
FLOUTING OF GRICE'S MAXIMS IN BOARDROOM DISCUSSIONS BETWEEN CANDIDATES AND LORD SUGAR'S PANEL IN "THE APPRENTICE UK"



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ABSTRACT

Situated within pragmatics, this study investigates the strategic use of language in institutional discourse, where indirectness often plays a crucial communicative role. Boardroom discussions provide a productive context for such analysis, as participants must assess performance, justify decisions, and negotiate responsibility in high-pressure situations. Focusing on *The Apprentice UK*, the research examines how Grice's conversational maxims are flouted in boardroom interactions, with attention to their types, linguistic forms, communicative purposes, and role-based differences. Using a mixed-methods approach, the study analyzes 90 instances of maxim flouting through both qualitative and quantitative methods. The findings show that all four maxims, Quantity, Quality, Relation, and Manner, are strategically flouted, with Quality occurring most frequently. These floutings are realized through devices such as irony, metaphor, exaggeration, vagueness, and indirect responses. Functionally, they serve both evaluative aims, including criticism and pressure, and defensive aims, such as justification and blame avoidance. The study concludes that maxim flouting operates as an important communicative resource in high-stakes institutional contexts, offering practical implications for Business English and professional communication training.

Keywords: Maxim flouting, Grice's maxims, communicative functions, linguistic realizations, boardroom discourse, pragmatics.

1. INTRODUCTION

Communication is a fundamental aspect of human interaction, allowing individuals to exchange ideas, express emotions, and establish relationships. As noted by Dan et al. (2020), language serves as the most universal medium through which people convey thoughts and intentions, thereby promoting cooperation and mutual understanding. However, successful communication depends not only on the transmission of information but also on shared contextual understanding between speakers. To explain this process, Grice (1975) introduced the Cooperative Principle and its four conversational maxims, Quantity, Quality, Relation, and Manner, as guidelines for effective communication. In actual interaction, however, speakers often intentionally depart from these maxims to imply meanings or achieve specific purposes, a phenomenon known as maxim flouting (Al-Shboul, 2022).

In professional and institutional contexts, communication becomes more strategic. According to Lazaraton (2002), institutional discourse, particularly interview settings, is inherently asymmetrical, as one party evaluates while the other must justify and present their

competence. Similar dynamics can be observed in boardroom discussions, where participants are required to defend decisions, negotiate responsibility, and manage professional image under pressure. Such settings highlight the importance of pragmatic competence in achieving communicative success.

While previous studies have explored Grice's maxims in conversations, films, and interviews (Averina, 2023; Hamani, 2019; Manurung, 2019; Nuzulia, 2020), business-related institutional discourse remains underexplored.

To address this gap, this study focuses on *The Apprentice UK*, whose boardroom interactions provide authentic examples of high-stakes professional discourse. It investigates three research questions:

1. What types of conversational maxims are flouted and how they are distributed in boardroom discussions?
2. How maxim flouting is realized and what communicative functions it serves?
3. How the use of maxim flouting varies across participant roles?

Drawing on 90 utterances from five selected excerpts of Season 1, the research contributes to pragmatic studies while offering practical insights for workplace communication and Business English education.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW AND THEORETICAL BACKGROUND:

2.1 LITERATURE REVIEW:

Understanding a speaker's intended meaning is vital for effective communication, as meaning often extends beyond the literal words used. Listeners must frequently rely on context and shared knowledge to interpret implied meanings (Gibbs Jr., 1999). This process is central to pragmatics, which studies how meaning is communicated and understood in context (Yule, 1996). A key framework in this field is H. P. Grice's Cooperative Principle (1975), which outlines four conversational maxims, Quantity, Quality, Relation, and Manner, as guidelines for effective interaction.

A substantial body of research has explored the flouting of conversational maxims across diverse communicative settings. Television talk shows are among the most frequently studied contexts. Studies on programs such as *Good Morning America* show that participants often depart from conversational norms to entertain audiences, shape interaction, and sustain engagement (Marlisa & Hidayat, 2020). Beyond authentic discourse, fictional settings such as films have also been widely examined. Studies on *La La Land* (Wahyuni, 2019) and *Home Alone 2: Lost in New York* (Gunawan et al., 2019) show that maxim flouting contributes to humor, character development, and narrative progression.

However, business communication remains underexplored, especially in spoken professional interactions. Existing studies, such as Limthaworn (2017), mainly focus on written discourse like business emails, where flouting helps maintain politeness and manage relationships. As a result, less is known about how these strategies operate in high-pressure spoken business contexts.

To address this, the present study investigates the flouting of Grice's maxims in boardroom discussions in *The Apprentice UK*. These interactions provide a valuable example of high-pressure professional communication, where participants must defend decisions, respond to criticism, and negotiate responsibility. Analyzing such discourse offers insight into how speakers strategically depart from conversational norms in competitive business environments.

2.2 Theoretical Background:

2.2.1 Pragmatics and the Cooperative Principle

Pragmatics is the branch of linguistics that studies how meaning is shaped by context, speaker intention, and interaction. This perspective was further expanded by Grice (1975), whose Cooperative Principle remains one of the most influential frameworks in pragmatics. This principle is supported by four conversational maxims: Quantity, Quality, Relation, and Manner. These maxims guide effective communication and help explain how listeners infer meanings beyond what is explicitly stated.

2.2.2 Conversational maxims

The Maxim of Quantity concerns the amount of information provided. Speakers should give as much information as needed, but not more than necessary.

The Maxim of Quality relates to truthfulness, requiring speakers to avoid false claims or unsupported statements. It is central to maintaining trust in conversation.

The Maxim of Relation emphasizes relevance, meaning contributions should connect logically to the ongoing discussion. This maxim helps conversations remain coherent and focused.

The Maxim of Manner concerns the way information is expressed, encouraging clarity, brevity, and order while avoiding ambiguity.

2.2.3 Implicature and Flouting of Maxims

Implicature refers to meanings that are suggested rather than directly stated, requiring hearers to rely on context and shared assumptions to interpret the speaker's intention. Grice (1975) distinguishes between conventional implicature, which is tied to specific linguistic forms, and conversational implicature, which arises through context and interaction.

A key mechanism behind conversational implicature is the flouting of maxims. Each maxim can be flouted in different ways:

- Quantity through too much, too little information, using tautologies.
- Quality through irony, metaphor, understatement, exaggeration and lack of evidence
- Relation through topic shift and irrelevance
- Manner through ambiguity, obscurity, lack of brevity

2.2.4 Boardroom Discussion

Boardroom discussion represents a valuable setting for examining these strategies. As Drew and Heritage (1992) suggest, institutional discourse is goal-oriented, role-based, and evaluative. In boardroom contexts, participants must justify decisions, negotiate responsibility, and manage professional image under unequal power relations (Lazaraton, 2002).

2.2.5 Image Repair Theory in Evaluative Boardroom Discourse

To better explain such responses, William Benoit's Image Repair Theory (1995, 2015) offers a useful framework. It describes how speakers respond to criticism through strategies such as justification, blame avoidance, and responsibility shifting. Combined with maxim flouting, this theory helps explain not only why speakers defend themselves, but also how they do so indirectly in high-pressure evaluative settings like The Apprentice UK.

3. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

3.1. Research Approach

This study employs a mixed-methods design with a primarily qualitative orientation. The term “mixed method” is used in this study to refer to all procedures of collecting and analyzing both qualitative and quantitative data in the context of a single study (Driscoll et al. 2007). The qualitative aspect centers on discourse analysis to identify instances of maxim flouting, interpret their implied meanings, and examine their communicative functions. Alongside this, a quantitative component is used to measure the frequency and distribution of maxim flouting across categories, participant roles, maxim types, communicative purposes, and linguistic forms. Statistical analysis is carried out using SPSS to support and reinforce the interpretation of the qualitative results.

3.2. Sampling:

This study uses purposive sampling, selecting data that closely align with the research objectives. The dataset is drawn from *The Apprentice UK*, a business-focused reality show in which contestants complete tasks and later face evaluative boardroom discussions with Lord Sugar and his panel. During these sessions, candidates must explain their performance, justify decisions, and respond to critical questioning.

Five episodes from Season 1 (Episodes 1-5) were chosen because they provide rich boardroom interactions and varied communicative situations. These episodes include evaluative, persuasive, and decision-making discourse between candidates and panel members. From this material, 90 utterances containing instances of maxim flouting were identified for analysis. By focusing specifically on boardroom segments, the study captures institutional and high-pressure discourse, making the data particularly suitable for examining pragmatic strategies such as maxim flouting.

3.3. Data Analysis:

After data collection, the researcher carried out a systematic analysis to identify patterns and generate meaningful findings, in line with Ary et al. (2002). The process began with reviewing the selected utterances to identify cases of flouting Grice’s conversational maxims. Each instance was then classified according to the relevant maxim, followed by an interpretation of its communicative intention and resulting conversational implicature.

All identified cases were coded and analyzed using SPSS version 26 and Microsoft Excel 2019 to examine their frequency and distribution. These tools supported classification, filtering, and extraction of results based on the research objectives. The quantitative analysis highlighted the most frequently flouted maxims, differences across participant roles, and the relationship between maxim types, communicative functions, and pragmatic forms. These results were then integrated with qualitative findings to provide a comprehensive understanding of how maxim flouting operates in boardroom interactions.

4. FINDINGS

4.1. Contextualized Analysis of Maxim Flouting in Boardroom Discourse:

These interactions take place in the boardroom after an unsuccessful task, where candidates are expected to explain their decisions and justify their performance. In this highly evaluative and pressurized environment, Lord Sugar and his panel closely question the candidates in order to determine accountability for failure. Within such a context, speakers frequently flout Grice’s conversational maxims as a strategic means of criticizing, applying

pressure, defending their actions, or maintaining their professional image. The following excerpts demonstrate how maxim flouting functions in practice within boardroom discourse.

4.1.1 Flouting the Maxim of Quality

Excerpt 1

Context: This exchange occurs when the panel challenges Adonike's proposed sales strategy of contacting funeral directors to sell flowers.

Lord Sugar's Panel (Margaret): "You wanted to ring funeral directors in the middle of the night to get them to step outside on the pavement and buy £60 worth of flowers from you. That was your strategy, was it?"

Margaret's statement demonstrates a flouting of the maxim of Quality through irony. Although based on the candidate's original proposal, it is reshaped with exaggerated details such as "in the middle of the night" and "on the pavement" to highlight how unrealistic the strategy appears. This makes the utterance an ironic criticism rather than a literal description.

The implicature is that the proposal reflects poor business judgment. Rather than seeking confirmation, the question functions as an indirect yet strong evaluation of the candidate's reasoning. By using irony, Margaret undermines the credibility of the idea while exposing weaknesses in decision-making.

At the same time, this criticism places the candidate in a defensive position, requiring them to justify their competence and maintain their professional image. The example shows how irony serves as an effective evaluative strategy in high-pressure boardroom discourse.

4.1.2 Flouting the Maxim of Quantity

Excerpt 2

Context: This exchange occurs when the panel asks the team to identify the weakest seller, prompting Tim to respond on behalf of the group.

Lord Sugar's Panel (Margaret): "What about selling? Who was the worst at selling?"
Tim: Each of us have individual talents and different personalities and that comes out in our selling technique. Everybody sold lots of items and that's there in the figure, so I don't think there were any bad sellers at all."

Tim's response illustrates a flouting of the maxim of Quantity through over-elaboration. Instead of directly identifying the weakest performer, he offers a broad and generalized explanation of the team's overall performance. By providing more information than necessary, he avoids addressing the specific detail requested.

The implicature is that no individual should be singled out for poor performance. Functionally, the response serves as blame avoidance, as Tim shifts attention from individual accountability to collective contribution. This strategy allows him to protect both himself and his teammates from criticism while preserving a positive image of the group in the boardroom discussion.

4.1.3 Flouting the Maxim of Relation

Excerpt 3

Context: This exchange occurs when Lord Sugar asks who should be held responsible for a decision made during the task.

Lord Sugar: Who was responsible for that?

Saira Khan: I decided to break it into two teams, because there were two very strong opinions the night before when I was laying down the strategy. And so in order to make sure that people worked as a team, I decided that there was one person in the team who had the experience.

Saira's response demonstrates a flouting of the maxim of Relation. Instead of directly identifying who was responsible, she shifts the discussion toward team organization and the reasoning behind her decisions. Although related to the broader situation, her answer does not explicitly address the question asked.

The implicature is that responsibility should not be assigned to one individual. Functionally, this serves as blame avoidance, as Saira frames the issue as a result of team dynamics and strategic considerations rather than personal failure. By redirecting attention to context, she presents her actions as reasonable and reduces the likelihood of direct criticism.

4.1.4 Flouting the Maxim of Manner

Excerpt 4

Context: This exchange occurs when Lord Sugar questions whether the product idea was originally developed by the team.

Lord Sugar: ...I'd like to know whether, honestly, honestly, you came up with this yourself.

Raj: I certainly did a number of those products. I think the idea came from the fact that we looked back at which business or which types of toys were really successful...

Raj's response illustrates a flouting of the maxim of Manner. Rather than giving a clear and straightforward answer, he provides an indirect and somewhat vague explanation about the team's process. This lack of clarity makes the response ambiguous and avoids directly addressing the issue of originality.

The implicature is that the idea should be considered valid because it resulted from strategic analysis, even if its originality is not explicitly confirmed. Functionally, the response serves as justification, allowing Raj to defend the team's decision while reducing the risk of criticism. The ambiguity helps him manage the situation without openly admitting or denying the concern raised in the boardroom discussion.

4.2 Distribution of Maxim Flouting

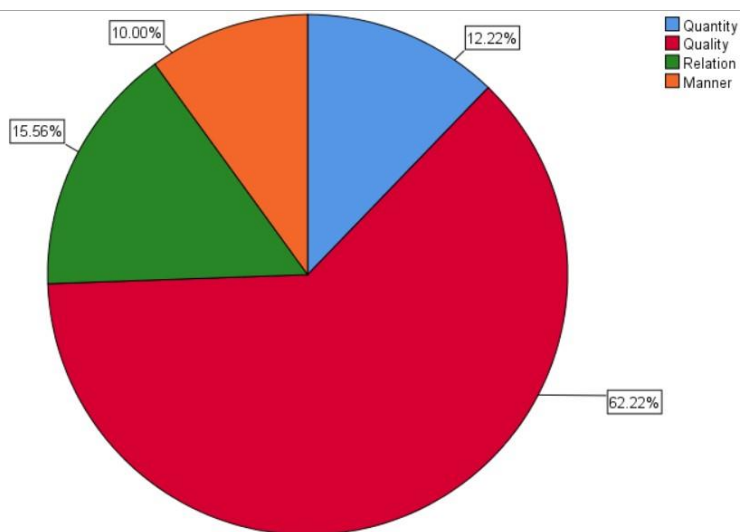


Figure 1 Distribution of Maxim Flouting

The results show an uneven distribution among the four Gricean maxims. The maxim of Quality appears most frequently, with 56 cases (62.22%), followed by Relation (14 cases, 15.6%), Quantity (11 cases, 12.2%), and Manner as the least common (9 cases, 10.0%). This indicates that speakers most often depart from literal truthfulness rather than from relevance, informativeness, or clarity.

In the boardroom setting, where interactions are strongly evaluative, Quality flouting enables speakers to use irony, exaggeration, and other non-literal expressions to make criticism or defense more forceful. By contrast, the lower frequency of Quantity and Manner suggests that participants still aim to remain clear and informative in order to sustain credibility. Relation flouting, though less frequent, reflects a strategic shift in relevance when handling challenging or sensitive issues.

4.3 Functional Outcomes of Maxim Flouting in Boardroom Interaction

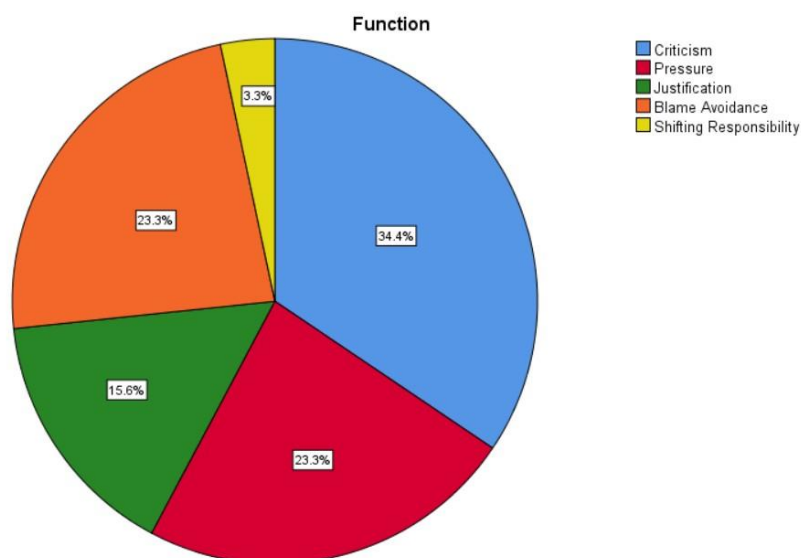


Figure 2 Functional Outcomes of Maxim Flouting in Boardroom Interaction

A closer look at communicative functions provides deeper insight into how maxim flouting operates in boardroom discourse. The findings show that its use is not random, but follows a clear functional pattern.

Criticism is the most common function (34.4%), followed by pressure (23.3%), blame avoidance (23.3%), justification (15.6%), and responsibility shifting (3.3%). This suggests that maxim flouting mainly serves evaluative and controlling purposes, while also helping speakers manage accountability.

The high frequency of criticism and pressure reflects the boardroom's focus on assessing performance and questioning decisions. Meanwhile, the notable presence of blame avoidance and justification highlights how participants respond strategically by defending themselves and reducing personal responsibility. Responsibility shifting appears least often, indicating that direct blame assignment is less common than indirect strategies.

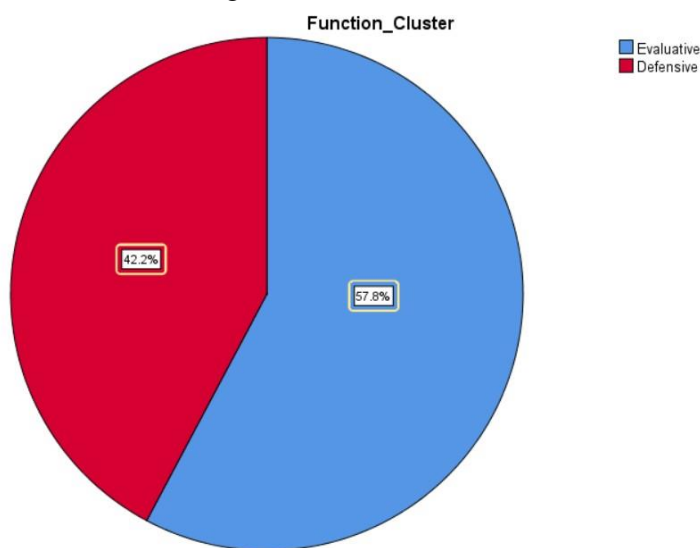


Figure 3 Function Clusters of Maxim Flouting in Boardroom Interaction

To better understand this pattern, the functions can be divided into two broader categories. The first is an evaluative orientation, covering criticism and pressure, which together make up 57.8% of the data. This shows that maxim flouting is mainly used to assess performance, question decisions, and increase scrutiny—reflecting the evaluative nature of boardroom discourse.

The second is a defensive orientation, including justification, blame avoidance, and responsibility shifting (42.2%). These functions reveal how speakers respond to pressure by defending their actions, reducing accountability, and protecting their professional image. Instead of addressing criticism directly, they often rely on indirect strategies..

4.4 Strategic Interrelationship of Maxim Flouting, Function, and Role in Boardroom Interaction

4.4.1 Functional Patterns of Maxim Flouting

Maxim * Function Crosstabulation

Maxim	Quantity	Count	Function				Total
			Criticism	Pressure	Justification	Blame Avoidance	
Maxim	Quantity	Count	0	2	3	6	11
		% of Total	0.0%	2.2%	3.3%	6.7%	12.2%
Quality	Quality	Count	27	17	8	3	56
		% of Total	30.0%	18.9%	8.9%	3.3%	62.2%
Relation	Relation	Count	2	1	1	8	14
		% of Total	2.2%	1.1%	1.1%	8.9%	15.6%
Manner	Manner	Count	2	1	2	4	9
		% of Total	2.2%	1.1%	2.2%	4.4%	10.0%
Total	Total	Count	31	21	14	21	90
		% of Total	34.4%	23.3%	15.6%	23.3%	100.0%

Figure 4 Functional Patterns of Maxim Flouting

A closer analysis shows that each maxim tends to serve particular communicative purposes rather than being used randomly. The findings point to clear functional patterns across the four maxims.

The maxim of Quality is most strongly connected to evaluative functions, especially criticism (27 cases, 30.0%) and pressure (17 cases, 18.9%). This suggests that non-literal language, exaggeration, and irony are commonly used to strengthen judgments and intensify evaluation.

The maxim of Relation is mainly associated with blame avoidance (8 cases, 8.9%) and some responsibility shifting (2 cases, 2.2%), showing that indirect relevance helps speakers avoid accountability.

Quantity demonstrates a more adaptable role, supporting both justification (3 cases, 3.3%) and blame avoidance (6 cases, 6.7%) by controlling how much information is given.

Although less frequent, Manner also contributes to blame avoidance (4 cases, 4.4%) and justification (2 cases, 2.2%), suggesting that ambiguity and unclear phrasing can reduce direct responsibility or commitment.

4.4.2 Alignment Between Maxim Choice and Participant Role

Maxim * Role Crosstabulation

Maxim	Quantity	Count	Role		Total
			Candidates	Lord Sugar's Panel	
Maxim	Quantity	Count	9	2	11
		% of Total	10.0%	2.2%	12.2%
Quality	Quality	Count	19	37	56
		% of Total	21.1%	41.1%	62.2%
Relation	Relation	Count	10	4	14
		% of Total	11.1%	4.4%	15.6%
Manner	Manner	Count	8	1	9
		% of Total	8.9%	1.1%	10.0%
Total	Total	Count	46	44	90
		% of Total	51.1%	48.9%	100.0%

Figure 5 Alignment Between Maxim Choice and Participant Role

A clearer understanding emerges when examining how different participant roles relate to specific maxims. The panel predominantly uses Quality flouting (37 cases, 41.1%), while candidates display a more balanced use of Quantity (9 cases, 10.0%), Relation (10 cases, 11.1%), and Manner (8 cases, 8.9%).

This distribution supports the functional findings. The panel's strong reliance on Quality reflects its evaluative role, as this maxim is effective for criticism and pressure. By contrast, candidates use a wider range of maxims to handle challenging questions, avoid direct responses, and reduce accountability.

These patterns suggest that maxim choice is closely connected to the speaker's institutional role and communicative purpose, rather than occurring by chance.

4.4.3 Role-Based Differentiation in Communicative Strategies

Role * Function Crosstabulation

Role	Candidates		Function					Total
			Criticism	Pressure	Justification	Blame Avoidance	Shifting Responsibility	
		Count	6	3	14	20	3	46
		% of Total	6.7%	3.3%	15.6%	22.2%	3.3%	51.1%
Lord Sugar's Panel		Count	25	18	0	1	0	44
		% of Total	27.8%	20.0%	0.0%	1.1%	0.0%	48.9%
Total		Count	31	21	14	21	3	90
		% of Total	34.4%	23.3%	15.6%	23.3%	3.3%	100.0%

Figure 6 Functional Patterns of Maxim Flouting

The link between communicative function and participant role provides a clearer view of how these strategies work in interaction. A strong contrast emerges between candidates and Lord Sugar's panel.

The panel's use of maxim flouting is largely concentrated in evaluative functions, especially criticism (25 cases, 27.8%) and pressure (18 cases, 20.0%), with very few instances of justification or responsibility shifting. This suggests that panel members mainly use flouting to assess performance, challenge decisions, and maintain control of the discussion.

By contrast, candidates show a more defensive pattern. Their responses are most often linked to blame avoidance (20 cases, 22.2%) and justification (14 cases, 15.6%), with fewer cases of criticism and pressure. This indicates that candidates primarily use maxim flouting to manage accountability and respond strategically to evaluative pressure rather than to impose it.

5. DISCUSSION OF KEY FINDINGS:

The findings indicate that maxim flouting in boardroom discourse is systematic rather than random, shaped by communicative goals and participant roles. Both qualitative and quantitative results reveal consistent patterns in how speakers depart from conversational norms to achieve specific interactional purposes.

A major finding is the dominance of the maxim of Quality, showing that speakers frequently use non-literal or exaggerated language. This reflects the strongly evaluative nature of boardroom interaction, where criticism, judgment, and defense are central. Devices such as irony and metaphor make evaluations more indirect yet rhetorically powerful.

The results also highlight two broad orientations: evaluative and defensive. Criticism and pressure function to impose judgment, while justification, blame avoidance, and responsibility shifting help speakers manage accountability. These strategies coexist, reflecting the dual demands of evaluation and self-protection.

Role differences further reinforce this pattern. The panel mainly uses evaluative strategies to control the interaction, whereas candidates rely more on defensive strategies to protect their position. This shows that pragmatic choices are closely linked to institutional roles and power relations.

Finally, the study demonstrates that maxim flouting involves not only functional intent but also specific linguistic realizations, with different forms serving different communicative purposes.

6. CONCLUSION AND IMPLICATIONS

6.1 Conclusion:

This study examined the flouting of Grice's conversational maxims in boardroom discussions in *The Apprentice UK*, focusing on their distribution, realizations, communicative functions, and role-based variation. Through both qualitative and quantitative analysis, the findings show that maxim flouting functions as a strategic communicative resource in this evaluative setting.

All four maxims, Quantity, Quality, Relation, and Manner, were found in the data, with Quality as the most frequently flouted. This confirms the expectation that speakers in boardroom discourse rely heavily on non-literal and evaluative language.

The study identified several linguistic realizations, including metaphor, irony, exaggeration, irrelevance, and varying degrees of informativeness. These forms are systematically linked to particular communicative purposes rather than being randomly used.

Maxim flouting serves both evaluative and defensive functions. Criticism and pressure are mainly used to assess performance, while justification, blame avoidance, and responsibility shifting help speakers manage accountability. Role differences further show that the panel relies more on evaluative strategies, whereas candidates adopt defensive ones.

Overall, the findings demonstrate that maxim flouting is a purposeful, context-sensitive strategy shaped by institutional roles and power relations in high-pressure professional discourse.

6.2 Implications

The findings offer important implications for linguistic research, practical communication, and business education.

From a linguistic perspective, the study expands understanding of Grice's Cooperative Principle by showing that maxim flouting is not simply a breach of norms, but a structured and context-dependent strategy. The alignment between maxims, linguistic forms, and communicative functions highlights the systematic nature of implicature in institutional discourse.

From a practical communication perspective, the results stress the importance of recognizing indirect language in professional settings. In meetings, interviews, or negotiations, speakers often rely on irony, metaphor, or indirect responses to evaluate others or manage responsibility. Awareness of these strategies can improve interpretation and response in real-world communication.

For business education, the study provides value for Business English learners by illustrating how professionals defend decisions, handle criticism, and maintain credibility.

Integrating such insights into training can strengthen persuasive communication, pragmatic awareness, and confidence in workplace interactions.

6.3 Limitations

Despite its contributions, this study has several limitations. First, the data is restricted to boardroom discussions from a single television program, which may not fully represent other institutional contexts. The edited nature of the show may also affect authenticity.

Second, the dataset consists of only 90 instances of maxim flouting, which limits the generalizability of the findings. A larger sample could provide stronger evidence.

Finally, the analysis treats each case as involving one primary maxim, while in actual interaction multiple maxims may be flouted simultaneously. This overlapping nature was not fully explored and may limit the depth of interpretation.

6.4 Suggestions

Future research could examine maxim flouting in broader contexts, such as real business meetings, interviews, or other institutional settings, to compare pragmatic strategies across environments.

Larger datasets and additional statistical testing may also strengthen validity and reliability. Researchers should further investigate cases where multiple maxims are flouted within a single utterance, as this would provide a more nuanced understanding of complex pragmatic behavior.

Finally, future studies could explore multimodal factors, such as tone, gesture, and facial expression, to better understand how maxim flouting is interpreted in spoken interaction.

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