

The Ethics Of Authority In Global Professional Settings: Analyzing Power Relations And Implicature In Institutional Discourse

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ABSTRACT

The present study focuses on the role of conversational implicature in indirect speech within the setting of workplace ethics and social economic inequalities. The study is based on a qualitative descriptive methodology that relies on Grice's Cooperative Principle. The data for analysis are taken from the film 'The Devil Wears Prada' (2006). Based on the analysis, individuals occupying high status positions tend to use indirect speech by violating the rules of quantity, quality, and relevance in order to give instructions, make evaluations, and control others without disclosing their motives explicitly. Meanwhile, subordinates interpret these implications thanks to their awareness of the hierarchy in the organization. Thus, it becomes possible to communicate efficiently despite the absence of any explicit meanings. Overall, the study reveals that conversational implicature can be viewed as a technique of indirect speech used as an instrument of power negotiations. The study also underlines the importance of implicit meanings rather than explicit utterances for the expression of authority. To conclude, this study highlights the importance of promoting equitable communication practices in international organizations. Thus, this study can contribute to further discussion on social sustainability and workplace inclusivity.

Keywords: *Conversational implicature, Power relations, Institutional discourse, Workplace inclusion, Social sustainability*

INTRODUCTION

It is worth mentioning that besides being a neutral medium for conveying messages, language is an effective weapon to create, negotiate, and maintain complicated power relations in organizational roles in the contemporary period of global professional transition. Thus, non-literal communication has become a critical issue of worldwide relevance as companies strive towards achieving social sustainability and promoting inclusive growth. In this respect, the role of pragmatics, which highlights the idea of getting meanings from contexts, social relations, and speaker intentions rather than from word meanings per se (Grice, 1975; Taguchi, 2017), should be emphasized. The understanding of conversational implicature plays a central role in studying organizational communication as, in institutions, speakers often use implied meaning instead of making clear statements.

Previous research projects have examined the use of implicatures in different genres, including film dialogues and pragmatics. It has been proved by the findings of Septyanti et al. (2020) and Putri & Ambalegin (2022) that implicatures arise as a consequence of violating the maxims of conversations in the genre of movie dialogues. Furthermore, the results of A'maliyah et al. (2025) and Umami & Nadita (2025) demonstrate that implicatures help communicate the intentions and feelings of the characters in animated films. Moreover, in their papers Ainiyah & Sholichah (2025) and Wahyuni et al. (2024) examine the issue of power relations in the language of film discourses and identify the impact of social hierarchy on discourse creation. Although the above-mentioned papers provide

interesting information, most of the studies have focused on identifying the types of implicatures or violations of the maxims of conversation. Nevertheless, few researches have investigated implicatures as means to communicate hierarchical relations. Indirect responses have never been analyzed within the institutional hierarchy and communication asymmetry.

Hierarchical organization influences the process of communication in institutions because the power status of participants in conversations is usually implied through language rather than mentioned explicitly (Holmes, 2017; Van Dijk, 2016). Indirect responses allow speakers to deliver messages, make criticism, give assessments, and even give instructions without direct conflicts. According to Haugh (2017), powerful people can impose the intended meaning using verbal signals, and their interpretation is determined by participants' social positions. Implicature, indirectness, and power play an important role in professional communications, where control and professionalism are vital.

In light of such a background, the current research is interested in exploring how implicatures develop in conversations in the hierarchical organizational context by analyzing some of the conversations in the film *The Devil Wears Prada* (2006). This research employs a qualitative descriptive design, which entails the application of Grice's Cooperative Principle to explore non-compliance with the conversational maxims in a bid to reveal their implicatures. It is hoped that through an investigation into the link between implicatures and the utilization of power in discourse, the research will be able to offer an insightful analysis of the role of language in power usage and its implications for sustainable growth.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The idea of conversational implicature, i.e., following or violating the CP and communicating meanings beyond literal speech, was introduced by Grice (1975). Implicature is contextualized not only but rather primarily due to social interaction, speaker's intention, and common knowledge (Dynel, 2018; Levinson, 1983). Since meanings are associated with the power paradigm and affected by both contextual and hierarchical factors, this phenomenon becomes even more significant in institutional discourse.

The most widespread manifestation of implicature is indirect answers, as implicatures occur when the speaker uses indirect expressions that cannot be understood as intended without some inferences (Haugh, 2017). In recent years, however, a growing attention has been paid to the role of indirect speech acts in professional communication instead of being related to politeness strategies as in previous studies (Brown & Levinson, 1987). Specifically, using indirect answers allows authorities to give orders, make evaluations, and show criticism within professional communication in a non-confrontational manner (Holmes, 2017). Thus, the connection between implicature and indirectness can be considered through the prism of negotiations and the use of power rather than as communication techniques alone.

Considering the link between the concepts discussed above through the perspectives of discourse analysis and power can help reveal further connections. According to Van Dijk (2016), implicit communication forms are structured in such a way that the element of authority can maintain social power structures (Fairclough, 1995). Similarly, Schnurr (2020) argues that the strategic use of language in professional settings is required for managing interpersonal relations and maintaining power structures. Implicature, in this case, is the technique of exercising control through implicitly communicated meanings.

Moreover, this integrative approach also finds support in previous works about film discourse. Indeed, it has already been shown that certain real-life communication features, such as power dynamics and social relations, are replicated in the conversation of films (Bednarek, 2018). In accordance with empirical data, implicature in films is typically created by means of indirect responses and maxim violation (Septyanti et al., 2020; A'maliyah et al., 2025; Umami & Nadita, 2025; Ainiyah & Sholichah, 2025). However, these pieces of research focused mainly on categorization of different types of implicatures, instead of investigating their usage in hierarchical communication. As a result, implicature in its role as a powerful negotiation device has been overlooked.

In an effort to fill the existing gap in the literature, the current paper will investigate how conversational implicature and indirect response operate as devices of power in hierarchical communication. With the potential applications to workplace ethics, inclusion communication, and social sustainability in mind, the present research will attempt to shed

light on the mechanisms of using implicature both as a language instrument and an institution-building technique. To accomplish this goal, a brief analysis of some dialogue excerpts from *The Devil Wears Prada* will be carried out.

METHODOLOGY

Research Design

A qualitative descriptive research design is used in this study to understand how conversational implicature is constructed by means of indirect answers in institutional discourse. This type of research design allows for the analysis of implicit meaning in certain contexts, where meanings are not quantifiable but have to be interpreted in terms of interactive and sociological aspects; therefore, qualitative research is considered to be appropriate for such studies in pragmatics (Taguchi, 2017). The use of a qualitative design will allow a comprehensive examination of speakers' negotiation of meanings in hierarchical structures because the language will be viewed from the perspective of social practice.

Data and Data Source

Movie conversations chosen from the script of the film *The Devil Wears Prada* (2006) became the source of data used in this study. Movie communication has been recognized as a relevant and reliable source of discourse analysis due to its realistic depiction of interaction and power relations within the organization. Since *The Devil Wears Prada* represents highly organized corporate work environment characterized by evaluation and hierarchical power, this movie has been chosen as a representative case.

The data consists of five sequences of communication. The data is considered to be sufficient for conducting a qualitative research as the aim of this study is not generalizing but exploring implicit meanings and power relations in more detail.

Data Selection Criteria

Purposive sampling was employed to select data on the basis of operationally defined criteria. First, if the utterance does not answer the previous statement explicitly but gives a meaning implicitly, then the utterance should be considered to be an indirect answer. Second, the statement should violate Grice's maxims of quantity, quality, relevance, or manner that will cause conversational implicature (Grice, 1975). Third, the dialogue must occur in power relations, which are operationally defined as conversations of two interlocutors occupying different positions in an institution.

Hierarchies of the participants were formed on the basis of the organizational hierarchy of the magazine *Runway*. Participants like Editor-in-Chief Miranda Priestly would be considered high-power speakers, while Andy Sachs and Emily Charlton would be seen as low-power participants.

Data Collection Technique

This process involved several stages in collecting the information. Firstly, it is important to mention that in order to discover all necessary dialogues, the official script of the film was analyzed. Secondly, any expressions that can be considered indirect responses were highlighted and documented. Thirdly, in order to ensure that the selected dialogues incorporated both implicatures and hierarchical communication, they had to be filtered based on pre-set requirements. These verified dialogues were subsequently sorted into five data groups.

Data Analysis Technique

The following steps formed a methodological approach for the analysis of the data that can be referred to as a qualitative pragmatic technique:

- 1) Detection of Indirect Responses
Each dialogue was analyzed based on its connection with the previous speech to see if it was direct or indirect in nature.
- 2) Maxim Violations Identification
In accordance with Grice's Co-operative Principle, each utterance was analyzed in terms of quantity, quality, relevance, and manner of speech to establish what maxims had been violated.
- 3) Conversational Implicature Interpretation

In the process of interpretation, context was considered through such elements as the intention of the speaker, common knowledge, and the situational context.

4) Power Dynamics Analysis

The interaction was analyzed through the concept of hierarchy to reveal the effect of power relations on implicatures.

5) Data Interpretation

The analysis was conducted from a perspective of social sustainability and workplace interaction. Thus, it guarantees an accurate and theory-based interpretation of data.

Validity and Dependability

In this research, theoretical triangulation is utilized where the analysis of discourse, power, and pragmatic theories is integrated to guarantee the credibility of the investigation. In-depth understanding of implicature in institutional settings can be achieved through an integration of various theoretical approaches (Schnurr, 2020).

Reliability is ensured through application of similar analysis for all data sets. Linguistic reliability and validity is maintained due to use of the official script of the movie. Interpretation of each interaction takes place based on the story and situational context of the movie scene.

DISCUSSION

The findings in this study concerning how conversation implicature can develop within hierarchical interaction within institutions through indirect answers have been provided in this section. The results indicate that the use of indirect speech acts not only helps in achieving certain objectives pragmatically but also functions as a strategy for the development of hierarchies within workplace communication, particularly when it breaches Grice's maxims of conversation (Grice, 1975).

Data 1

Main finding: Indirect interrogatives are employed for establishing implicit orders within hierarchy.

Interrogations such as Miranda's "Is there a reason my coffee is not here? Was I unclear in some way?" are indirect orders and not questions, since this violates the quantity maxim. This is a violation of the quantity maxim since the statement implies duty rather than offering or requesting adequate information. Such non-observance creates implicature that the listener must deduce, according to Grice (1975).

From a power standpoint, Miranda's institutional authority determines how effective this implicature is. Higher status speakers can rely on indirectness since their power guarantees compliance without explicit directions, as stated by institutional discourse theory (Wahyuni et al., 2024). In this case, implicature is employed to give an order and indicate displeasure at the same time.

As this outcome demonstrates, implicature helps to preserve linguistic complexity while enabling those in charge to control others; thus, influencing power dynamics. In turn, such indirect disapproval can be psychologically harmful and cause confusion about ethical norms and sustainability, preventing full inclusivity. As such, while implicature is helpful in achieving hierarchical control, it may hinder transparency in communication.

Data 2

Main finding: Metaphorical implicature makes job expectations unsustainable and promotes institutional control.

Given its lack of literal meaning, the statement "you are chained to this desk" is a metaphor that contradicts the principle of politeness. The use of exaggeration means that availability is expected in this instance. As pointed out by Grice (1975), metaphors are intended to make the hearer think beyond literal interpretation of the speech act.

Emily serves as a mediator in power dynamics, reproducing institutional authority. This is consistent with the idea that power is distributed across hierarchical organizations in addition to being used by top leaders (Wahyuni et al., 2024). Here, the implicature illustrates the internalization and downward transmission of institutional expectations.

This research shows how language plays a role in creating an unsustainable work culture from a sustainability standpoint. Excessive labor expectations and constant availability, which are frequently linked to workplace burnout,

are normalized by the metaphor. Therefore, implicature in this context not only communicates meaning but also justifies actions that go against the values of ethical and sustainable workplaces.

Data 3

Main finding: Irony as implicature serves to marginalize subordinate identities while asserting power.

Miranda's sarcastic reply, "What a fantastic story." The phrase "so entertaining and full of useful information" blatantly transgresses the quality standard because it conveys false praise. Grice (1975) asserts that irony is a well-known instance of breaking a maxim that results in implicature by creating a conflict between literal and intended meaning.

Since Miranda used irony to reject Andy's attempt to claim her identity, this implicature is strongly related to power dynamics. These tactics enable dominant individuals in institutional discourse to regulate contact and silence subordinate voices without engaging in direct conflict (Wahyuni et al., 2024). Here, the implicature serves as both an evaluative tool and a symbolic dominance mechanism.

This discovery has wider implications for inclusive growth. This type of communication restricts recognition and participation—two crucial elements of inclusive workplaces—by weakening the identity of the subordinate. Thus, implicature in this instance highlights the need for more egalitarian communication in sustainable organizational systems by showing how indirect language can support discriminatory practices.

Data 4

Main finding: power based on the perception of replaceable workers can be illustrated via hyperbole and exaggerated implicature.

The claim by Nigel that "we could replace you in five minutes" is an instance of hyperbolic exaggeration and a violation of the quality maxim. Such exaggeration makes an implication that the employee is easily replaceable and is not a necessity. Hyperbole can be considered one of types of implicature, as proposed by Grice (1975).

Thus, this study illustrates that implicature may emerge from what appears to be straightforward statements rather than from more indirect ways, contrary to previous findings. Implicature emerging in such direct speech indicates that the power mechanism is expressed not only via indirect speech but also in the form of evaluative language embedded in institutional ideologies, as pointed out by Wahyuni et al. (2024).

Therefore, this finding highlights the structural nature of the power dynamics, in which the less powerful party perpetuates institutional ideologies. The concept of "replaceability" symbolizes the "disposable workers" cultural phenomenon, opposing ethical and sustainable business organizations. Hence, the implicature in question demonstrates the language role in perpetuating systemic vulnerability and inequality in workplace relations.

Data 5

Main finding: Minimalist replies are used as silencing techniques that limit the involvement of subordinates.

"That's all" can be used as a minimalistic linguistic expression that violates the quantity maxim through providing insufficient information. Grice (1975) states that while not elaborating, minimal replies do not create implicature but leave a silent implication, which, in this case, implies that there is no need to provide further explanation.

From the perspective of power, this phrase shows how the limits of discourse are controlled to exert power. Unequal power relations within an organization are manifested in the unilateral termination of dialogue (Wahyuni et al., 2024). In this case, rather than being an instrument for expressing something, implicature becomes an instrument for silencing others.

This result is particularly relevant from the perspective of inclusive growth. Communicative restrictions hinder discourse and subordinate participation, which are crucial elements in inclusive and sustainable organizational development. Thus, in this context, implicature exemplifies how silence can become a powerful tool for exclusion.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATION

It can be concluded from the findings of the study that conversational implicature functions as a linguistic tool for establishing power relationships in institutional contexts, in the case of *The Devil Wears Prada* (2006). The findings show that those with higher status can give commands, make evaluations, and end conversations without explicitly stating the command or evaluation. As a result, communication structured based on hierarchy maintains asymmetric power dynamics through both explicit statements and strategic omissions. These implications have a profound impact on social sustainability in various fields. By combining implicature theory with power relation analysis and emphasizing its relevance to workplace ethics, this study advances the discipline of pragmatics and discourse analysis. However, this study is limited because it relies on a small corpus—namely, five dialogues taken from a single film—which may fail to reflect the complexity of authentic institutional discourse. For a more comprehensive exploration of the role of implicature in that context, the following studies are suggested to: (1) expand the dataset through diverse films or real work interactions; (2) use a mixed-methods approach, adding qualitative interpretation with quantitative trends in implicature; and (3) conduct multimodal examination that includes elements such as intonation, body gestures, and facial cues. Additionally, investigations into the relationship between language, power, and social sustainability should focus on well-defined sectors, such as corporate entities or academic institutions with a clear hierarchical framework, so as to produce measurable and broadly applicable findings.

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