A Gricean glimpse into *Hamlet*

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ABSTRACT
In this paper we investigate the flouting of Grice’s maxims in the Hamlet story, through an extensive and in depth discourse analysis. Hamlet is a detective story and a mystery play of a deeper kind in the medieval sense. The unexpected death of Hamlet’s father has called him back and, according to the ethics of the age, it is his duty to avenge his father’s murder. The revelations of the ghost of Hamlet’s father succeed the struggle between Claudius, who tries to keep his guilt hidden, and Hamlet, who tries to bring it to light. Hamlet assumes madness not to conceal any plan of revenge, but as a means “to be in presence of all, and yet to be hidden, to be intelligible to himself, and a perplexity to others, to be within reach with everyone, and to be himself inaccessible” as Dowden analyses. In this context, we should expect his language to be appropriate. We, therefore, followed an analytical path towards the identification of certain conclusions. We reveal the repeated violation of the co-operative principle expressed in the maxims of Grice. This effort also brings forward the fact that the principles of politeness and tact formulated by Leech are mocked. The other characters cannot understand him and think of him as mad, but the audience can grasp the true meaning of the situation. Our step-by-step discourse analysis can safely lead us to proper judgment of the significance of Hamlet’s replies. Further contextual considerations were taken into account to enable us to choose between the possible alternatives. This, in effect, means treating the text as a series of communicative acts. Our analysis of Hamlet’s utterances reveals a remarkable example of violating the maxims as a means to a cause. Shakespeare certainly knew how to master that.

1. INTRODUCTION
Drama brings on stage four interrelated elements: language, knowledge, situation and action. Viewers or readers of the play, but primarily language users, can understand what characters mean, by transcending linguistic forms. Likewise, language analysts can not be restricted to the description of

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*I must thank an anonymous reviewer for helpful comments on this paper. This paper originated from an assignment for course 4-420 in Discourse Analysis taught by Eliza Kitis, at the Department of English, Aristotle University. I thank her for giving me this opportunity.*
linguistic forms used, but analyse the language in use – investigate what the language is used for, thus, undertake what is known as discourse analysis. No amount of textual analysis can provide us the means to capture the feeling in the theatre when Hamlet utters his crushing reply to Polonius: Polonius "What do you read, my Lord?", Hamlet "Words, words, words" (II, ii, 190-191). Certainly Polonius did not expect Hamlet to answer in this way, by stating the obvious and giving information which Polonius already possesses. An inappropriate reply indeed, but in accordance with our experience of the play so far, we are entitled to assume that Hamlet either pretends to be mad, or is rude to Polonius in order to make him leave. Further contextual criteria have to be considered to reveal the different possibilities of interpretation. Therefore, the text must be treated as a series of communicative acts.

Observing conversational exchanges, one can safely assume that, in most of them, the participants are actually co-operating with each other. This principle, called the Co-operative Principle, together with its four maxims, was first set out by Grice and is stated in the following way: "Make your conversational contribution such as required, at the stage at which it occurs, by the accepted purpose or direction of the talk exchange in which you are engaged" (Grice 1975: 45). The Co-operative Principle is complemented with the following four maxims:

Quantity:  Make your contribution as informative as is required, but not more than is required.
Quality:  Do not say that which you believe is false or for which you do not have enough evidence.
Relation:  Be relevant.
Manner:  Be brief and orderly, avoiding obscurity and ambiguity.

When we engage ourselves in a conversation, or any other speech event, it becomes obvious that what people say and do in different situations varies enormously. Stating the sources of that variation needs taking into consideration several factors. For example, we would have to take account of cohesion, coherence, factual and specific background knowledge, the roles of speaker and hearer and the social relationships between them. In effect, the speaker can communicate to the hearer more than s/he actually says, based on some background information, which they both share. Ultimately, then, it is not just encoded meaning that matters but also un-encoded, implicated meaning, which contributes significantly to generating and deriving interpretation of language. Implicature, then, can be seen as a means of 'closing' the gap between the compositional sentence-meaning and utterance or pragmatic-meaning. There are cases where a participant in a conversation may fail to fulfil a maxim in the following ways:
a. One may violate a maxim, and as a result mislead the hearer.
b. One may opt out from the operation both of the maxim and of the Co-
operative Principle, saying or indicating that one has no wish to co-
operate in the way the maxim requires.
c. One may be faced by a clash; in order to fulfil one maxim one has to
violate another.
d. One may flout a maxim; one blatantly fails to fulfil it (Grice 1975: 49).

Grice points out that there are other maxims, such as "Be polite", in
addition to the four maxims he proposes, that are usually considered by
participants in conversation. Leech (1983) approaches the theme of
politeness from the addressee’s rather than from the speaker’s perspective.
Undoubtedly, different kinds and degrees of politeness are observed in
different situations. At a general level, illocutionary functions can be
classified in the following four types as regards the illocutionary goal: it
competes with the social goal (Competitive), it is indifferent to the social
goal (Convivial), it coincides with the social goal (Collaborative) and it
conflicts with the social goal (Conflictive). Hamlet purposefully refuses to
follow the courtesies that should support transactions between a social
superior and his subordinates; he refuses to play the politeness game. In the
passage III, ii, 307-398, the Co-operative Principle along with the four
maxims are repeatedly violated and the Principle of Politeness expressed by
Leech is mocked. An examination of the discourse indicates successive
breaches of politeness and failures to co-operate on the part of Hamlet.

2. THE PLAY AND HAMLET'S LANGUAGE
Up to the moment the play opens, Hamlet's life has been peaceful and steady
going. The news of his father's unexpected death has brought him back from
the University of Wittenberg. This sudden event demands action on behalf of
Hamlet. It is the ethics of the age that impose on Hamlet the duty to avenge
his father's suspected murder. Generally, in a tragedy of revenge the hero
bears no responsibility for the situation in which he finds himself entrapped
and from which the tragic element stems. "The exposition of such plays does
not display the hero taking a fatal step, but the hero confronted with
appalling facts" (Gardner 1967: 218). The horrible revelation of the ghost of
Hamlet's father brings about the struggle between Claudius, who works on
keeping his guilt hidden, and Hamlet, who tries to expose it. Claudius,
unwilling to repent, must destroy Hamlet by conspiracy and poison. Hamlet,
being impetuous and tactless, has his own difficult task to destroy Claudius.
As the excitement of the ghost's revelation fades, it becomes necessary for
Hamlet to think it over. No one shares Hamlet's burden. He chooses not to
reveal all to his friends and ensure their help, but instead pledges them to
keep it a secret and forms the plan of feigning madness. This proves to be
the perfect means "to be in presence of all, and yet to be hidden, to be intelligible to himself, and a perplexity to others, to be within reach of everyone and to be himself inaccessible" (Dowden 1962: 145).

Therefore, his language should be accordingly appropriate. As Clemen suggests, he would betray himself if he used open direct language. So, "he must speak ambiguously and cloak his real meaning under quibbles and puns, images and parables" (1967: 230). Hamlet's world is a world of riddles and his language is often riddling, too. The other characters cannot understand his behaviour and his utterances, but the audience can grasp the true meaning of the situation. As Mack puts it "Hamlet seems to lie closer to the illogical logic of life" (1967: 244). In addition, Clemen offers a different perspective of Hamlet in terms of its language. It appears to be that Hamlet is a turning-point in the development of Shakespeare's style. These new possibilities of language arise from the personality of Hamlet. "The new language comes from him, in him it attains to perfection". The language of the king and the queen, Laertes and Polonius, adapted to their character, follows well-worn paths. It is less novel – these characters do not need a new form of expression. "On the contrary, they may be more aptly characterised by a conventional mode of speech". "But Hamlet's nature can only find expression in a wholly new language" (Clemen 1967: 227).

3. A GRICEAN ANALYSIS

In what follows, I propose to analyse a specific excerpt from the play, which is considered indicative of the rest of the play. The findings of the analysis are claimed to reflect on the whole of the rest of the play. The passage we examine begins with Guildenstern asking Hamlet to speak with him.

Guildenstern: Good my Lord, vouchsafe me a word with you.

Hamlet: Sir, a whole history. (307-309)

"My Lord" indicates the social relation between the speaker and the hearer. Obviously, the speaker is of inferior status to Hamlet, the Prince of Denmark. Once a statement is made to you, or a request is made of you, you must react to it somehow. But Hamlet's response is striking. Here we notice Hamlet's first deliberate failure to co-operate. His flouting of the maxim of quantity can also be considered as impolite, in trying to discourage Guildenstern pursuing a further conversation with him. Moreover, it perfectly serves his assumed madness. Guildenstern is indeed discouraged by the strange and incomprehensible behaviour of Hamlet, and falls short in expressing at once the purpose of his coming to Hamlet.

Guildenstern: The King, sir.

Hamlet: Ay sir, what of him? (310-311)

Hamlet, here, rejects the imposed social relations which determine, among other things, the way one is supposed to address another. In the above lines,
both Guildenstern and Hamlet address each other in the same way. After Hamlet has asked what of the King, Guildenstern just states his condition:

Guildenstern: Is in his retirement, marvellous distemper'd. (312-313)

At this point, Hamlet could have uttered something odd that would put an end to whatever communication has been accomplished so far. Instead, he chooses to show interest and ask for further information, since he needs to know the cause of the King's distress after the performance Hamlet himself had arranged for everybody to see. Faithful to the Co-operative Principle and the Politeness Principle he asks:

Hamlet: With drink sir?

Guildenstern: No my Lord, rather with choler. (314-315)

Guildenstern simply produces an appropriate answer to Hamlet's question, without expecting Hamlet to resort again to his feigned madness.

Hamlet: Your wisdom should show itself more richer to signify this to his doctor: for, for me to put him to his purgation, would perhaps plunge him into far more choler. (316-319)

Hamlet’s reply flouts both the maxim of quantity and the maxim of manner. In a way, he mocks Guildenstern for not going to a doctor instead of coming to him. Hamlet's contribution is not as informative as is required and his reproaching Guildenstern is long and rather exaggerated. No one can deny that if Guildenstern needed medical help, he would ask it from a doctor. But Hamlet deliberately ignores the assumption that Guildenstern has not come to him for medical advice. "Your wisdom should show itself more richer" denotes also the presupposition that the speaker's social relation with the hearer allows him to characterise him "poor in wisdom", a comment that could never exist the other way round. Further on, Hamlet's utterance carries symbolic overtones: "For me to put him to his purgation, would perhaps plunge him into far more choler". None of those present at that scene could grasp the true meaning of such utterance, yet Hamlet's audience knows that Hamlet himself has caused the King's distress. So, what Hamlet implies here is that if he is more involved, it is possible to distress the King even more.

Guildenstern looks troubled, showing his annoyance, since his conversation with Hamlet has led nowhere so far, and his purpose is not at all served. So, he resorts to pleading with Hamlet for his co-operation, hoping to settle his affair. In his asking so, Guildenstern does not violate the Principle of Politeness. Not only would his rudeness end their conversation but he would also exceed the limits determined by his social status. Instead, he urges Hamlet to 'contain' his discourse. In Gricean terms, Guildenstern requests Hamlet to be relevant to the purpose of the talk which is set by him.

Guildenstern: Good my Lord put your discourse into some frame, and start not so wildly from my affair. (320-321)
Hamlet feels Guildenstern's frustration and chooses not to upset him any further but urges him to make headway with his affair.

Hamlet: I am tame sir, pronounce. (322)

This appears to be the perfect opportunity for Guildenstern to complete the purpose of his coming and state his request. But Guildenstern falls short of our expectations and ignores the obvious difficulty in communicating with Hamlet. So, he just adds prefatory which renders his utterance pre-sequential:

Guildenstern: The Queen your mother, in most great affliction of spirit, hath sent me to you. (323-324)

Hamlet would not let such an opportunity go by and cuts off communication at once. On the surface, that is a polite reaction to Guildenstern's former utterance, but basically Hamlet mocks Guildenstern by deliberately breaking the maxims of quantity and manner:

Hamlet: You are welcome. (325)

That was the final stroke Guildenstern could take. More decisive than ever, he commits himself to either fulfil his purpose or be excused and leave. Although Hamlet's utterance and his behaviour so far have pushed Guildenstern to the edge and forgetting the imposed limits in addressing a social superior would be justifiable, Guildenstern never forgets their social relationship and therefore states his affair donned in a high degree of politeness.

Guildenstern: Nay, good my Lord, this courtesy is not of the right breed. If it shall please you to make me a wholesome answer, I will do your mother's commandment: if not, your pardon, and my return shall be the end of my business. (326-330)

Hamlet realises how upset and displeased Guildenstern is and tries to calm him down, diminishing his anger. But admitting that he was impolite to him or that he failed to co-operate would lead to the conclusion that Hamlet has not at all lost his sanity. Still, his answer is obscure without giving the required information, thus flouting both the maxim of manner and quantity.

Hamlet: Sir, I cannot. (331)

Guildenstern does not understand and asks for clarification:

Guildenstern: What, my Lord? (332)

A sane person would be expected to specify the meaning of his/her utterances and provide further explanations whenever requested by the hearer. Hamlet has certainly assessed such situations and follows another pattern, that of withdrawing for a moment. Choosing this policy, he leads the others to perceive his thought as confused and unorderly, which would testify to his feigned madness. Hamlet here resolves the matter to himself and helps the conversation go on, asking what is that his mother has said.

Hamlet: Make you a wholesome answer: my wit's
diseased. But, sir, such answer as I can make, you shall command: or rather as you say, my mother: therefore no more but to the matter. My mother you say –

(333-336)

Rosencrantz takes over. Although there is not much difference between Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, Rosencrantz steps forward with a stronger determination to satisfy their purpose:

Rosencrantz: Then thus she says: your behaviour hath struck her into amazement and admiration.

(337-338),

a statement issued by Rosencrantz that still does not state their purpose. Here, Rosencrantz can be said to fall short of making his contribution as informative as is required. Rosencrantz, thus, finds a way to appropriate Hamlet’s mother’s utterance in order to implicate therein his own stance to Hamlet’s behaviour. This implicature, therefore, can be seen as the exponent of the amazement generally caused by Hamlet’s attitude. Rosencrantz finds this a means to convey in addition to the literal meaning of his utterance an additional meaning. Hamlet grasps this opportunity to prove his behaviour absurd and his mind disturbed, by mocking at the situation:

Hamlet: O wonderful son, that can so astonish a mother... (339)

Hamlet blatantly cuts off communication uttering a response that goes beyond expectation. Further on, he deliberately ignores the obvious to everyone presupposition that the Queen has most probably sent Guildenstern and Rosencrantz to Hamlet to ask for something and not just state the fact that his behaviour has amazed her. So Hamlet chooses to show surprise questioning Rosencrantz if that is the primary illocutionary force of his discourse.

Hamlet: ...But is there no sequel at the heels of this mother’s admiration? (340-341)

Rosencrantz does not have the authority to question or make negative comments on the Prince. He has no other alternative than to follow the Cooperative Principle by answering Hamlet’s question and stating at last the reason that brought them.

Rosencrantz: She desires to speak with you in her closet, ere you go to bed.

Hamlet: We shall obey, were she ten times our mother. Have you any further trade with us? (342-345)

Hamlet reacts positively to Rosencrantz’s direct illocution, but chooses to go on, this time in a polite way, and ask if there is anything else they want from him.

Rosencrantz: My Lord, you once did love me.

Hamlet: So I do still, by these pickers and stealers.

(346-347)
The primary purpose has been served since the Queen’s message reached Hamlet, who accepted to follow his mother’s commands. So, Rosencrantz moves on and states background knowledge, shared by both of them. Rosencrantz thought of doing so, reasonably enough, since Hamlet has at times failed to acknowledge obvious presuppositions, disobeying the Cooperative Principle. Furthermore, Rosencrantz has another request to make, and uses this statement as an introduction to it. He never abandons his place, that of a subordinate, so it is only right to forward his request with such a transitive statement, committed to the most important kind of politeness, that which is covered by the operation of the tact maxim.

Rosencrantz: Good my Lord, what is your cause of distemper? you do surely bar the door of your own liberty, if you deny your griefs to your friend.

Hamlet: Sir I lack advancement.

Rosencrantz: How can that be, when you have the voice of the king himself, for your succession in Denmark?

Hamlet: Ay, but while the grass grows, the proverb is something musty. (348-357)

Hamlet’s last statement is another failure of communication, flouting the maxim of manner and possibly the maxim or relation. His utterance is ambiguous and abstruse, and one wonders of its connection to what was previously said. It seems to be a proverb, but if we exclude it from the rest intercourse, it might not be of great importance. But he will not elucidate his statement and so deprives Rosencrantz of the chance to ask for clarification.

In the conversational exchange that follows, the roles change and it is Hamlet who does not understand. But it would be “unreasonable” for an insane person to try to make out matters which are incomprehensible to him.

Hamlet: ...Let me see, to withdraw with you, why do you go about to recover the wind of me, as if you would drive me into a toil?

Guildenstern: O my Lord, if my duty be to bold, my love is too unmannerly.

Hamlet: I do not well understand that.

(358-363)

Hamlet neither needs nor asks for clarifications. On the contrary, he proceeds with a request, trying to get Guildenstern behave in some required way. His first directive is in the interrogative form and is followed by other stronger ones – Hamlet even pleads with Guildenstern to play the pipe – which will finally lead to a simile.

Hamlet: ...Will you play upon this pipe?

Guildenstern: My Lord, I cannot.

Hamlet: I pray you.

Guildenstern: Believe me, I cannot.
Hamlet: I do beseech you.

Guildenstern: I know no touch of it, my Lord.

Hamlet: 'Tis as easy as lying: govern these ventages with your finger and thumb, give it breath with your mouth, and it will discourse most eloquent music. Look you, these are the stops.

Guildenstern: But these cannot I command to any utterance of harmony, I have not the skill.

(364-375)

After having explained how one can use and play the pipe vis-à-vis Guildenstern's admitting his inability to do so, Hamlet brings the conversation to a desirable point. It is time to make a comparison in the form of a metaphor. Metaphor is considered to be a breach of the quality maxim. Moreover, Hamlet, in drawing this parallel, gives too much information, some of which is perceived as unnecessary.

Hamlet: Why look you now, how unworthy a thing you make of me: you would play upon me; you would seem to know my stops: you would pluck out the heart of my mystery; you would sound me from my lowest note, to the top of my compass: and there is much music, excellent voice, in this little organ, yet cannot you make it speak. What do you think that I am easier to be played on, than a pipe? Call me what instrument you will, though you can fret me, you cannot play upon me. God bless you sir. (376-384)

That is the end of the conversation between Rosencrantz, Guildenstern and Hamlet. Any further attempt for either side to continue would prove pointless since there is nothing left to be said that would serve anyone of the three. With Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, Hamlet is at times severely and imperiously kind and at other times his utterances demonstrate irony, ambiguity, enigma and obscurity.

Polonius enters the scene, engaging himself in a conversation, which is probably one of the funniest in the whole play. Polonius is a state official, not really witty, but rather thinking and operating in vanity, "patterning words of wisdom which he does not understand and cannot put into practice" (Chambers 187). Polonius brings another message from the Queen and, in contrast with Guildenstern and Rosencrantz, he states his affair at once, in the way social conventions allow him to do so. There would be no point in pursuing his goal differently since he shares no intimacy with Hamlet and feels no worry for his disturbed mind.

Polonius: My Lord; the Queen would speak with you, and presently.

Hamlet: Do you see that cloud? that's almost in shape
like a camel.

Polonius: By th'mass, and it's like a camel indeed.
Hamlet: Methinks it is like a weazel.
Polonius: It is back'd like a weazel.
Hamlet: Or like a whale?
Polonius: Very like a whale. (385-393)

When Polonius utters his message, Hamlet comments on a cloud, which may not even exist. A deliberate breaking of the maxim of relation and a breach of the Politeness Principle, in order to establish once again his feigned madness, but mostly to make a fool of Polonius. Here, no friendship is at stake, so Hamlet does not mind being so blatantly offensive. Polonius does not mind either and lets Hamlet make fun of him. The plan which will destroy Hamlet is worked out by Claudius and himself, so Polonius feels comfortable and sure that Hamlet will soon go down. When Hamlet sees that no matter what he says Polonius accepts it and agrees with it, he does not object to go to his mother and announces it to Polonius.

Hamlet: Then I will go to my mother, by and by;
They fool me to the top of my bent. I will come by and by.

Polonius: I will say so.

Hamlet: By and by, is easily said. (394-398)

Hamlet’s dry response addresses the semantic level of their discourse, forsaking its subtextual aspect. However, for the audience Hamlet’s utterance plays on various levels. One is the level of what is actually said and Hamlet asserts that it is an easy task to report what is asserted. It remains for the audience to grasp the implicated meaning of Hamlet’s utterance that addresses what has been implicitly conveyed in his discourse but not asserted. It is this subtextual meaning of Hamlet’s discourse that cannot be reported.

4. CONCLUDING REMARKS
Hamlet cannot escape from the world that surrounds him. The court at Elsinore consists of ordinary people who cannot understand him. He is absolutely alone. The contrast between Hamlet and his surroundings is striking throughout the play. His surroundings, ordinary and confined, seem to be of a different world from his. Hamlet’s motives and feelings are beyond comprehension. And here lies a paradox: most of the people surrounding him are more able to cope with a practical crisis in life than this cultured, idealist prince. "With Hamlet on side and these on the other, the elements of a tragedy are complete" (Chambers 187). "The idealist gets the worst of it, and we are left to wonder at the irony of things by which it is so" (189).
Hamlet's successive failures to co-operate are deliberate in order to establish his assumed madness. In his undertaking the duty to avenge his father's death, he needs a different language that involves impolite utterances, ambiguous responses, irrelevant comments, which all lead to a disorientated communication. Hamlet is, indeed, the rudest man in Elsinore. But maybe we should aim at discovering and defining another principle, which seems to be the inversion of the Co-operative and the Politeness Principle: the defensive principle. Hamlet can be said to follow the "maxims of defence!"

When Hamlet pays with his life, Shakespeare makes his mysterious destiny feel right. "Denmark is restored to health and trust; the Prince succeeds in death, and the soldierly code of honour and revenge is absorbed in the wider motive" (Fergusson 197). No matter how many of Hamlet's famous puzzles are solved, it will still remain one of the most mysterious plays. It will always capture the audience or the reader with its intriguing story, the Prince who becomes a legend, and certainly the verse which touches us in many ways and allows various insights. "But just because it reaches us so intimately every reader will form his own opinion of Hamlet and his own notion of the meaning of the play as a whole" (197).

REFERENCES