

Maxim Violation as A Defense Mechanism in A Fictional Character: A Pragmatic–Psychoanalytic Analysis of Wednesday

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ABSTRACT

This study investigates how violations of Gricean conversational maxims function as manifestations of Freudian defense mechanisms in fictional discourse. The data are drawn from a therapy session in Episode 1 of the Netflix series Wednesday (2022), focusing specifically on Wednesday Addams' responses to questions concerning the rejection of her literary work. Employing a qualitative interpretive approach, the analysis integrates Grice's Cooperative Principle with Freud's theory of ego defense mechanisms. The data collection process proceeded in several stages. In the first stage, the selected episode was watched thoroughly and was repeatedly view. In the second stage, all the dialogue in the selected episode was transcribed. In the third stage, the transcribed utterances were reviewed and organized into a structure data set. The findings reveal that Wednesday violates the Maxim of Manner by avoiding direct responses and the Maxim of Quality through evaluative overgeneralization. These violations function as rationalization strategies that protect her ego from psychological threat posed by repeated rejection. Rather than representing communicative failure, the maxim violations operate as strategic linguistic choices that preserve self-image and deflect vulnerability. This study demonstrates that integrating pragmatic theory with psychoanalytic interpretation enables a deeper understanding of the psychological motivations embedded in fictional dialogue. The findings contribute to interdisciplinary scholarship by illustrating how conversational structure can reveal latent emotional architecture in character construction.

Keywords: *Defense Mechanism, Grice Cooperative Principle, Grice Maxims, Freudian Psychoanalysis, Wednesday*

INTRODUCTION

Language is a fundamental instrument of communication in human social interaction. Language operates not merely as a vehicle for information exchange but as a site where identity, power, and psychological tensions are negotiated. Aligning with this statement, Mahroof (2021) states that in pragmatics, the major aim of communication is considered the exchange of information. Within pragmatics, effective communication is traditionally framed through Grice (1975) Cooperative Principle, which assumes that interlocutors contribute meaningfully to achieve mutual understanding. However, actual communication frequently deviates from these cooperative norms. Such deviations are not necessarily communicative breakdowns; rather, they often signal deeper layers of meaning. This Cooperative Principle is divided into four maxims as regulative principles guiding rational discourse, Quantity (giving enough information), Quality (being truthful and evidence-based), Manner (being clear), and Relevance (staying on topic and responding to what matters). When speakers violate these maxims, hearers infer implicatures. Yet pragmatic theory rarely interrogates the psychological motivations behind such violations.

Therefore, an understanding of maxim and implicature plays an important role in interpreting meaning and its intention in daily communication. Fascinatingly, the human tendency to communicate implicitly is sometimes rooted

in the psychological need for self-defense. This is related to the psychoanalysis perspective by Sigmund Freud where the speaker uses specific language to avoid truths that threaten their ego by violating maxims. From psychoanalytic perspective, Sigmund Freud argues that human behavior—including linguistic behavior—is shaped by unconscious processes. Gampang (2016) states in his journal, In Freudian psychoanalytic theory, defense mechanisms are unconscious psychological strategies brought into play by various entities to cope with reality and to maintain self-image. In addition, Freud proposed that the ego used various psychological strategies to resolve conflicts between unconscious desires and the demands of reality. Repression, for instance, is a mechanism where the ego rejects or ignores thoughts or memories that cause anxiety or discomfort. Projection is a mechanism in which individuals project their negative feelings or thoughts onto others. This is an example of how the ego attempts to maintain a balance between conflicting desires and the demands of reality (Putu, 2025). However, the ego employs defense mechanism to protect itself from anxiety-producing realities. If communication is psychologically motivated, then systematic violations of conversational norms may reflect ego-driven strategies rather than random stylistic choices.

The Netflix series *Wednesday* (2022) provides a compelling context for examining this intersection. *Wednesday Addams'* speech is frequently marked by sharp detachment, ambiguity, and evaluative intensity. Previous studies have discussed various literary and linguistic aspects. For instance, Marsha et al. (2024) analyzed Politeness Strategies in *Wednesday Addams'* Utterances. Lidvina Mbembo et al. (2024) discussed the Representatives Illocutionary Act through *Wednesday's* speech acts. On the other hand, Ambarwati et al. (2024) analyzed the Mental Binary Opposition of *Wednesday* and *Enid*. However, no prior study has integrated Gricean pragmatics with Freudian psychoanalysis to analyze how conversational violations may function as defense mechanisms.

This study addresses that gap by asking: How do violations of Gricean maxims in *Wednesday Addams'* utterances function as Freudian defense mechanisms? This article aims to analyze the character of *Wednesday Addams* in episode *Wednesday's Child is Full of Woe* through the dual framework of Gricean Maxims and Freudian Defense Mechanisms. It aims not only to categorize her violations of conversational maxims but also to reveal the defensive psychological mechanisms underlying such speech patterns. This analysis contributes to the existing literature by moving beyond superficial character traits to uncover the psychological architecture underlying linguistic deviation.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Maxim violation, Freudian defense mechanisms, and the pragmatics of fictional discourse form the core theoretical domains of this study. Grice (1975) introduced the Cooperative Principle and its four maxims—Quantity, Quality, Relevance, and Manner—as the foundations of rational conversation. When speakers deviate from these maxims, listeners infer implicatures, or unstated meanings, to restore coherent interpretation. Freudian psychoanalysis, meanwhile, proposes that human behavior is driven by unconscious processes, and that ego employs defense mechanisms—such as rationalization, repression, and projection—to manage psychological threats (Gampang, 2016; Paramitha et al., 2025). Together, these frameworks suggest that systematic maxim violations in discourse may reflect ego-driven self-protection rather than communicate failure.

Several prior studies have examined the language of *Wednesday Addams* and related discourse phenomena. Syuhra et al. (2024) analyzed politeness strategies in *Wednesday Addams'* utterances and found that she consistently prioritizes self-image maintenance. Mbembo and Satwika (2024) investigated representative illocutionary acts in the same series, revealing that *Wednesday's* speech acts carry layered communicative functions beyond their surface form. Ambarwati and Tawami (2024) examined mental binary oppositions between *Wednesday* and *Enid*, illustrating how psychological contrasts are encoded linguistically. In a related vein, Hossain (2021) demonstrated the broad applicability of Grice's maxims in pragmatic discourse analysis, and Nurtjahyo (2016) applied Freudian framework to fictional characters in literary analysis. Despite these contributions, no prior study has integrated Gricean pragmatics with Freudian psychoanalysis specifically to examine how maxim violations in *Wednesday Addams'* utterances function as expressions of ego defense.

This study addresses that gap by asking how do violations of Gricean maxims in *Wednesday Addams'* utterances function as Freudian defense mechanisms? Employing a qualitative interpretive approach, the study analyses a therapy scene from Episode 1 of the Netflix series *Wednesday* (2022). The data were collected through repeated viewing and transcription of the selected scene. Relevant utterances were then identified, categorized by maxim violation type, and

interpreted through the lens of Freudian defense mechanisms. This dual framework enables the study to move beyond surface-level character description toward a systematic account of the psychological architecture underlying Wednesday's communicative behavior.

METHODOLOGY

This study employs a qualitative interpretive approach based on detailed discourse analysis. Qualitative methodology is appropriate here because the objective is not to quantify occurrences but to interpret the communicative and psychological functions of specific utterances. This approach aligns with the core principle of both Gricean pragmatics and Freudian psychoanalysis, each of which depends on contextual, interpretive close reading to reveal the meaning that lies beneath the surface of discourse. Rather than counting instances of maxim violations across a set of data, the study conducts a focused, in-depth analysis of a single exchange, consistent with case-based qualitative research in applied linguistics.

The data source is the therapy scene from the first episode of the Netflix series *Wednesday* (2022), titled *Wednesday's Child is Full of Woe*, specifically the exchange between Wednesday Addams and Dr. Valerie Kinbott concerning Wednesday's attempts to publish her novels. This scene was selected because it contains multiple, clearly identifiable maxim violations in an emotionally tense interaction, making it particularly well-suited for dual pragmatic-psychoanalytic analysis. Utterances from Dr. Kinbott are included as contextual reference points for interpreting Wednesday's responses.

Data collection proceeded in three stages. First, the selected episode was viewed repeatedly to ensure familiarity with the narrative context. Second, all dialogue within the scene was transcribed from the original Netflix broadcast. Third, the transcribed utterances were reviewed and organized into a structured data set, with each utterance annotated to indicate the conversational context in which it occurred. Data analysis then proceeded in two sequential stages: first, utterances were identified and categorized according to which Gricean maxim they violated, using Grice's (1975) original definitions as the analytical standard; second, each identified violation was interpreted using Freud's theory of defense mechanisms in order to determine the psychological function served by the violation.

DISCUSSION

This present discussion focuses on a single exchange taken from the therapy session between Wednesday Addams and Dr. Kinbott in the episode *Wednesday's Child is Full of Woe*. This exchange occurs when Dr. Kinbott asks about Wednesday attempts to publish her novels.

Data 1

The transcribed dialogue:

Dr. Kinbott: "Any luck getting your work published?"

Wednesday: "Editors are short-sighted, fear-based life forms. One once described my writing as gratuitously morbid, and suggested I seek psychiatric help." (31:45)

Table 1. Data 1 – Utterance, Maxim Violation, and Defense Mechanism

Utterance	Maxim Violated	Linguistic Form	Psychological Function
"Editors are short-sighted, fear-based life forms. One once describe my writing as gratuitously morbid, and suggested I seek psychiatric help."	Manner	Indirect, evasive answer; shifts focus to editors rather than acknowledging than rejection	Avoidance of vulnerability; ego-protection through evasion

<i>"Editors are short-sighted, fear-based life forms."</i>	Quality	Overgeneralized evaluation presented as fact; no evidential basis	Rationalization; displaces blame onto editors to preserve self-image
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This exchange has been selected as the focus of the analysis for some reasons. First, it contains multiple violations of Gricean maxims, each of which can be linked to Freudian defense mechanisms. This exchange demonstrates a layered pattern of communicative violation. Second, the exchange addresses a topic that is deeply personal to Wednesday. Dr. Kinbott brings up her creative work and the repeated rejection it has faced from the publishing industry. This rejection touches on core aspects of Wednesday's identity, including her perspective as a talented and misunderstood writer, and her need to protect her ego from the awful reality that her work has been consistently rejected. This scene makes the exchange particularly rich for sustained analysis.

In order to fully understand the significance of Wednesday's responses in this exchange, it is necessary to situate them in the broader context of the therapy session and the communicative expectations that organize it. Dr. Kinbott question "Any luck getting your work published?" is not a random or useless question. It follows directly from an earlier moment in the session when Dr. Kinbott revealed that she has been sent the manuscripts of Wednesday's three novels as part of her psychological evaluation. Dr. Kinbott has found that she is familiar with the content of these novels, and she has identified certain elements in them as psychologically revealing, especially the relationship between the protagonist Viper and her mother Dominica. The question about publication is part of a strategy to explore Wednesday's relationship with her own creative output and the ways where that output has been received, or rejected, by the outside world.

The question itself is straightforward and also factual. It invites a simple or no answer, or at least a brief elaboration on the status of Wednesday's publishing journeys. From a therapeutic perspective, the purpose of the question is to open a space where Wednesday might reflect on her feelings about rejection on her relationship with external validation, and on the gap between her perspective as a talented writer and the reality that her work has not been accepted for publication. In Gricean terms, a cooperative response would involve Wednesday providing the information that Dr. Kinbott has requested, and potentially expanding on the emotional dimensions of that experience. Instead, Wednesday provides a response that violates multiple conversational maxims at once, and reveals the operation of defense mechanism to protect her ego from the discomfort of acknowledging failure and vulnerability.

The Maxim of Manner Violation

The first maxim that Wednesday violates in her response is the Maxim of Manner. As mentioned in literature review, this maxim requires clarity and avoids ambiguity in conversation and expression. When Dr. Kinbott asks whether Wednesday has any luck getting her work published or not, the question invites a direct answer. The expected response would be "Not yet," or "No, I haven't." Wednesday provides a response that does not directly address the question at all instead. She says "Editors are short-sighted, fear-based life forms." This statement is not a clear answer to the question. It does implicitly confirm or deny whether her work has been published, nor does it provide any concrete information about her efforts. Instead, Wednesday shifts the focus away from her own experience to a general criticism of editors as a category.

By avoiding a direct answer, Wednesday prevents the conversation from moving into topic where she need to acknowledge her lack of success. A direct acceptance that her work has not been published would position her as someone who has failed to achieve her goal, as someone whose creative output has been judged and considered inappropriate by the publisher. This is a position of vulnerability that Wednesday's ego is unwilling to claim. The ambiguity of her responses functions as a linguistic shield that protects her from having to confront that vulnerability directly.

Psychological Function

A direct admission ("I haven't been published") would require confronting vulnerability. By shifting the focus, Wednesday avoids occupying the position of the rejected writer. Ambiguity functions as ego-protection. Thus, the violation is not accidental—it is strategically evasive.

The Maxim of Quality Violation

The second maxim that Wednesday violates is the Maxim of Quality, which demands the speaker to not give anything they believe to be false or lack of reasonable evidence. When Wednesday says that editors are “short-sighted, fear-based life forms,” she is presenting generalization as though it were an objective fact. There is no evidence to support the claim that all editors are fearful or incapable of recognizing literary work. What Wednesday does is constructing a narrative that explains away her repeated rejections in a way that liberates her of responsibility and protect her self-image as a talented and misunderstood writer.

Psychological Function: Rationalization

Here, rationalization becomes evident. Instead of internalizing rejection as possible critique of her writing, Wednesday reframes rejection as evidence of editorial incompetence. As discussed in the literature review, Rationalization involves the construction of seemingly logical justifications for actions or beliefs that are in fact motivated by unconscious motives. In this case, the painful reality is that Wednesday’s novels have been rejected by publishers, and once one editor has described her writing as “gratuitously morbid” and suggested that she seek psychiatric help. It is not simply a rejection of her work, but it is a rejection of the way she thinks and sees the world, a rejection of who she is. To accept this feedback at face value would be to accept that there is something fundamentally wrong with their perspective, something that makes her unsuitable for the world of professional writing. To accept this feedback just like that means to accept that there is something wrong with her perspective, something that makes her unsuitable for the world of professional writing.

Wednesday’s ego cannot tolerate this interpretation. Instead, it constructs an alternative narrative where the problem is not with Wednesday or her novels, but with the editors themselves. If editors are short-sighted and fearful, then their rejection of Wednesday’s work is not a reflection of any flaws on her part. It is their inability to appreciate something that is bold and dark for their narrow sensibilities. This rationalization allows Wednesday to keep her self-image as a talented writer who is simply ahead of her time, rather than facing the possibility that her work may have flaws.

The structure of the defense operates as follows:

- 1) Threat: Repeated rejection challenges self-image.
- 2) Anxiety: Possibility of inadequacy.
- 3) Defense: Editors are the problem.
- 4) Result: Ego preserved.

Rationalization transforms failure into external limitation. The ego remains intact. The combined violations reveal a layered defense.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATION

This study demonstrates that Wednesday Addams’ violations of the Maxim of Manner and the Maxim of Quality in her response to Dr. Kinbott function as manifestations of Freudian rationalization: her indirect, evasive reply avoids acknowledging rejection, while her generalization that editors are “short-sighted, fear-based life forms” displaces blame externally, protecting her self-image as a gifted but misunderstood writer. Rather than representing communicative incompetence, these violations are intentional and ego-driven linguistic strategies. The integration of Grice’s (1975) Cooperative Principle with Freud’s theory of defense mechanisms, as elaborated by Gampang (2016) and Paramitha et al. (2025), proves productive: pragmatics identifies the structural deviations in Wednesday’s discourse, while psychoanalysis explains the motivational depth behind them, together revealing that conversational norm violation can serve as a window into a fictional character’s psychological architecture.

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