian social pretensions and conversational conventions.

**Table 3.** Flouting the maxim of manner

| No | Dialogue                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                     | Rhetorical manifestation |
|----|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|--------------------------|
| 1  | Jack: Yes, I know it is. But supposing it was something else. Do you mean to say you couldn't love me then?<br><br>Gwendolen: (glibly) "Ah! that is <b>clearly a metaphysical speculation</b> , and like most metaphysical speculations has very little reference at all to the actual facts of real life, as we know them." | Hyperbole                |

ACT I (Page 17-18)

The example of flouting the maxim of manner is shown in Table 3, realized using hyperbole as a rhetorical device. Rather than answering Jack's question directly, Gwendolen reframes it as a "metaphysical speculation," a deliberately exaggerated and obscure characterization that departs from the clarity and orderliness expected of ordinary conversation. This flouting reflects Wilde's calculated use of humor to reveal the performative and evasive nature of Victorian upper-class social interaction, in which characters deliberately complicate their utterances to avoid direct emotional engagement.

### Flouting of Quantity

The flouting of the maxim of quantity emerges as the most dominant pragmatic strategy in *The Importance of Being Earnest*, occurring in seven instances through hyperbole, repetition, and irony. According to Grice (1975), the maxim of quantity requires that a speaker's contribution be as informative as required for the current purpose of the exchange. Requires that a speaker's

contribution be as informative as required for the current purpose of the exchange and should not be more or less than what is necessary. When this maxim is deliberately flouted, conversational implicature arises, allowing the speaker to convey meanings beyond the literal content of the utterance. In this play, the flouting of the maxim of quantity manifests rhetorically through three dominant devices: hyperbole, repetition, and irony, as elaborated in the following analysis.

- **Hyperbole**

Hyperbole is a rhetorical device characterized by deliberate exaggeration beyond what is literally true or necessary, employed to produce emphasis or comic effect. Hyperbole seems to function as a type of figurative expression where the literal meaning diverges from the intended interpretation" (Recchia, Howe, Ross & Alexander, 2010, as cited in Vasilopoulou, 2025, p. 12). In the context of Gricean pragmatics, hyperbolic utterances flout the maxim of quantity by providing informationally excessive contributions that surpass the communicative

needs of the exchange. This is evident in the following excerpt:

#### Data 1.2

Jack: (nervously) "Miss Fairfax, ever since I met you, I have admired you more than any girl. I have ever met since ... I met you."

Gwendolen: "Yes, ... There is something in that name that **inspires absolute confidence**. The moment Algernon first mentioned to me that he had a friend called Ernest, **I knew I was destined to love you.**"

(Wilde, 1895, Act I, p.17)

The bold statement above shows that Gwendolen attaches excessive and idealized significance to the name Ernest. She not only expresses a strong preference for the name but also elevates it to the level of romantic destiny, claiming that loving a man with that name is "her destiny." Such an exaggerated statement suggests that her love is not based on Jack's personal qualities, character, or emotional compatibility, but rather on an arbitrary social symbol.

- **Repetition**

Repetition is a form of consistency that requires a repeated lexical item, a synonym, a near-synonym, an element, or a noun (1997 as cited in Falah, 2026). Repetition is when a word or phrase is spoken or occurs repeatedly. Repetition as a rhetorical manifestation of maxim flouting occurs when a speaker reiterates the same propositional content across successive utterances without adding new informational value, thereby exceeding the quantity required by the conversational exchange. The following excerpt illustrates this phenomenon:

#### Data 1.6

Lady Bracknell: "Untruthful My nephew Algernon? Impossible! He is an Oxonian."

Jack: "I fear there can be no possible doubt about the matter....that he was perfectly well aware from the first that **I have no brother, that I never had a brother, and that I don't intend to have a brother, not even of any kind.** I distinctly told him so myself yesterday afternoon.

(Wilde, 1895, Act III, p. 64-65)

The bolded line above implies that Jack himself is aware of the implausibility of his confession. Beyond its pragmatic function, this repetition operates as a Goffmanian performance of respectability. Jack's insistent reiteration is an attempt to consolidate a social identity that his own deceptions have rendered unstable (Goffman, 1956). Jack's compulsive repetition here ironically dramatizes this instability, exposing the constructed and precarious nature of Victorian social identity as a central object of Wilde's critique.

- **Irony**

Beyond hyperbole and repetition, the flouting of the maxim of quantity is also rhetorically manifested through irony. According to Massaguni and Hartono (2025), this manifestation may be understood as an utterance's conclusion deviating from what is expected, producing an ironic effect. Below is the excerpt that illustrates this phenomenon:

#### Data 1.3

Jack: "No. He seemed to have expressed a desire to be buried in Paris."

Chasuble: "In Paris! (Shakes his head) I fear that hardly points to any very serious state of mind at the last. .... The last time I delivered it was in the Cathedral, **as a charity sermon on behalf of the Society for the Prevention of Discontent among the Upper Orders.** The Bishop, who was present, was much struck by some of the analogies I drew."

(Wilde, 1895, Act II, p.37)

The excerpt above flouts the maxim of quantity through irony, as Chasuble responds to Jack's simple statement with an extensive, unsolicited account of his own sermon and the bishop's admiration for it, far exceeding what the exchange requires. The bolded line shows that the irony is further deepened by the name of the charitable society he mentions, "the Society for the Prevention of Discontent among the Upper Orders," a charity meant to help the poor, is instead redirected to preserve the comfort of the privileged

class. The artificial performativity of Chasuble's piety is exposed by this ridiculous reversal, revealing that he prioritizes his own prestige over genuine pastoral empathy.

### Flouting of Relevance

The flouting of the maxim of relevance is the second most frequent pragmatic strategy in Oscar Wilde's *The Importance of Being Earnest*, occurring in two instances and manifesting rhetorically through hyperbole and irony as characters deliberately divert the conversation from the interlocutor's original topic. According to Grice (1975), the cooperative principle requires that a speaker's words be relevant to the topic and purpose of the conversation, and flouting occurs when a speaker intentionally diverges from this expectation by providing an apparently irrelevant response. These two rhetorical devices, hyperbole and irony, serve as the primary vehicles through which this flouting is realized in the play.

- **Hyperbole**

Hyperbole in the flouting of relevance involves providing exaggerated information to avoid questions from the conversation partner. As Claridge (2010, as cited in Vasilopoulou, 2025, p. 9) suggests, hyperbole could be strategically employed to sway audiences. This is evident in the following excerpt:

#### Data 2.1

Jack: "You are not to talk of Miss Cardew like that. I don't like it."

Algernon: "Well, I don't like your clothes. **You look perfectly ridiculous in them.** Why on earth don't you go up and change? **It is perfectly childish** to be in deep mourning for a man who is actually staying for a whole week with you in your house as a guest. **I call it grotesque.**"

(Wilde, 1895, Act II, p.41)

In that quote above, the character uses hyperbole to the conversation away from the interlocutor's statement. Rather than answering directly, Algernon instead makes exaggerated and irrelevant comments about Jack's appearance, such as calling them 'perfectly ridiculous' and 'Grotesque'.

- **Irony**

The rhetorical manifestation of irony in this exchange operates through what Massaguni and Hartono (2025) describe as situational irony, a condition in which what occurs directly contradicts what is conventionally expected. This pattern is evident in the following excerpt:

#### Data 2.2

Jack: "How can you sit there, calmly eating muffins when we are in this horrible trouble...You seem to me to be perfectly heartless."

Algernon: "**Well, I can't eat muffins in an agitated manner. The butter would probably get on my cuffs. One should always eat muffins quite calmly. It is the only way to eat them.**"

(Wilde, 1895, Act II, p.55)

From that line above, Algernon, seated calmly and eating muffins amid a relational crisis, responds to Jack's emotional appeal with a lecture on the proper technique of muffin consumption; the irony does not reside in any single word but in the total contrast between the seriousness of the situation and how Algernon treats it as unimportant. This situational irony implicates Algernon in deliberately refusing to engage with emotional reality, exposing the Victorian aristocratic tendency to prioritize social composure and surface decorum over genuine human feeling.

### Flouting of Manner

The flouting of the maxim of manner occurs least frequently in Oscar Wilde's *The Importance of Being Earnest*, appearing in only one instance and manifesting rhetorically through hyperbole, as a character responds to a simple question with an unnecessarily obscure and exaggerated elaboration. According to Grice (1975), the maxim of manner requires a speaker to be clear, brief, and orderly, avoiding obscurity and ambiguity in their utterances, and a flouting occurs when a speaker deliberately violates this expectation to generate implicature. This flouting manifests rhetorically through hyperbole, as demonstrated in the following analysis.

- **Hyperbole**

The hyperbole of Gwendolen's utterance flouts the maxim of manner by responding to Jack's simple question with a verbose statement. Instead of giving a direct answer, she frames the issue as a "metaphysical speculation," making her response more obscure than required. This flouting is rhetorically manifested through hyperbole, as she exaggerates the philosophical significance of Jack's hypothetical question. This is clearly demonstrated in the excerpt below:

### Data 3.1

Jack: Yes, I know it is. But supposing it was something else. Do you mean to say you couldn't love me then?

Gwendolen: (glibly) "Ah! that is **clearly a metaphysical speculation**, and like most metaphysical speculations has very little reference at all to the actual facts of real life, as we know them."

(Wilde, 1895, Act I, p.17-18)

By describing Jack's simple question as a "metaphysical speculation," she deliberately exaggerates its complexity and elevates it to an unnecessary philosophical level. This hyperbolic framing allows her to avoid directly confronting the superficial basis of her affection.

This exchange also functions as Wilde's social criticism of Victorian aristocratic culture. Gwendolen's exaggerated intellectualism reflects a social tendency to value appearance and sophistication over sincerity. According to Nnyagu and Deborah (2023), Victorian society placed strong emphasis on respectability and decorum as essential social virtues.

### The Absence of Flouting of the maxim quality

Regarding the Gricean maxim of quality, which requires truthfulness and sufficient evidential grounding in an assertion, no flouting was found in the selected dialogues from *The Importance of Being Earnest*. This absence can be considered consistent with the nature of Wilde's comedy. Instead of his characters making statements that are scandalously false or unfounded, which would be a direct flouting of this principle, Wilde's characters tend to manipulate the conversation through what they say: saying too much, saying too far from the subject, rather than

through outright lies. The humor and rhetoric in this play are largely built on excess, deflection, and ambiguity, rather than on deliberate deception on a propositional level. Therefore, the absence of any flouting of the quality principle in this study does not indicate a flaw in the analysis but rather reflects the characteristic rhetorical mode of the text itself.

### Social Criticism Realized through Maxim Flouting

The analysis reveals that maxim flouting in *The Importance of Being Earnest* systematically targets four axes of Victorian social life: marriage, class, morality, and identity. Across all instances, flouting operates not as communicative failure but as a deliberate pragmatic strategy through which rhetorical devices construct layers of social critique. As Sapitri and Tarmini (2023) observe, literary works with social themes reflect the author's sensitivity to realistic social problems, a sensitivity that, when expressed through stylistic devices, transforms language into a vehicle for social critique.

### Marriage

Gwendolen declares to Jack: "My ideal has always been to love someone of the name of Ernest". There is something in that name that inspires absolute confidence. The moment Algernon first mentioned to me that he had a friend called Ernest, I knew I was destined to love you" (Act I, p. 17) flouts the maxim of quantity through hyperbole. Her elaborate declaration far exceeds what the situation requires, and the hyperbolic claim that a name alone "inspires absolute confidence" and renders one "destined" to love its bearer absurdly inflates an arbitrary social marker into a philosophical destiny.

As Nnyagu and Deborah (2023) observe, the Victorian era was characterized by a rigid social hierarchy in which individuals were evaluated not by their personal character but by their social standing and adherence to prevailing norms, a context in which marriage functioned primarily as a mechanism for consolidating class position rather than pursuing authentic emotional union. As Goffman (1956) argues, social actors manage impressions through performed behavior; here, Gwendolen masks shallowness behind a rhetorical facade. Wilde thus exposes Victorian marriage as a

social arrangement governed by arbitrary convention rather than authentic love.

### **Class**

Lady Bracknell defines ignorance: "Ignorance is like a delicate exotic fruit; touch it, and the bloom has gone... Education produces no effect whatsoever. If it did, it would prove a danger to the upper classes and probably lead to acts of violence in Grosvenor Square." (Act I, p.20-21) flouts the maxim of quantity through a combination of simile and hyperbole. Her elaborate philosophical elaboration far exceeds conversational necessity, generating the implicature that the Victorian upper class actively cultivated ignorance not as an intellectual position but as a strategy of class self-preservation. The simile aestheticizes what is in fact a political agenda, the deliberate suppression of education to prevent social mobility, while the hyperbolic warning about violence reveals aristocratic anxiety over the dissolution of class boundaries.

### **Morality**

As Nnyagu and Deborah (2023) observe, Victorian writers used satire to expose the follies of their society, and Lady Bracknell inadvertently confesses to the ideological function of ignorance as a tool of class domination, thereby transforming aristocratic wisdom into self-indictment. Algernon's response to Jack's dinner invitation, "once a week is quite enough to dine with one's own relations... The amount of women in London who flirt with their own husbands is perfectly scandalous... It is simply washing one's clean linen in public"(Act I, p. 12-13) flouts the maxim of quantity through irony and hyperbole.

The rhetorical irony is multilayered: Algernon characterizes marital fidelity, the very cornerstone of Victorian domestic morality, as "scandalous," while framing avoidance of family duty as social sophistication, and the hyperbolic framing of wifely faithfulness as an embarrassing public exposure constitutes a deliberate inversion of the moral register. As Sapitri and Tarmini (2023) demonstrate, irony and sarcasm function as the dominant stylistic modes through which social criticism is articulated in literary texts, operating through contrast and inversion rather than direct confrontation, precisely the mechanism Wilde

deploys here, implying that authentic moral conduct had become so rare among the Victorian aristocracy that its performance was regarded as socially awkward rather than admirable.

### **Identity**

Jack's repeated denial across two acts "I have no brother Ernest. I have no brother at all. I never had a brother in my life" (Act II, p. 53) and "he was perfectly well aware from the first that I have no brother, that I never had a brother, and that I don't intend to have a brother, not even of any kind" (Act III, p. 64-65) flouts the maxim of quantity through repetition. Under Grice's (1975) maxim of quantity, such reiteration is communicatively unnecessary and constitutes deliberate flouting. The implicature generated is one of performative desperation: the compulsive repetition signals not confidence but anxiety, implying that Jack himself recognizes the fragility of the social identity he has constructed through deception.

As Goffman (1956) argues, identity is maintained through repeated social performance. Jack's compulsive reiteration of the same denial across two acts enacts precisely this dynamic: each repetition is not a confident assertion of truth but a desperate attempt to stabilize a social self that his own fabrications have rendered precarious. The more insistently he repeats the denial, the more visibly the constructed nature of his Victorian respectability is exposed. Wilde thus exposes the respectable Victorian gentleman not as an authentic moral being but as a carefully managed social facade that unravels when confronted with its own contradictions.

### **CONCLUSION**

This study has shown that Grice's maxims are flouted in Oscar Wilde's *The Importance of Being Earnest* not only as a source of humor but also as a deliberately crafted pragmatic move to construct and deliver social criticism of Victorian values. It was found that the maxim of quantity is the most flouted (7 instances), predominantly via exaggeration, repetition, and irony, followed by the maxims of relevance and manner, and no instances of maxim flouting involving the maxim of quality were identified in conjunction with rhetorical devices in the selection of data used. This

suggests that the characters in Wilde's play construct social criticism through exaggeration and indirectness rather than outright lies, using the play's general mode of comic criticism to reveal the pretensions of Victorian society rather than directly deceiving its characters.

The integration of Grice's (1975) Cooperative Principle and Goffman's (1956) notion of impression management as a means of analyzing the social construct of identity has moved beyond the mostly descriptive and classification-oriented study of maxim floutings to an interpretive analysis rooted in sociopragmatics.

Each instance of maxim flouting analyzed has also corresponded to a specific dimension of Victorian social criticism: the construction of marriage as a social ceremony rather than a heartfelt union; the construction of class as an ideology maintained by feigned ignorance; morality as a performative façade that covers up private hypocrisies; and the shaping of identity as an unsteady and ever-repeated presentation. These findings help validate the argument that Wilde's wit is a tool for exposing Victorian aristocratic hubris rather than an accidental byproduct. However, this study is limited in several ways. First, the data have been selected from only one text, and this data set has been narrowed further to only those utterances that were considered to display both a flouting of one of Grice's maxims and the appearance of a specific rhetorical device, to the exclusion of flouting utterances with no rhetorical expression, and thus the work may present an incomplete picture of the pragmatics of the text.

Secondly, as is the case with almost any pragmatic study of this nature, the analysis of implicature and the identification of forms of social criticism may have involved a certain amount of interpretative bias, and it is still possible that alternative readings of the text could be made.

Lastly, further research could extend this sociopragmatic framework to other Wildean plays or Victorian-era works and explore a broader range of rhetorical manifestations of maxim flouting to enrich understanding of pragmatic strategies in literary discourse more generally.

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