

AN INVESTIGATION INTO THE FLOUTING OF CONVERSATIONAL MAXIMS EMPLOYED BY MALE AND FEMALE GUESTS IN THE AMERICAN TALK SHOW “THE ELLEN SHOW”

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Abstract - Grice's maxims are basic rules for interlocutors to follow in conversations. Nevertheless, when the speaker intentionally makes the hearer look for the real meaning beyond what is said implicitly, (s)he employs conversational maxim flouting. This article aims at investigating types of conversational maxim flouting and rhetorical strategies employed by male and female guests in the American talk show “The Ellen Show” and discovering similarities and differences in terms of the flouting of conversational maxims between two genders. The study design is based on a combination of qualitative and quantitative approaches and the application of descriptive and comparative methods. The samples including 72 maxim flouting situations for each gender are selected from the Interviews section on the official channel of The Ellen Show. The findings reveal that although both genders share some similarities concerning the pragmatic features of maxim flouting, each gender reflects its own tendency of language style in communication.

Key words - The Ellen Show; male and female; the flouting of conversational maxims; rhetorical strategies; similarities and differences.

1. Introduction

Communication is considered as an indispensable part of human daily life. While involved in a conversation, people are supposed to cooperate with each other to make the conversation run smoothly. Grice [1] proposed *Cooperative Principle* including four maxims of quantity, quality, relation and manner for interlocutors in order to achieve effective conversational communication. Nevertheless, the view may describe a philosopher's paradise since it seems that no one actually speaks like that the whole time. In conversation, there are instances where the speaker intentionally or unintentionally chooses not to observe maxims. Interestingly, when the speaker does not observe maxims deliberately (*i.e. maxim flouting*), (s)he intends to express the meaning beyond the word used and it has to be inferred by the hearer. Thus, pragmatic features of maxim flouting must be considered by the listener in those situations to distinguish what the speaker says and what (s)he means.

To the best of our knowledge, up to now, this matter has not received much attention in Vietnam. With the hope of contributing a small part to the teaching and learning of the speaking skill, this article is aimed at: (1) investigating pragmatic features of flouting maxims employed by male and female guests in the American talk show *The Ellen Show* in terms of types of maxims and strategies of maxim flouting, (2) analyzing the similarities and differences between male and female guests in terms of conversational maxims flouting in *The Ellen Show*. The Ellen Show, an American entertainment talk show hosted by Ellen DeGeneres, combines comedy, celebrity, musical guests, and human-interest stories. Debuting since September,

2003, the Ellen Show has reached 17 seasons with more than 1,000 episodes. Among a variety of amusing and fascinating segments which involve the participation of guests (including celebrities, extraordinary people or those who have viral videos) and audiences, the *Interview* part of the show where interactions between the host and the guests occur naturally is chosen to investigate.

2. Theoretical Background

2.1. The Flouting of Conversational Maxims

In his *Logic and Conversation*, Grice [1] first analyzed cooperation as consisting of four **conversational maxims**: Quantity, Quality, Relation and Manner.

Maxim of Quantity: Be as informative as is required.

Maxim of Quality: Be genuine and sincere and give truthful contribution.

Maxim of Relation: Be relevant.

Maxim of Manner: Avoid obscurity and ambiguity.

Basically, there are two possible things that people can do with maxims: observance and non-observance of the maxims. Observance of the maxims means that the rules of maxim are followed. On the other hand, **non-observance of the maxims** means that the rules are ignored.

Grice [1] clarified five ways of **non-observance of conversational maxims**: flouting, violation, opting out, infringing, and suspending. *Flouting* a maxim takes place when a speaker blatantly fails to observe a maxim without any intention to mislead a hearer; whereas, in *violating* a maxim, the speaker intends to mislead the hearer. In *opting out* a maxim, the speaker shows his/ her unwillingness to cooperate in the way the maxim requires. *Infringing* a maxim usually takes place when a speaker has an imperfect linguistic performance, cognitive impairment, or when a speaker cannot speak clearly or to the point because of informatively impaired. Meanwhile, *suspending* a maxim occurs when there are culture-specific or particular events that force the speaker not to say something directly, for instance, taboo words.

Among instances of non-observance of maxims, it seems that maxim flouting particularly attracts the attention of linguist such as Grice [1] Thomas [2], Grundy [3], etc. since it is likely to occur more frequently in daily conversations. Hence, the main focus of this article is the **flouting of conversational maxims**.

Flouting one maxim or more occurs when a participant in a conversation does deliberately fail to obey one or more of conversational maxims for the purpose of implying

something behind the literal meaning of the utterance, i.e. conversational implicature. Thomas [2] supported Grice's view that the conversational implicature that is added when flouting is not intended to deceive the recipient of the conversation, but to make the recipient look for other meaning. Grice [1] suggested four types of **flouting of conversational maxims**: flouting of the Quantity Maxim, flouting of the Quality Maxim, flouting of the Relation Maxim and flouting of the Manner Maxim.

Flouting of the Quantity Maxim

A participant in conversation intentionally provides insufficient or excessive information.

Flouting of the Quality Maxim

An interlocutor's contribution is patently untrue, or lacks adequate evidence.

Flouting of the Relation Maxim

A participant is giving a response that is unmatched or irrelevant to the topic that is being discussed.

Flouting of the Manner Maxim

A speaker intentionally fails to observe the maxim by not being brief, not being orderly, using obscure language, or using ambiguity.

2.2. Rhetorical Strategies for Maxim Flouting

It is assumed that when flouting conversational maxims, the speaker must apply strategies to convey the implicature to the hearer. Grundy [3] suggests six rhetorical strategies which include figures of speech as means of maxim flouting: *tautology*, *metaphor*, *overstatement*, *understatement*, *rhetorical question*, and *irony*. These rhetorical devices are classified as strategies of maxim flouting because their definitions and usages themselves show their potential to flout maxims. For further explanation, the definition of six rhetorical devices are provided below to prove their capacity as strategies for maxim flouting.

Tautology

Tautology is the repetitive use of phrases or words that have similar meaning. According to Grundy [3], tautology is an expression used frequently to express a complex meaning in an easier way.

Metaphor

Levinson [4] defines metaphor as the use of an expression in which there is a relationship between 'metaphorical' expression and 'literal' expression in which 'metaphorical' expression can change the meaning of 'literal' expression or vice versa.

Overstatement

According to Leech [5], overstatement is similar to hyperbole, in which a speaker describes something more strongly than the actual state of affairs.

Understatement

Leech [5] stated that understatement is the opposite of overstatement since understatement describes something more weakly than the actual state of affairs.

Rhetorical question

Rhetorical question is a question that is asked just for

effect, or to lay emphasis on some point being discussed, when no real answer is expected.

Irony

Grice [6] suggests that in irony, it is perfectly obvious to the speaker (A) and his audience (B) that what A has said or has made as if to say is something (s)he does not believe. While using irony, A believes that B can get the implicature behind his/her utterance.

2.3. Language and Gender

According to Han [7], the person who pioneered in the field of *Language and Gender* was Lakoff, whose work confirmed that women's speech had some features that were different from men's speech. Lakoff's approach is referred to as '*deficit*' theory since her analysis was not centered on empirical research and her finding suggests that women's speech had uncertainty and lack of confidence on the part of women. The other commonly known approach is the '*dominance*', which assures that male speech is dominant over the subordinate female speech since men are likely to use what power they have to dominate women, so language is one of the powerful tools which allows men to express their status of supremacy. On the contrary, pioneers of '*different approach*' react against the suggestive dominance theory. According to West & Zimmermann [8], researchers of the theory state that the reason for the different biological forms of language used by men and women is due to their early socialization. So, it is related to psychological differences, socialization differences in social power. The theory of social power claims that men's greater degree of social power leads to their domination of interaction. Hence, the other powerless part of society must be more polite. On the other hand, Freeman & McElhinny [9] suggested the Difference Dual-Culture approach, which explains that differences in language appeared in childhood where physical social separation is made.

In summary, men and women does not share common language styles. Male speech tends to show their power and dominance in conversation while female speech tends to show intimacy and they are associated with politeness. Furthermore, the difference between men and women in conversation is due to the fact that they have different backgrounds and also fill different roles in society.

3. Methodology

The study design is based on a combination of quantitative and qualitative approaches in order to identify, describe and analyze pragmatic features of maxim flouting instances. The methods applied in the research are descriptive and comparative ones. Two criteria to select samples are established: 1-the samples have to include *maxim flouting* instances, 2-the male and female guests in the instances have to be native English speakers. The source is the *Interview* segment in the show from Season 15 to one-third of Season 17 (from September, 2017 to December, 2019) since the English subtitles have been fully available since Season 15 until now. Nearly 1,000 short video clips, each of which lasts from 1 minute to 8 minutes, are taken from the official channel of the show on YouTube.

On average, 30 situations where each gender flouted one or more maxims were found out in each of Season 15 & 16. In one-third of Season 17, 12 maxim flouting instances of each gender were selected. In total, 72 situations of maxim flouting employed by male guests and 72 situations of maxim flouting employed by female guests in The Ellen Show are chosen as the sample of the research. These situations are all transcribed into written forms, which are used as the data of the study.

The data are coded as follows:

Table 1. Data coding

Types of Data	Coding
Gender	ma: male fe: female
Data number	01
Types of maxim flouting	quan: quantity; qual: quality re: relation; man: manner
Rhetorical strategies	tau: tautology me: metaphor over: overstatement under: understatement rhe: rhetorical question ir: irony no: no Grundy's rhetorical strategies are found out

E.g. ma/01/qual/ir, fe/02/quan/rhe

4. Findings and discussion

4.1. Maxim Flouting Employed by Male Guests in "The Ellen Show"

4.1.1. Types of Maxim Flouting Employed by Male Guests

a. Quantity Maxim Flouting

- (1) Ellen: It's changing, look how sexy, the whole new look. I mean the room just got hotter, it really did.
Blake: ***I mean you can't be the Sexiest Man Alive unless you're the sexiest man alive.***

[ma/10/quan/tau]

In this context, Blake provides uninformative contribution to Ellen's compliment Blake on his sexy look. The maxim of quantity is flouted with the purpose of making a joke to create a cheerful atmosphere.

b. Quality Maxim Flouting

- (2) Ellen (imitates Columbo's voice): Pardon me, ma'am, I hate to bother you, but-

(Applause)

Alec: ***You know who's cheering loudest are those who don't even know who Columbo is.***

[ma/01/qual/over]

In (2), Alec's utterance seems to lack adequate evidence, not based on any logical facts. In this case, his purpose is to tease Ellen in a friendly way.

c. Manner Maxim Flouting

- (3) Nick: So I'm trying to get better at French.

Ellen: What do you have so far?

Nick: ***Someone asked me how is your French? And I said it depends on who I'm talking to.***

[ma/02/man/no]

In this situation, Nick aims at saving face for himself, so he tries to avoid the fact that he acquires little French though he's filming in Montreal, a city which is considered to be "very French".

d. Relation Maxim Flouting

- (4) Ellen: And you're only 24, right? So to achieve all this by the time you're 24...

Ben: ***I'm just going to go to bed now.***

[ma/13/re/over]

In (4), while Ellen compliments Ben on what he has achieved at his age, his reply seems irrelevant, which flouts the maxim of relation. His purpose is to emphasize the fact that he had to work really hard to get the achievement.

e. Mixed Maxim Flouting

- (5) Ed: Ellen wanted to buy my house a few years ago for Porsche.

Ellen: Yes. So her birthday is next week. So maybe

Ed: ***My wife would kill me.***

[ma/17/re&qual/over]

In the context when Ellen shows her interest in Ed's house and intends to ask him to sell it to her, Ed flouts both relation and quality maxim by saying something irrelevant as well as definitely untrue. He aims at refusing Ellen's offer in a polite way.

4.1.2. Rhetorical strategies for Maxim Flouting Employed by Male Guests

All six types of rhetorical strategies proposed by Grundy are discovered in the situations where maxim flouting is employed by male guests in the interview.

In (4), *overstatement* is applied to emphasize the fact that he has a really hard-working time to get the achievement so he needs to rest for a while. In (1), in order to make a joke, Blake uses *tautology* strategy since the phrase "the Sexiest Man Alive" is repeated.

Further examples of the rhetorical strategies of *understatement*, *metaphor*, *rhetorical question* and *irony* are described in (6), (7), (8), (9).

- (6) Ellen: It's so nice to meet you. I'm a big fan.

Thomas: Pleasure, likewise.

Ellen: You're very very funny.

Thomas: ***Oh, I'm moderately humorous.***

[ma/30/qual/under]

In the situation, he understates his talent by using the word "moderately". His purpose is to show his modesty when receiving Ellen's compliment.

- (7) Stedman: And so, for me, I've been able to find my own happiness, and to find my own skills, my own talents, and my own abilities. And I'm satisfied with that. I'm really happy with that. And so the combination – when you have a good partner that's able to self-actualize

their potential, and you're able to self actualize yours, then *one and one equals about six*.

[ma/57/qual/me]

In (7), it is obvious that he uses metaphor strategy because even a little child knows that one and one can not equal six. Actually, he tries to emphasize the fact that in a relationship, a good partner assists the other to self-actualize their potential and this good combination can help them achieve more.

(8) Ellen: How do I know it's not intentional?

Mark: *How do you know I'm not narcoleptic?*

[ma/31/quan/rhe]

In (8), Ellen is teasing Mark because of the fact that he falls asleep easily anywhere. Mark then jokes with Ellen in return by using a rhetorical question in response to Ellen's question.

(9) Ellen: Yeah, you got an "aw" because there's the two of you kissing. Because y'all are cute.

Blake: *Can you believe that she's with me?*

What's wrong with her? There's something wrong with her.

[ma/39/qual/ir]

In the situation, everyone shows their admiration for the sweet love of him and Gwen Stefani when they see the photo of them kissing. However, Blake uses ironical questions to express his strong feeling that he feels so lucky and delighted about being in love with Gwen.

4.2. Maxim Flouting Employed by Female Guests in "The Ellen Show"

4.2.1. Types of Maxim Flouting Employed by Female Guests

a. Quantity Maxim Flouting

(10) Ellen: And does he watch, does he like The Bachelor?

Beth: *Are you kidding? I don't think I would be watching The Bachelor if it weren't for my husband. No, he loves it. We love watching it together. He gets very annoyed with me when we're watching The Bachelor. We have to watch it the next day because we go to bed at 8 o'clock.*

[fe/45/quan/rhe]

In the example, Beth flouts quantity maxim because her response to Ellen seems more excessive than the Yes/ No question requires. She tries to emphasize the fact that her husband really likes the TV show The Bachelor.

b. Quality Maxim Flouting

(11) Ellen: We got you a \$500 Postmates card. It's the real deal. Dude.

Auli'i: *I am never leaving my apartment.*

[fe/16/qual/over]

In (11), when receiving a \$500 Postmates card, which is from an American company delivering goods locally, Auli'i flouts quality maxim to imply that she needn't go out to buy food or goods thanks to the card.

c. Manner Maxim Flouting

(12) Ellen: So when are you turning 40? Soon, right?

Tiffany: *I'm never going to be 40, but I am turning 21 for the 19th year really soon. In December I'll be 21 for the 19th year.*

[fe/63/man/no]

In this examples, the contribution of Tiffany flouts manner maxim because she tries to talk in an obscure way with the purpose of making a joke with the hearer.

d. Relation Maxim Flouting

(13) Ellen: Are you adventurous? Like would you jump out of the plane?

Judy: *Jews aren't adventurous.*

[fe/37/re/me]

In (13), when being asked whether she is adventurous, Judy mentions Jews, which seems irrelevant to the question. Therefore, she flouts relation maxim. In fact, Judy was born to a Jewish family, so she uses metaphorical figure of "Jews" to refer to herself. Her purpose is to save face for herself since directly admitting that she is not adventurous appears more embarrassing for her.

e. Mixed Maxim Flouting

(14) Ellen: Did you have fun at the birthday?

Chrissy: *Did I have fun? It was like the Oscars, the Grammys, the Emmys all in one gorgeous tent. It was incredible. I've never seen this kind of group. You have an incredible group of friends.*

[fe/13/quan&qual/rhe&me]

In (14), when being asked about Ellen's birthday party which she was invited to, Chrissy asks a rhetorical question in return, which is redundant. Therefore, she flouts quantity maxim. She then flouts quality maxim by using metaphorical figures such as "the Oscars, the Grammys, the Emmys" to describe those who join the party. The intention of the maxim flouting is to express her great excitement when joining Ellen's party.

f. Rhetorical strategies for Maxim Flouting Employed by Female Guests

All six types of rhetorical strategies are found out in instances where female guests flout maxims. In addition, *mixed rhetorical strategies* where two strategies are applied in one case of flouting maxim are discovered in flouting maxim situations of female guests.

Auli'i in (4) uses *overstatement* in "I'm never leaving my apartment" to show her great excitement when receiving the gift from Ellen. (13) is the instance of the application of *metaphor* strategy. Judy was born to a Jewish family, so she uses metaphorical figure of "Jews" to refer to herself. Her purpose is to save face for herself since directly admitting that she is not adventurous appears more embarrassing for her. In (2), when being asked about Ellen's birthday party which she joined, Chrissy asks a *rhetorical question* "Are you kidding?" in return to show her excitement.

The following instances (15), (16), and (17) are examples of *understatement*, *tautology* and *irony* strategies, respectively.

(15) Ellen: And the last time you were here, you were starting the “Endgame” movie right? Is that what you – you were starting that?

Brie: **Yeah. The little movie that could.**

[fe/69/qual/under]

To show her modesty, Brie applies *understatement* strategy through the phrase “the little movie” since “Endgame” is a blockbuster movie actually.

(16) Ellen: I’m just confirming what the tabloids are saying, which is that y’all are getting married.

Gwen: **Oh, so if I say we are, then I say we are. And if I say no we’re not, then that would be sad too.**

[fe/21/quan/tau]

In reply to the rumour Ellen has just mentioned, Gwen provides a *tautological structure* with the purpose of hiding the truth. As a celebrity, she does not want to reveal her private life.

(17) Ellen: And what were you last year?

Halsey: **Oh, well, I really wanted to do something really glamorous and feminine. I like flowers and pink and stuff like that. So I went as Marilyn Manson.**

[fe/66/qual/ir]

Irony strategy is applied by Halsey since while she states that she wanted to do something “glamorous and feminine”, she chose to dress up as Marilyn Manson, who has a scary appearance. Her purpose in this case is to joke with the host.

Mixed rhetorical strategies are discovered as in the case of (14), in which two strategies are applied in one contribution. In reply to Ellen, Chrissy first asks the *rhetorical question* “Did I have fun?”. She then applies *metaphor* through the figures “the Oscars, the Grammys, the Emmys”, which refer to those whose win those prestigious awards.

4.3. Similarities and Differences between Male and Female Guests in terms of Conversational Maxim Flouting in “The Ellen Show”

4.3.1. Types of Maxim Flouting

The investigation reveals that all four types of conversational maxim are flouted by both male and female guests in the show. Besides, instances where two or three maxims are flouted at the same time in one’s contribution are identified in both genders (*i.e. mixed maxim flouting*) as well.

Figure 1 below is the summary of the types of maxim flouting of its presenting from 72 instances where male guests employ maxim flouting and 72 instances where female guests employ maxim flouting in “The Ellen Show”.

The statistics indicate that *Quality Maxim Flouting* is more commonly employed by male guests while *Quantity Maxim Flouting* is performed more frequently by female

guests. It can be seen that males’ contribution tends to lack adequate evidence or patently untrue; whereas, female guests frequently provide excessive information in the interview. Interestingly, relation maxim is the maxim flouted the least frequently in both genders. It can be assumed that in an interview, the guests normally try not to give irrelevant replies to the host.

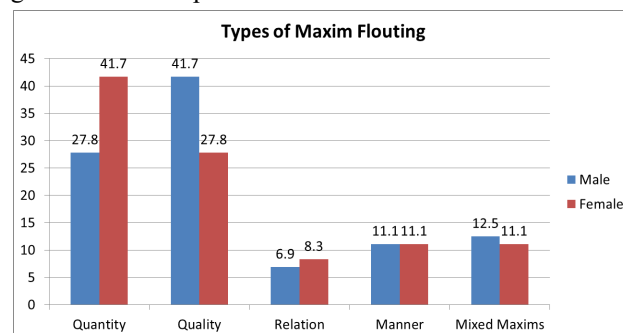


Figure 1. Types of Maxim Flouting Employed by Male and Female Guests in “The Ellen Show” (in percentage)

4.3.2. Rhetorical strategies

All six types of rhetorical strategies proposed by Grundy are discovered in the situations where maxim flouting is employed by male and female guests in the interview. The analysis also shows that there are a number of instances where no rhetorical strategies are used, especially the instances of female.

In addition, *mixed rhetorical strategies* where two strategies are applied in one case of flouting maxim are discovered, but mixed rhetorical strategies are employed by women only.

Figure 2 below is the summary of the rhetorical strategies drawn out from 72 instances where male guests employ maxim flouting and 72 instances where female guests employ maxim flouting in “The Ellen Show”.

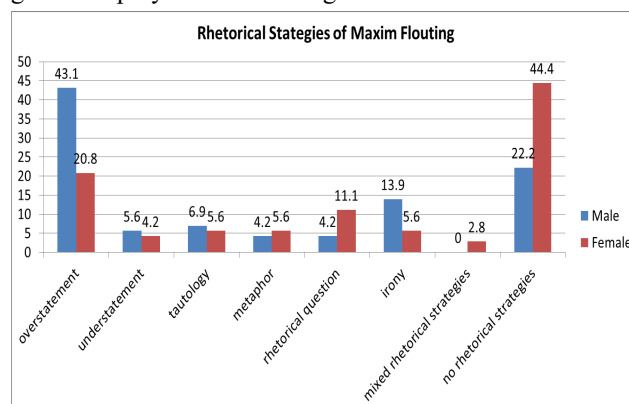


Figure 2. Rhetorical strategies for Maxim Flouting Employed by Male and Female Guests in “The Ellen Show” (in percentage)

According to Figure 2, it can be concluded that male guests tend to use rhetorical strategies more often than female guests. Of all strategies, *Overstatement* are applied the most frequently by both genders. *Understatement*, *Metaphor* and *Tautology* strategies are not commonly used by both male and female guests.

5. Conclusion

The results of the investigation show that all of the types of maxim flouting and rhetorical strategies are employed by both gender in the show. Furthermore, *mixed maxim flouting* and *mixed rhetorical strategies* where contributors employ two or more types of maxim flouting or strategies at the same time are discovered.

The differences in the frequency of types of maxim flouting and rhetorical strategies show that each gender reflects their own tendency of language style in communication. Males tend to give inadequate evidence or exaggerated contribution while females frequently provides excessive information and seem to infrequently apply rhetorical strategies in maxim flouting situations. The results of the research can be applied to teaching English language learners pragmatic competence. Thus, they can have a deeper understanding of instances where conversational maxims are flouted and strategies of maxim flouting, which are used frequently in real life English and know how to construct a productive, meaningful and natural conversation in English.

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