

# THE USE OF GRICE`S CONVERSATIONAL MAXIMS IN THE AMERICAN SITCOM "MODERN FAMILY"

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**Bušelić, Ivana**

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Ivana Bušelić

**The Use of Grice's Conversational Maxims in the American Sitcom  
Modern Family**

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Split, 2023.

UNIVERSITY OF SPLIT  
FACULTY OF HUMANITIES AND SOCIAL SCIENCES  
Department of English Language and Literature

**The Use of Grice's Conversational Maxims in the American Sitcom  
Modern Family**

BA Thesis

Student:  
Ivana Bušelić

Supervisor:  
Mirjana Semren, Assistant Professor

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# 1. Introduction

The Cooperative principle proposed by Grice (1975: 45) is, in his words, “a rough general principle which participants will be expected (*ceteris paribus*) to observe”. It refers to participants engaging in a conversation. He further explained the principle through his four conversational maxims. He divided them into the maxims of Quality, Quantity, Manner, and Relation. Swiggers (1981: 304) refers to them as “specifications of the axiom applied to four aspects of conversational exchange”. Grice’s Cooperative principle and conversational maxims influence the view of linguists, philosophers, and cognitive scientists on meaning and conversation (Neale, 1992). They are used very often in everyday life, even though most do not realize this.

Sitcoms are full of advice regarding popular social issues of their time, which makes them different from other types of comedy (Berman, 1987). They rely on comedy and humour, although they mostly show situations from daily life. They use maxims because they are one of the easiest means of achieving humour or evoking emotions in the viewer. This is why the category for analysis is a sitcom. The one that will be analysed is the American TV sitcom *Modern Family*. It deals with normal family situations and there is always a lesson to be learned and advice to be taken at the end of each episode.

The aim of the paper is to show that Grice’s conversational maxims are often used in sitcoms, in this case in the TV sitcom *Modern Family*, to achieve humour, or to bring out specific feelings or emotions in the viewer. The theoretical part of the thesis provides information about the Cooperative principle and the four conversational maxims. Different categories of non-observance of the maxims are also explained and the distinction between the categories of non-observance will be briefly mentioned. The second part provides examples of non-observances of the maxims. Several examples will be provided in which a maxim was used. In this case ‘use’ refers to non-observance and ‘non-observance’ refers to instances where one fails to follow the rules of a maxim.

## **2. The Cooperative principle and Grice's conversational maxims**

In a conversation, the participants cooperate to understand each other because they need to understand what the other is saying in order to successfully exchange the information they want during their conversation. Grice (1975) called this the Cooperative principle. This principle is not very informative because it is abstract. To understand the structure of a conversation there are certain rules one should follow. Grice (1975) states at least eight of these rules, which he names 'maxims' and divides them into maxims of Quality, Quantity, Manner, and Relation.

### **2.1. The Cooperative principle**

The Cooperative principle was proposed by British language philosopher, Paul Grice in 1975. According to Grice (1975), this principle states that one should make their contribution to a conversation as is requested, when it occurs and in the accepted course of conversation in which one is involved. It is fundamental for a successful conversation and it governs conducting conversations. This means that the speaker is often cooperating with the other speaker and believes that the other speaker is cooperating with him to make the exchange successful. This principle makes way for conversational implicatures, which are "not logically justified, but speakers derive them with the assumption that the interlocutor will understand them due to the achieved cooperation" (Werkmann, 2011: 137).

### **2.2. Grice's conversational maxims**

The maxims are important in everyday conversation because they are necessary for understanding the interlocutor. Grice (1975) was aware that there would be instances where people would fail to observe the maxims, where reasons could be various, e.g. when one shares more information than necessary or shares something irrelevant to the conversation. The four conversational maxims are of Quality, Quantity, Manner, and Relation.

**The maxim of Quality** states that one should not say things for which they do not believe to be true. Grice (1975: 45) explains it more precisely:

- “1. Do not say what you believe to be false.
2. Do not say that for which you lack adequate evidence”.

According to Grice (1975: 45) **the maxim of Quantity** relates to how much one should contribute to the conversation, and it makes up of 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”.

He states that the second maxim of Quantity is disputable as it can be seen as a mere waste of time, however it's admission will be secured by the maxim of Relation.

**The maxim of Relation** states that one should be relevant when contributing to a conversation. Grice (1975) states that the maxim is “terse”, however it helps with several problems, for example how many kinds of relevance there are or how these shift during the conversation.

Finally, the author sees **the maxim of Manner** as how something is said, and the author includes the supermaxim of being “perspicuous”. He explains it in four more rules that should be followed (Grice, 1975: 46):

- “1. Avoid obscurity of expression.
2. Avoid ambiguity.
3. Be brief (avoid unnecessary prolixity).
4. Be orderly”.

The observance of some of these maxims has more importance than those of others. Other maxims become important only if the maxim of Quality is fulfilled. There are also other maxims, such as those of moral or aesthetic character (Grice, 1975). However, in this thesis these maxims will not be analysed.

### 2.3. The non-observance of a maxim

The maxims can be ignored or non-observed unconsciously and consciously. Maxims that are not observed consciously are often ignored to make jokes or to achieve humour. According to Werkmann (2011: 138) “Many jokes, as well as ironic jokes, involve a violation of one or more of Grice’s conversational maxims”. There are different categories for non-observance of conversational maxims. Grice (1975) states that a speaker can ‘flout’ a maxim, ‘exploit’ a maxim, he can face a ‘clash’ between maxims, he can ‘violate’ a maxim, or ‘opt out’ of a maxim. He later added the category of ‘infringing’ a maxim. Thomas (1997) also gives the category of ‘suspending’ a maxim. Regarding the exploitation of a maxim, Grice (1975: 49) states that “On the assumption that the speaker is able to fulfil the maxim and to do so without violating another maxim (because of a clash), is not opting out, and is not, in view of blatancy of his performance, trying to mislead, the hearer is faced with a minor problem: How can his saying what he did say be reconciled with the supposition that he is observing the overall CP?”. The following paragraphs illustrate each of the abovementioned categories.

According to Grice (1975), a flout happens when one blatantly fails to observe a maxim with the intention of creating an implicature. An implicature occurs when there is an additional meaning that is inferred in addition to the semantic meaning of the words that were uttered. There are flouts that exploit a maxim and flouts that are necessitated by a clash between maxims. Thomas (1997: 390) gave an example of an exploitation of a maxim:

*“Interviewer: Did the United States Government play any part in Duvalier's departure?  
Did they, for example, actively encourage him to leave?”*

*Official: I would not try to steer you away from that conclusion”.*

It was an interview with an official from the United States Embassy in Port-au-Prince, Haiti. Instead of simply saying ‘Yes’, she gave a long and complicated answer. She failed to observe the maxim of Manner.

An example given by Thomas (1997: 389) for a clash between maxims is the following one: imagine someone asked a colleague what time it was, and they replied in a way that makes it seem that they are unsure of the answer, or that they are not saying everything they know:

*“Well, according to this clock it’s a quarter to four”.*



The reason for the non-observance of the maxim of Quality is the fact that the speaker was faced with a clash of maxims. He was unable to observe both the maxim of Quality and Quantity at the same time (Thomas, 1997).

Moreover, Grice defined ‘violation’ as the unostentatious non-observance of the maxim in his first published paper on the conversational cooperation from 1975. He stated that if one violates a maxim, they “will be liable to mislead” (Grice, 1975: 49). According to Thomas (1997), many people incorrectly use the term ‘violate’ for all forms of non-observance of the maxims. The author (1997: 392) gave a conversation of a headmaster and a pupil as an example for violation:

*“Headmaster: You know that I now know where you went, don't you?”*

*Hannah: We were in the woods”.*

It is a known fact that Hannah and her friend were absent from school when they were not supposed to be. Where they had gone and whether they had visited their friend's house were the crucial questions in this situation. Hannah's claim that they were in the woods is eventually proven to be accurate, although not entirely so as she withholds the fact that they had first been to their friend's house for a little bit. However, the way Hannah responded would not lead the headmaster to believe that she was not telling the entire story. This violation of the maxim of Quantity creates the misleading implicature that they went to the woods only and not to their friend's house (Thomas, 1997).

The next category is opting out of a maxim. One opts out of a maxim by showing refusal to cooperate in the way that the maxim requires. Examples of this non-observance are easy to be found in public life, when one cannot reply the way that is expected for legal or ethical reasons. Thomas (1997: 392) gives the example of a British MP who had been questioned about the discussion he had with the Libyan leader Colonel Gadaffi:

*“Well, honestly, I can't tell you a thing, because what was said to me was told me in confidence”.*

Finally, a speaker who does not observe a maxim, but has no intention of creating an implicature or deceiving, is infringing a maxim. This category of non-observance may be a result of several issues, e.g., excitement, speaker's lack of command of a language, performance anxiety, cognitive issues, or a speaker's inability to speak clearly, concisely, etc. (Thomas, 1997).

The last category of non-observance to introduce is the suspension of a maxim. Thomas (1997) states that many authors have said that there are instances when one does not need to opt out of observing the maxims because there are some events in which there is no expectation that maxims will be observed and because of this, the non-observance does not create any implicatures. Thomas (1997: 392) also states that “This category is necessary to respond to criticisms of the type made by Keenan (1976), who proposed as a counterexample to Grice's theory of conversational implicature the fact that in the Malagasy Republic participants in talk exchanges ‘regularly provide less information than is required by their conversational partner, even though they have access to the necessary information’ (Keenan, 1976: 10)”. The suspension of the maxims could be culture-specific or event-specific (Thomas, 1997). Thomas (1995) claims that the fact that in Britain Shakespeare’s play *Macbeth* is believed to be bad luck, so it is referred to as *The Scottish Play* by the acting community in Britain is an example for suspension of a maxim. In this instance, they fail to observe the maxim of Quantity.

It is not easy to differentiate between the categories of non-observance. As it has been previously stated, a flout must be so obvious that the interlocutor is aware that an implicature has been created. Thomas (1997) states that one crucial issue that Grice neglected to address is how one could differentiate between infringement, not intended to cause any implicature and a violation, where one possibly intended to mislead.

The theoretical section of the thesis is followed by the section presented by empirical research. In the next chapter the methodology of the research is explained. It also contains information about the TV sitcom *Modern Family*. Then comes the analysis of the non-observances. Lastly, there is a brief discussion of the results of the analysis.

### **3. Methodology**

#### **3.1. The sample**

This thesis will be referring to season four of the sitcom *Modern Family*, which aired from 2012 until 2013. Season four has twenty-four episodes altogether, however only ten episodes will be analysed. The episodes will be watched multiple times and close attention will be paid to what is being said in order to understand the context. Any scenes or conversations in which any of the earlier mentioned maxims were not observed will be analysed. The aim of the use,

i.e., non-observance of the maxim will also be discussed. The analysis will not be referring to non-verbal communication. The length of the scenes will vary from a few seconds to almost a minute.

### **3.1.1. The TV sitcom *Modern Family***

The TV sitcom *Modern Family* is one of the highest grossing sitcoms of all times. It is relatable for the average person as it shows situations that happen often to a family, and it shows them in a comic way. Another reason why this sitcom is used for the analysis is because while watching, one can often spot instances in which the conversational maxims are used.

TV sitcom *Modern Family* aired from 2009 until 2020. It follows three diverse modern-day families, a clan of Pritchetts, Tucker-Pritchetts and the Dunphys. All three of these families are connected through Jay Pritchett. Jay, a rich closet manufacturer, is married to his second wife Gloria, a much younger vivacious Colombian woman. They live together with Gloria's son, Manny, a young romantic who is very mature for his age. In season four of the series, they have their own son, Joe. Jay has two of his own children, Claire, and Mitchell. Claire is married to Phil. They have three children: Haley, the pretty and popular girl who is poorly educated, Alex, the smart middle child who struggles with social situations, and Luke, the playful and goofy youngest (Pugh, 2018). Claire's brother Mitchell is married to Cam, known for his happy and bubbly personality. Together they adopt a little girl of Vietnamese origin, Lily, who is funny and very sassy. At the series finale, they adopt another child, a baby boy named Rexford. The episodes comprise of story lines that peak as the three families meet up for a dinner, party, or other occasion (Pugh, 2018). The episodes contain confessional-like interviews in which the characters speak to the camera directly.

Season four is a very eventful one for the families. In this season, Jay is turning 65, Gloria is pregnant and her and Jay welcome their baby boy Joe. Haley is going to college, only for her to be thrown out later. Claire has a heart episode and Phil's mother dies at the end of the season. Mitchell and Cam must deal with the fact that could not adopt a baby, even though Lily is not fazed by it. Mitchell tries to subtly persuade Cam into getting a part-time job and he becomes a music teacher. Claire and Cam take on the task of renovating a house and selling it.

### 3.2. Data analysis

The episodes used in the analysis are episodes one, two, three, four, five, ten, thirteen, fifteen, eighteen and twenty. Each of these has one or more scenes of examples. A brief explanation of the plot of each episode will be given, as well as the context of each scene. After explaining the context, a transcript of each scene will be given and following the analysis of the non-observance of the maxims.

There are seven scenes in Episode 1<sup>1</sup>. These are illustrated in the examples below.

#### **Episode 1 – “Bringing up the Baby”**

**Phil kidnaps Jay for his 65<sup>th</sup> birthday, however the celebration was not to Jay’s liking. Mitchell and Cam deal with the fact that they cannot adopt another baby and think about adopting a cat. Haley and her boyfriend Dylan try to convince her parents to let him stay with them for two weeks. Gloria reveals her pregnancy.**

#### **SCENE 1**

**00:04:01 – 00:04:23**

In this scene, Claire, Alex, and Haley are in the kitchen after prom. Claire is asking Haley about her drinking and her boyfriend:

Claire: Were you drinking?

Haley: Mom, do we really have to do this? You ask if I was drinking, I say “no”, and we both know that’s not true. I mean, aren’t we past this point in our relationship?

Claire: No, young lady, we are not.

Haley: Then I wasn’t drinking.

Dylan: Me neither, Mrs. D.

Claire: Dear God. Tell me he did not spend the night here.

Haley: Mom, do we really have to do this?

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<sup>1</sup> The names and plot descriptions of the episodes were taken from IMDb.

Haley blatantly did not observe the maxim of Quality. This means that she flouted a maxim. Haley did not want to flout the maxim, but, as she sees it, her mother makes her do so. In addition, Dylan, her boyfriend, violated the maxim of Quantity by sharing the fact that he did not drink, even though he was not asked about it. Both of these non-observances were used to achieve humour in the scene.

## **SCENE 2**

**00:08:07 – 00:09:05**

In this scene, Claire and Haley are talking about Dylan possibly moving in with them for two weeks:

Haley: For whatever it's worth, Dylan was very responsible last night. He's a good guy to have around the house.

Claire: Mmm. Where are we going with this?

Haley: Well, since I can't move in with him anymore, he can't afford his apartment. So, I was wondering if it would be okay if he could stay with us for a couple of weeks?

Claire: Sure. Oh, you know what? Why don't you guys take our room?

Haley: Aw!

Alex: She's being facetious. Sarcastic. Dylan no stay.

Haley: What? Oh, come on! He helps out a lot! He's very handy!

Alex: Really? The guy who locked himself in his car?

Claire: You are in no position to be asking for favours, young lady. Here. Drink this. It's for your hangover.

Haley: Ugh. It smells gross.

Claire: Well, then you better drink it fast.

Haley: Ew. I'm gonna throw up. Ugh. Ugh.

Alex: Ugh. That's a hangover cure?

Claire: No.

In this scene Claire blatantly ignored the maxim of Quality two times. For this reason, the category of non-observance of a maxim is a flout. In both instances, humour was achieved. In the first instance, it is achieved through the fact that Haley does not realise that her mom was being sarcastic, and later she does with the little help from her sister Alex, who, with her butt ins helps the scene to be funny. In the second instance, humour is achieved through Claire's face when she denies the drink being a hungover cure. Her face is serious and can be seen that she is not happy with Haley's behaviour at prom the previous night.

### **SCENE 3**

**00:09:33 – 00:09:49**

In this scene, Jay, Phil and two of Jay's friends, Miles and Shorty, talk about Jay turning 65:

Miles: So... 65, huh? You're heading into the best years of your life.

Shorty: That's right. You put in the work. You climbed the mountain. Now it's time to reap the rewards.

Jay: I guess you're right.

Phil: Sounds pretty good to me.

Shorty: You know, the more I look at you, the angrier I get that you don't got a beard.

Phil: I had a soul patch once.

Shorty and Phil did not observe the maxim of Relation here because Phil's beard, or lack thereof, has nothing to do with the conversation the four men were having. The two men had no intention of creating an implication and because of that the category of non-observance was infringing. The non-observance of the maxim of Relation is what helps the scene achieve humour.

### **SCENE 4**

**00:10:58 – 00:11:38**

In this scene Gloria tells Claire that she is pregnant:

Claire: Sure. You know, I had a little Peppermint Schnapps at my prom, but I hid it from my parents. And I kicked my boyfriend out before they woke up. It's called respect.

Gloria: I'm pregnant.

Claire: (Whispers) You're gonna get fat. You... Oh, I mean...Oh, okay... That's great! It's great! You're pregnant! Congratulations! Wow.

Gloria: It was a surprise.

Claire: Yeah, I'll bet. What did my dad say?

Gloria: I haven't told him that. I worry that he's going to think it's not such great news.

Claire: Oh, no, don't be silly. He's gonna be thrilled!

Claire: (in the interview) I knew he wasn't gonna be thrilled. And if history is any indication, he wasn't gonna be able to hide it.

Both Claire and Gloria failed to observe maxims in this scene. Gloria infringed the maxim of Relation because her pregnancy has nothing to do with what Claire did at her prom. However, it could be argued that her pregnancy is relevant to the conversation they were having, as Claire was referring to her daughter's behaviour at prom the night before, therefore she was talking about children. In this case, Gloria did not infringe the maxim of Relation. Moreover, Claire flouted the maxim of Quality by lying about her father being thrilled about the pregnancy. Gloria's infringement of the maxim of Relation and Claire's automatic reaction to it helped the scene achieve humour.

## **SCENE 5**

**00:13:35 – 00:13:51**

In this scene Cam is arguing with the lady who works at the animal shelter:

Cam (in the interview): Mitchell stormed off, but I couldn't. I had to give her a piece of my mind.

Mitchell: And how'd that go?

Cam: I may have strayed off topic just a bit.

Mitchell: Yeah.

Cam: (arguing with the lady): No, sir! No, she will always be Norma Jeane Baker to me.

Shelter lady: What is your point exactly?

Cam: That like the thrice-starred starlet, this cat is being deprived a stable home.

Cam infringed the maxim of Relation because Norma Jeane Baker has nothing to do with the fact that the shelter lady did not want to give them the cat without checking their home. The category of the non-observance is infringing because Cam did not mean to stray off the topic but did so in the heat of the moment. Moreover, Cam's dramatic infringement made the scene achieve humour.

## **SCENE 6**

**00:20:13 – 00:20:26**

Manny is reading a poem he wrote for his baby brother or sister:

Manny: This is for my new baby brother or sister. "Welcome, little one. Open your eyes and take your place. This is where you're meant to be, Nestled in the bosom of your mother..."

Phil: Lucky baby.

Claire: What?

Phil: Love you, baby.

Phil flouted the maxim of Quality. He blatantly lied to Claire by saying he loves her instead of explaining what he really said, as to not get into trouble. Therefore, the category of non-observance of the maxim of Quality was a flout.

## **SCENE 7**

**00:20:46 – 00:21:19**

In the last scene of season 4, episode 1, Dylan, after staying with the Dunphys for two weeks, is trying to convince Claire to stay a little longer:



Dylan: Don't feel bad about making me move out Mrs. D. I knew this day would come eventually and I'm totally covered.

Claire: Great. So, we'll see you around.

Dylan: I got a place with an old friend of mine. Well, not so much of a place as a storage pod. And not so much of a friend as a racoon.

Claire: Good to know you'll have company.

Dylan: I call him Bubbles because his mouth is all foamy.

Claire: Dylan, I am on to your little game. I know none of this is true. You're just trying to guilt me into letting you stay.

Dylan: You're right. I'm sorry.

Claire: Mmm-hmm.

Dylan: I'll just live in my car. Think I can borrow a coat hanger in case I get locked in there...  
(door slam).

In this scene Dylan flouted the maxim of Quality and Quantity because he is blatantly ignoring them. He is lying to Claire about his situation and keeps talking even though it can be clearly seen that Claire is not interested and knows that he is lying. What makes the scene achieve humour is the fact that Claire calls him out on his lie. The viewer can easily spot Dylan's non-observance, which also helps the scene achieve humour.

There are three scenes in Episode 2. These are illustrated in the examples below.

### **Episode 2 – “Schooled”**

**Phil and Claire drop off Haley at college, and Jay and Gloria take a baby class, per Manny's instructions. Lily gets into a small fight on her first day of kindergarten, which results in a play date with the boy and his two moms.**

## **SCENE 1**

**00:03:10 – 00:03:37**

The family is saying goodbye to Haley, who is going to college:

Claire: Luke, come say goodbye to your sister.

Luke (wearing a mask): I'm right here. Bye Hayley, have fun. Don't drink too much beer or shots of tequila.

Hayley: Why are you wearing that mask?

Luke: Uh, I like it.

Claire: He doesn't want you to see him cry.

Alex: He is literally masking his emotions.

Luke: No!

Phil: That's so sweet.

Haley: Come here.

Luke: It's not sweet. I'm an evil cyborg. Half my face was burned off in an industrial accident, and the mask is hiding the servos that control my mouth.

In this scene Luke flouted the maxim of Quality by clearly trying to hide his emotions about his sister leaving under the mask. Rather than just achieving humour, this scene brings out emotions in the viewer because it is as much as an emotional scene as it is a funny one.

## **SCENE 2**

**00:17:02 – 00:17:17**

In this scene, Jay and Gloria come back home after they leave baby class earlier:

Jay: Hey, kid.

Manny: Jay, mom, how was class?

Gloria: It was great. It was very educating and now we know everything about the baby, no?

Manny: Mhm. Interesting, because your teacher called, and you forgot your glasses when you left... three hours early.

In this scene Gloria and Jay flouted the maxim of Quality by saying they attended the class. The viewer saw earlier that they left early, and they are lying to Manny because they knew he

would be angry. The fact that the teacher called, and Manny already knew they were lying is what helps the scene achieve humour.

### SCENE 3

**00:18:36 – 00:18:44**

In this scene, Phil and Claire are on their way back after helping Haley settle in her college dorm:

Phil: How you doin’? You okay?

Claire: Yeah. No, I’m... I’m-I’m good. You?

Phil: Fine, yeah.

Claire and Phil both flouted the maxim of Quality here by lying about their feelings about Haley leaving for college to each other. They are both sad because their daughter is leaving, and the viewer can easily see this. The scene is not funny, nor is it meant to be, as it brings out sad emotions in the viewer.

There are two scenes in Episode 3. These are illustrated in the examples below.

#### **Episode 3 – “Snip”**

**Phil wants to get a vasectomy, Gloria refuses to accept the fact that she is gaining weight during pregnancy. Meanwhile, Mitchell is trying to get Cam to get a part-time job without saying it directly to his face.**

### SCENE 1

**00:06:11 – 00:06:17**

In this episode, Phil is having a vasectomy and Jay is accompanying him to the clinic:

Jay: Let’s go. Chop, chop!

Phil: Seriously? “Chop, chop”?

Jay: Oh, right.

Jay violated the maxim of Manner in this scene because of his way of telling Phil to hurry up. The saying chop, chop is ambiguous because it could mean that Jay is telling Phil to hurry up or he could be talking about his vasectomy. It is a violation because he had no intention of creating an implicature with his saying. The fact that he created an implicature about Phil's operation is what helps the scene achieve humour.

## **SCENE 2**

**00:09:44 – 00:10:12**

Jay and Phil are in the waiting room. Phil is getting a vasectomy and he is scribbling a lot because of his nervousness:

Jay: Phil would you please knock that off?

Phil: What?

Jay: What's the matter? Are you nervous?

Phil: I'm not nervous. Mayb-maybe you're the one that's nervous. You ever think about that? "Nervous" (Phil starts aggressively clicking his pen)

Jay: Okay. Okay. Because if you've had a change of heart...

Phil: I haven't had a change of heart. Maybe you've had a change of heart, I'm totally pumped. Pump, pump, pump. Pump up the jam in my pumped-up kicks. Pumpty-dumpty. Pumplestiltskin.

Jay: Because they do this kind of thing all the time, and in about an hour you're gonna be wanting to ride a horse. (Man comes in gasping and shuddering)

Phil flouted the maxim of Quality. He blatantly lied and is in denial regarding his nerves. The scene achieves humour with Phil's constant comical showing of nervousness and stress before his medical procedure through his actions and babbling. At the end, Phil does not go through with the operation. What also helps the scene achieve humour is the fact that right after Jay's words to calm him down, a man comes in with an exact opposite reaction of what he is describing. The scene gets even funnier as Phil runs away from the clinic.

There is one scene in Episode 4. It is illustrated in the example below.

**Episode 4 – “The Butler’s Escape”**

**Phil teaches Luke magic and finds it difficult to accept the fact that he wants to quit. Mitchell and Cam switch roles, as Cam becomes the new music teacher and Mitchell takes care of Lily. Gloria keeps the house awake with her snoring.**

**SCENE 1**

**00:05:08 – 00:05:18**

In the scene before this one, Alex was acting rude to Claire and Luke:

Luke: Mom, something’s on my mind and it’s really bothering me.

Claire: Yeah, it’s really bothering me, too, but I think it’s gonna be rich, so we better be nice to it.

Luke: I wanna quit magic.

Luke violated the maxim of Manner here by being obscure with just saying that something is bothering him, without explaining what it was. Because of that Claire violated the maxim of Relation. When answering Luke, Claire was talking about her daughter Alex’s behaviour. The maxim of Relation was violated because Alex’s behaviour has nothing to do with what Luke is talking about. What makes the scene more interesting and funnier is the fact that the viewer could possibly also think that Luke is talking about Alex as it would be a logical conclusion after seeing Alex’s actions in the previous scene.

There is one scene in Episode 5. It is illustrated in the example below.

**Episode 5 – “Open House of Horrors”**

**Claire tries to be less extreme when it comes to Halloween, and Phil decided to have an open house on Halloween. Mitchell and Cam throw a costume party.**

**SCENE 1**

**00:19:35 – 00:20:10**

Phil, who works as a real estate agent, is having an open house on Halloween. He told Claire that she was not scary earlier in the episode, and she decided to take revenge. She came to the house to scare him but did not succeed and he realized she was there. He could not find her as a couple came to check out the house. After they left, spooky things started happening around the house, and Phil thought it was Claire’s doing until he got a phone call:

Phil: (answering the phone) Yes?

Claire: Phil, where are you?

Phil: Claire? Where are you?

Claire. I came over to scare you, but then I heard you showing the house to that couple, so I got out of your way.

Phil: You’re home?

Claire: Yeah, I got here ten minutes ago.

Phil: So... So, you’re saying... This call isn’t coming from inside the house?

Claire: What are you talking about? Just get home. The kids and I are hungry.

Alex: Yeah, hurry up, Dad.

Luke. We miss you!

Phil: Miss you, too, buddy.

Phil then hangs up the phone and starts looking around the house to gather up his things and leave the house. As he is doing this, more spooky things start happening. He heads upstairs and finds his keys on a bed, and just as he reaches them, Claire, Alex, and Luke jump out and scare

him. Claire flouted the maxim of Quality here by lying about being home when she was at the house where Phil was. The flout of the maxim helped the scene achieve humour, but the highlight of the scene is Phil getting scared.

There is one scene in Episode 10. It is illustrated in the example below.

**Episode 10 – “Diamond in the Rough”**

**Manny and Luke’s team makes it into playoff game unexpectedly, but there is no place to play. While they search for a place to play, they decide to renovate a house also. Phil and Mitchell argue who has to tell them that it is a bad idea. Gloria sings to her baby.**

**SCENE 1**

**00:05:47 – 00:06:13**

In this episode, Claire and Cam try to transform an empty lot into a baseball pitch. After seeing an elderly woman selling her run-down home for a bargain, they decide to try their hand at renovating it after being motivated by their work on the baseball pitch. While Mitchell immediately advises them that it is not a good idea, Phil pretends to support Claire. Phil and Mitchell both believe that it is a bad idea that will only cause them to lose money.

Cam: Phil, you think it’s a good idea, right?

Phil: Totally. Yes.

Claire: And you know we can handle it, right?

Phil: I think you guys can handle anything.

Cam: Aw.

Claire: Yeah. Then you go talk to him. You’re a professional. He respects you.

Phil: Okay. Give us some space. I’ll go talk him into it.

Claire: All right.

Phil: All right?

Claire and Cam: Okay.

Phil: Okay.

Phil: Listen. There's no way we're letting them do this.

Mitchell: I know, right?

Phil: They are not equipped to take this on. We might as well flush all our savings down my boring toilet.

Mitchell: Oh, you're really bitter about that.

Phil blatantly lied to Claire and Cam in this scene to not make them angry with him. The category of non-observance of the maxim of Quality could be a flout as he implied that Claire and Cam can do what they are set on doing. However, the category of the non-observance could also be a violation because Phil is misleading them into thinking they could do what they intended. As can be seen in the example above, Phil goes to Mitchell and immediately tells him the opposite of what he told Claire and Cam. He then does not tell Mitchell that he lied to them and here he did not observe of the maxim of Quantity, as he said too little. He violated it because he was trying to mislead Mitchell into believing he told the same thing he told him, to Claire and Cam. Phil's non-observance of the maxims and his pretending to plead with Mitchell to let them renovate helps the scene achieve humour. Mitchell runs after the car after he realises Phil made him the bad guy. Later, Mitchell does the same thing as Phil and tells Cam that he agrees that they should renovate the house, violating the maxim of Quality. This evolves into a hilarious argument between the two.

There is one scene in Episode 13. It is illustrated in the example below.

**Episode 13 – “Fulgencio”**

**Gloria's mother and sister visit, Mitchell and Cam try to teach Lily to speak nicer, and Phil helps the children with their problems.**

**SCENE 1**

**00:21:11 – 00:21:25**

In this episode, Haley, Alex, and Luke had some problems and were looking for Claire to solve them. However, she was not available, and Phil wanted to solve their problems, as well as his own, but he made everything worse. He makes Luke stay at home while the others attend the christening so that he can go around and cause problems for the people who were causing



theirs. At the end of the episode Claire is shocked how all of their children's problems are gone, as she does not know what Phil did.

Claire: Isn't that crazy, how all of our kids' problems just disappeared?

Phil: Don't ever ask me about my business, Claire.

Claire: What are you talking about?

Phil: Don't ask me about my business.

Claire: I wasn't.

Phil: Good. Don't.

Phil flouted the maxim of Manner here. His response to Claire was obscure and did not explain Claire what exactly he was talking about. The fact that he did not elaborate means he also flouted the maxim of Quantity, as he said too little. The category of the non-observances is a flout because Phil is trying to imply that he had something to do with the disappearances of the problems. The scene achieves humour because of Phil's flouts.

There is one scene in Episode 15. It is illustrated in the example below.

### **Episode 15 – “Heart Broken”**

**Phil and Claire's Valentine date goes wrong as Claire ends up in the hospital. Mitchell and Cam have a Valentine's Day Lonely Hearts Party, they wake up hungover trying to figure out why Dylan is living with them. Jay and Gloria unsuccessfully try to have some alone time without being interrupted.**

## **SCENE 1**

**00:04:44 – 00:05:09**

In this episode, Claire had a small heart episode, and she did not want Phil to tell anybody about it because she did not want anyone to worry about it. In this scene, he is talking to the children.

Phil: I don't want to get upset. I've been through enough tonight.

Haley: What happened?

Phil: I'm not supposed to tell you.

Alex: When you say it like that, we make it worse in our heads.

Phil: Fine. It's no big deal. Your mother had to go to the hospital.

Haley: Oh, my God!

Luke: What?!

Alex: That is so much worse than it would be in our heads!

Phil: She's fine. She just passed out a little. Something to do with her heart.

Haley: Like a heart attack?!

Alex: Mom had a heart attack?!

Luke: Mom almost died of a heart attack?!

Phil: No! She had a little episode, probably triggered by me. She just needs to rest.

Phil opted out the maxim of Quantity here. He opted out because he did not act the way the maxim requested. This means that he respected the maxim of Quality because he promised Claire, he would not say what happened. However, he flouted the maxim of Quality a few seconds later by telling the kids what happened. It is a flout because he lied to Claire that he was not going to say anything. However, he was pressured into flouting it because of his children, Alex to be more precise. The children's reaction to Phil's flout, i.e., him telling them what happened, is what helps the scene achieve humour.

There is one scene in Episode 18. It is illustrated in the example below.

**Episode 18 – “The Wow Factor”**

**Mitchell tries to help Lily to deal with a bully, Claire and Cam argue about their house renovation. Jay gets in trouble when Gloria finds out he left Joe to a woman he barely knew and went to the cinema.**

**SCENE 1**

**00:00:23 – 00:00:46**

In this scene, Claire and Cam are talking about the house they have been renovating together and why they make such a great team.

Cam: For the last few months, Cam and I have been redoing a house together that we're gonna flip, and I have to say, it has been goin' great!

Cam: We make an amazing team.

Claire: Yeah. The key is trust.

Cam: Absolutely.

Cam: (alone in an interview) The key is, I let Claire think she's in charge. I hide what I want in something bigger and more expensive. Then when she rejects that, we "compromise" on what I wanted all along. I call my method "the Trojan horse."

In this scene Cam flouted of the maxim of Quality because he does not want Claire to know that he is actually lying because he does not want to make her angry. What is more interesting is that Claire also flouted the maxim of Quality here for the same reason. The non-observance of the maxim helped the scene achieve humour. The category of the non-observance is a flout because they both tried to manipulate each other to make the other think that they make a great team, even though both think they themselves are actually in charge.

There is one scene in Episode 20. It is illustrated in the example below.

### **Episode 20 – “Flip Flop”**

**Claire and Cam struggle to sell their renovated house after turning down an offer from Phil's arch nemesis, Gil Thorpe. They stage it to Luke's older friend liking, but he gets freaked out and leaves. Gloria worries about Manny's relationship with her ex-husband's new girlfriend.**

## **SCENE 1**

**00:04:18 – 00:04:36**

This scene shows Mitchell's reaction when Claire and Cam fail to sell the house:

Mitchell: Oh, that is perfect. That's just perfect.

Cam: Something you wanna say, Mitchell?

Mitchell: (alone in the interview) Yes. I told you so. I warned you this would happen. I tried to stop it, but you wouldn't let me. I was right, and you were wrong. Uh, you live in this ridiculous candy-colored fantasy land. I am so much smarter than you, and it is killing me not to rub your nose in it!

Mitchell: (back with everyone): No. I'm just thinking.

Mitchell opted out of the maxim of Quality in this scene because he lied to Cam about how he feels. The category is opting out because he did not respond as the maxim requested because he did not want to make Cam mad at him. With the non-observance, the scene achieved humour and some viewers most likely related to Mitchell, as they have been in a similar situation.

### 3.3. Discussion

In this chapter, the analysis of the sample will be discussed. Firstly, it will be mentioned what maxim was not observed the most and how many times the other maxims were not observed. Secondly, the most popular category of non-observance and how many times the other categories of non-observance were used will be presented. Thirdly, the discussion about the characters with the highest number of non-observances will be shown, followed by the discussion of non-observances of maxims for each family and its members individually. Finally, the last paragraph will show those episodes where families did not observe maxims and which family had the most non-observances.

The sample i.e., season four of the TV sitcom *Modern Family*, had 10 episodes with 19 scenes of examples of non-observances. The maxim that was not observed the most in the sample is the maxim of Quality. It was not observed 19 times in 8 out of 10 episodes, and in 14 out of 19 scenes. Season four does not rely heavily on non-observance of the maxim of Manner, as there were only 3 scenes with instances of it (see Episode 3, scene 1; Episode 4, scene 1; Episode 13, scene 1). Both maxims of Relation and Quantity have 5 non-observances. The most popular category of non-observance is a flout, with it being used 20 times in examples in the entire sample. The next category was violation with 7 uses, however one should note that, in one instance (see Episode 10, scene 1), it is unsure if the non-observance was a flout or a violation. The category of infringing was used 4 times, followed by opting out with 2 times being used. Finally, the category of suspending a maxim was not used at all in season four of

*Modern Family*. Most of the non-observances aimed to achieve humour, with only 2 scenes trying to bring out emotion in the viewer (see Episode 2, scene 1, scene 3).

The first episode has the highest number of scenes with non-observances. It has 7 scenes with 12 examples of non-observances of maxims. The next is episode two with 3 scenes and 5 examples of non-observances, followed by episode three with 2 scenes and 2 examples. Episode four has 1 scene with 2 examples, episode five 1 scene with 1 example. Moreover, episode ten has 1 scene with 3 examples and episode thirteen has 1 scene with 2 examples, the same as episode fifteen and episode eighteen. Finally, episode twenty has 1 scene with only 1 example of non-observance.

The character with the most non-observances in the fourth season of *Modern Family* was Phil with 10 non-observances (see Episode 1, scene 3, scene 6; Episode 2, scene 3; Episode 3, scene 2; Episode 10, scene 1; Episode 13, scene 1; Episode 15, scene 1), followed by Claire with 7 (see Episode 1, scene 2, scene 4; Episode 2, scene 3; Episode 4, scene 1; Episode 5, scene 1; Episode 18, scene 1). The most frequently non-observed maxim was the maxim of Quality for both of them. Jay's friend Shorty with 1 non-observed maxim (see Episode 1, scene 3) is the character with the least non-observed maxims.

Unlike Phil, who with his flouts of the maxim of Quality, aims not to make her feel bad and not to show his nervousness, Claire lies for her own entertainment or because she is angry with someone. Every one of her flouts of maxim of Quality, for example when she speaks with Haley about Dylan staying with them (see Episode 1, scene 2), was for humour purposes. The only exception is the scene where both her and Phil lied about being okay with their daughter going away to college (see Episode 2, scene 2). This flout aimed to evoke emotions in the viewer. Luke masks his emotions by not observing the maxim of Quality (see Episode 2, scene 1), and he also violates the maxim of Relation (see Episode 4, scene 1). Haley flouts the maxim of Quality, even though Claire knows the truth (see Episode 1, scene 1). Alex did not have any non-observances in season four.

Every maxim that Cam did not observe showed his true diva persona, as he is known to be a drama queen. This was especially seen on the example where he infringed the maxim of Relation (see Episode 1, scene 5) when he talked to the lady that works in the animal shelter. Mitchell and Cam were told that their house needs to be checked if it would be okay for the cat to live there. After being denied adopting a baby, Cam had had enough and went on a rant that ended with him talking about Norma Jeane Baker. Mitchell, unlike his sister, flouts the maxim

of Quality in order not to make Cam angry or sad. He also opts out of the maxim of Quality for the same reason. Lily did not have any non-observances in season four.

Both Jay and Gloria flout the maxim of Quality when speaking to Manny in order not to disappoint him, even though he already knows that they are lying (see episode 2, scene 2). Moreover, Jay violated the maxim of Manner when talking to Phil (see Episode 3, scene 1), and Gloria violated the maxim of Relation when she told Claire she was pregnant (see Episode 1, scene 4). Manny did not have any non-observances in season four.

In the first four episodes all families have scenes with instances of not observing maxims. Episodes five and fifteen are a Halloween and a Valentine's Day episodes, in both which only the Dunphys did not observe maxims of Quality (see Episode 5, scene 1; Episode 15, scene 1) and Quantity (see Episode 15, scene 1). In episode thirteen where Jay and Gloria christen their son, again only Dunphys, or in this case Phil, did not observe maxims of Manner and Quantity. Episodes ten, eighteen and twenty mostly deal with Claire and Cam's renovation and them trying to sell the renovated house. In the three scenes of these episodes, the Dunphys and Tucker-Pritchetts did not observe maxims. Both Pritchetts and Tucker-Pritchetts have 4 non-observed maxims per family (see Episode 1, scene 4, scene 5; Episode 2, scene 2; Episode 3, scene 1; Episode 10, scene 1; Episode 18, scene 1; Episode 20, scene 1). The Dunphys have the most with 20 non-observed maxims.

#### **4. CONCLUSION**

In this thesis, many instances of non-observances of Grice's conversational maxims in the sitcom *Modern Family* were analysed. The aim was to see if the season four of the sitcom uses these maxims and, if so, what is the aim of the use, i.e. non-observation of the conversational maxim.

It can be concluded from the earlier discussion that the sitcom relies on its characters often lying when using Grice's maxims to achieve humour because the maxim of Quality was the most frequently non-observed maxim. One can notice from the examples (see chapter 3.2.) and the discussion (see chapter 3.3.) that Claire and Phil are completely different personalities. Phil is the nice guy, a self-proclaimed fun dad and Claire is the one who puts the foot down in the family. A similar situation can also be noticed in the Tucker-Pritchett family. Cam is fun

and sassy and because of this he is arguably one of the most loved and funniest characters in the sitcom. Mitchell is different because he is more serious. The same cannot be said about Jay and Gloria. They did not have many instances of non-observances, but in the ones that they did one cannot notice anything that tells them something about their personalities and how different or alike they are. Haley and Luke, as mentioned in the discussion, did not observe the maxim of Quality. One could say that this is typical for a teenager and a playful youngest child. Alex and Manny both had zero non-observances, and this reflects their personalities as they are both intelligent and too mature for their age. Lily also did not have any instances of non-observances which again one would also say is typical as she is still a child. It was mentioned earlier that the storylines of the episodes culminate at the end when all the families gather at a family event of some sort (see chapter 3.1.1.), however maxims are not used often in these scenes. In season four there is only one scene in which this occurred and that is the scene where Manny reads a poem he wrote for his unborn sibling while everyone is there and Phil flouts the maxim of Quality (see Episode 1, scene 6).

A major shortcoming of the analysis in the thesis is that the non-verbal communication was not considered when analysing the examples. Moreover, a subjective interpretation was given of the category of non-observance of the maxim, and it is important to take into consideration that there is a possibility not all non-observances have been spotted.

Grice's maxims are used daily, as they are a key factor for a successful exchange of information. Even though they are vital for daily conversations, there are certain social instances where it is required that they are not observed or that they are ignored. Some examples of this might be that they are not observed in order to tell a joke, or to lie to someone. The reasons for non-observance do not need to be willingly there because people also unconsciously ignore them.

Grice's maxims can be used to analyse conversations, therefore some ideas for future research are possible. It would be interesting to see if the maxims that are non-observed in the TV sitcom *Modern Family* reflect real life families. Moreover, it could be interesting to take a character from the sitcom and see what maxim they do not observe the most in the show as a whole and what category of non-observation they use the most. It also may be interesting to connect this with the personality of the character and see if it influences it. Another interesting idea would be to see if the conversational maxims are used in other TV genres like horror films or telenovelas.

## 5. SUMMARY

The aim of this paper is to explain the Cooperative principle and the four conversational maxims proposed by Grice (1975), to show different categories of non-observance of the maxims given by Grice and discussed by Thomas (1997), accompanied with examples. Moreover, to show how these maxims are not observed in the sitcom *Modern Family*. The main focus of the paper is the analysis of those non-observances of maxims in season four of the sitcom. The plot of each episode used was described, and the context of every scene was given, followed by a transcript. The analysis of the non-observances of the maxims is the author's own interpretation of them, as it is difficult to be completely sure what category the non-observance is. The results of the analysis show that the most non-observed maxim is the maxim of Quality, and the most popular category of non-observance is a flout. It also briefly mentions differentiating between the categories of non-observances of the conversational maxims because it is sometimes difficult to decide between the categories.

**Key words:** Cooperative principle, conversational maxims, sitcom, non-observance

## 6. SAŽETAK

Cilj ovog rada je objasniti načelo suradnje i četiri razgovorne maksime koje je predložio Grice (1975), pokazati različite kategorije nepoštivanja maksima koje je dao Grice i o kojima je raspravljala Thomas (1997), popraćene primjerima. Štoviše, pokazati kako se ove maksime ne poštuju u sitcomu *Moderna obitelj*. Glavni fokus rada je analiza tih nepoštivanja maksima u četvrtoj sezoni sitcoma. Opisane su radnje svih epizoda koje su se koristile, dat je kontekst svake scene, nakon čega je slijedi transkript. Analiza nepoštivanja maksima je vlastita interpretacija autora ovog rada, jer je teško točno odrediti koja je kategorija nepoštivanja. Rezultati analize pokazuju da se najviše ne poštuje maksima kvalitete, a najčešća kategorija nepoštivanja je ruganje. Također ukratko spominje razlikovanja kategorija nepoštivanja razgovornih maksima jer je ponekad teško odlučiti između kategorija.

**Ključne riječi:** načelo suradnje, razgovorne maksime, sitcom, nepoštivanje



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Mentor/ica rada (ime i prezime, akad. stupanj i zvanje):

doc.dr.sc. Mirjana Semren

Komentor/ica rada (ime i prezime, akad. stupanj i zvanje):

Članovi povjerenstva (ime i prezime, akad. stupanj i zvanje):

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