



A Study of Racial Discrimination in *Green Book* from the Perspective of the Cooperative Principle

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Abstract. The United States is a multi-racial country formed by immigrants, which regards itself as a “melting pot”, but different races have different statuses, thus giving rise to the problem of racial discrimination. This kind of discrimination mainly started with the sale of the first black slaves in the North American continent in 1619 and continues to this day. From the perspective of the Cooperative Principle, this paper explores all kinds of racial discrimination encountered by the black musician Don during his tour to the south in *Green Book*. From the analysis of language, language does have an impact on racial discrimination, because some understated words will inadvertently cause discrimination, which awakens the public’s cautious use of language. In this paper, through literature analysis and case analysis, it can be concluded that the conversational implicature with racial discrimination caused by the violation of the Cooperative Principle in *Green Book* makes the life of blacks treated unfairly and forms the character of inferiority. Therefore, it does harm to their body and mind.

Keywords: The Cooperative Principle · *Green Book* · Racial discrimination · Conversational implicature

1 Introduction

The problem of racial discrimination in *Green Book* is generally analyzed from the perspective of sociology or communication. For example, the interaction between Don and his white driver Tony in *Green Book* is a phenomenon of cross-cultural communication [1]. The keywords of racial discourse such as “Sunset City” and “Nigger” in the *Green Paper* reflect the power relationship in American society and build a new social order characterized by “orthodox white hegemony” [2]. However, few studies start from the language itself and explore the problem of racial discrimination caused by the improper use of language. Based on the above view, from the perspective of linguistics, through literature analysis and case analysis, and taking *Green Book* as an example, this paper explores racial discrimination from the perspective of violating The Maxim of Quantity, The Maxim of Quality, The Maxim of Relation, and The Maxim of Manner in the Cooperative Principle. From a macro point of view, this paper can not only make the public

pay attention to their words and deeds to avoid racial discrimination but also encourage filmmakers to make more similar films to explore the issue of racial discrimination and speak for the marginalized groups of society; from a micro point of view, this provides certain cases and methods for future studies combining the Cooperative Principle and racial discrimination.

2 The Cooperative Principle and the Four Maxims

The Cooperative Principle was put forward by the American philosopher Grice in 1967. It is a principle that needs to be followed to ensure the smooth progress of the conversation between the two parties. Grice (1975) divides the Cooperative Principle into four maxims: The Maxim of Quantity, The Maxim of Quality, The Maxim of Relation, The Maxim of Manner [3]. These four maxims are actually just ideal hypotheses analyzed by linguists, and the speaker may not be able to understand them [4].

3 The Violation of the Cooperative Principle and the Emergence of Conversational Implicature

In people's actual verbal communication activities, if the speaker can directly explain what he wants to express, he will abide by four principles. However, in a certain context, in order to achieve a specific communicative intention, the speaker's words do not match the theme of the communication, which means that it violates the Cooperative Principle and produces conversational implicature. Conversational implicature is actually indirect language, which is a very common phenomenon in life, but when understanding reasoning, people need to consider the content of the conversation, the relationship of the speaker, the specific scene and other factors. Conversational implicature is realized on the basis of language itself, and racial discrimination is spread through language, so conversational implicature with racial discrimination is reflected in the language that violates the Cooperative Principle.

4 An Analysis of Some Examples of Violating the Cooperative Principle in *Green Book*

4.1 Violation of the Maxim of Quantity

The Maxim of Quantity requires that what is said is informative but not superfluous. The examples are as follows:

(1) Don: Rich white people pay me to play piano for them because it makes them feel cultured. But as soon as I step off that stage I go right back to being just another nigger to them.

This is what the black pianist Don confided to the white driver Tony. Among them, "But as soon as I step off that stage I go right back to being just another nigger to them" violates The Maxim of Quantity that there is not enough information and does not explain how Don was discriminated against by whites because of his black identity. For ordinary

black people, they are discriminated against by white people in all aspects; but Don is not an ordinary person, he is a literate doctor. White people show him respect in his recitals, calling him a great artist, applauding him, and giving him status, but offstage they show the opposite [5]. There is no specific list of white people's discriminatory behaviors against him. One is because Don wants to retain his self-esteem in front of Tony, and the other is to give the audience space to imagine the degree of discrimination against such a distinguished black man.

(2) Tony: How does he smile and shake their hands like that? If they tried to pull that outhouse shit on me, I'd piss right on their living room floor.

A man: We have many concerts dates left.

Tony: Yeah...So...?

...

Tony: What's your point?

A man: Ugly circumstances are going to happen again...Dr. Shirley(Don) could've stayed up north getting rear-end kissed at Park Avenue parties for three times money, but he asked for this.

Tony: Why?

Tony wonders why Don should get along with whites after being discriminated against by them, and then a man who appreciates Don says this to Tony. Among them, "but he asked for this" violates The Maxim of Quantity that there is not enough information. Tony asks why, but the man does not answer and Tony's doubts are also the audience's doubts. Don did this because he wanted to sacrifice his long journey to the south on behalf of the entire black group, to communicate with whites he met along the way and whites who invited him to tour, and to show whites that blacks could be good by his own behaviors and the charm of playing the piano. In the process, he was being full of courage to fight against the humiliation and inner injury he suffered along the way [6]. Although Don made a lot of efforts to alleviate white discrimination against black people, the effect was very small, and the white people he dealt with still discriminated against him and treated him differently.

4.2 Violation of the Maxim of Quality

The Maxim of Quantity requires that what is said should be true or have sufficient evidence. The examples are as follows:

(3) Don: Do you foresee any issues in working for a black man?

Tony: No! Just the other day me and the wife had a couple of colored guys over at house.

This is the question of Don interviewing Tony. "Just the other day me and the wife had a couple of colored guys over at house" violates The Maxim of Quality that there is no true information. As a matter of fact, Tony did not receive blacks, who were called by his wife to repair the kitchen. His wife poured the two blacks two glasses of water to drink. When he saw it, he was uncomfortable and full of disgust. When his wife wasn't paying attention to him, he ran to the kitchen and threw away the two cups. But his wife picked up the cups in the trash can later. By the comparison between his behavior and his wife's behavior, it is all the more obvious that he discriminates against black people.

And he lies to Don because he lost his previous job and had to find a job to make ends meet [7].

(4) Tony: I live on the streets, you sit on a throne, so yeah, my world is way blacker than yours.

Tony tells Don in the car that his life is hard. “my world is way blacker than yours” violates The Maxim of Quality that there is no true information. In fact, the bottom of white people’s life is not as miserable as that of black people. Whites do not have to be restricted everywhere even if they are at the bottom and can go in and out of any place freely and enjoy a fair treatment, while blacks are discriminated against in terms of social class, housing, judicial justice, lifestyle and skin color [8]. Tony just sees Don pretending to be a superior boss and doesn’t know how much racial discrimination has done to Don. Tony believes that Don does not understand the black race because Don deliberately allows himself to behave like upper-class whites, such as avoiding eating black food and listening to black music. Don thinks that this is the only way to gain respect and fear of Tony, but in fact, by spending time with Don, Tony has no discrimination against Don. Don finally loses control of his emotions and confesses his experiences and feelings to Tony. After listening to Don’s cry, Tony learns that his previous idea is wrong. Don, like ordinary blacks, suffers serious racial discrimination. From this moment on, Tony knows how to understand Don, and Don is no longer defensive against Tony, so the relationship between the two becomes better and better and they also know how to think of each other. For instance, before the last performance, Don is not allowed to dine with whites at the venue so he still asks Tony to coordinate. But when he sees Tony being embarrassed by the restaurant administrator, he chooses to eat somewhere else in order not to embarrass Tony. At this time, Tony does not want to humiliate Don and takes Don away to break the contract to play in the restaurant.

4.3 Violation of the Maxim of Relation

The Maxim of Relation requires saying something relevant to the topic of the conversation. The examples are as follows:

(5) Don: Where are you off to?

Tony: Just going downstairs. To have a drink.

Don: With your friend, Dominic? Before accepting his offer, we need to talk. Tony. I think you’re doing a wonderful job, so I would like to formally offer you the position of my road manager.

Tony: No, thanks. I ain’t goin’ nowhere, Doc. I was just goin’ down to tell’em.

This is Tony’s conversation with Don before going to meet friends at the bar. Among them, “Before accepting his offer, we need to talk” violates The Maxim of Relation that what is said should be relevant to the topic of the conversation. Tony just goes downstairs for a drink, but Don turns to the topic of Tony job-hopping, and then gives him a raise, but Tony doesn’t agree because he is just going for a drink. Before this, Don inadvertently saw Tony meeting with several former friends. Tony’s friends told Tony to stop being a driver and go to work for them, so now when he sees Tony going out, he first carefully tests whether he is going out with his former friends. When he learns that it is, he immediately talks about changing jobs, which has nothing to do with what Tony wants. Tony has no plans to change jobs because he and Don have been through a lot.

He helped Don deal with the problems caused by racial discrimination, and Don also taught him a lot of life philosophy and behaviors. These two people, who are completely different in character, class and skin color, have become best friends in life [9]. But Don is still afraid of losing Tony, even though he knows he and Tony have a good relationship, and as a black man, he is desperately short of a sense of security and doesn't believe that Tony would end up in one way, so he is in a hurry to make it clear that he wants Tony to stay.

(6) The traffic policeman: Why you driving him?

Tony: He's my boss.

...

The traffic policeman: How you say this last name?

Tony: Vallelonga.

The traffic policeman: Hell kind of name is that?

Tony: It's Italian.

The traffic policeman: Oh, now I see. That's why you driving him around. You half a nigger yourself.

This is a conversation between the traffic policeman and Tony, when the traffic policeman stopped Don's car to check the documents of Don and Tony. "That's why you driving him around. You half a nigger yourself" violates The Maxim of Relation that what is said should be relevant to the topic of the conversation. Tony drives for Don because Don pays him a high salary, not because they share a similar pedigree. The traffic policeman says this because he is very confused about the white man being a black driver, and finally judges by his name that he is Italian. He takes the name as a far-fetched reason to explain that the white man works for the black man. The traffic policeman discriminates against not only blacks but also Italians. In fact, Italians are considered not white enough so as to have a slight difference in skin color from white Americans, but they are not the main object of discrimination because it is hard to tell an Italian from a white American.

4.4 The Maxim of Manner

The Maxim of Manner requires dialogue to avoid obscurity, ambiguity and verbosity. The examples are as follows:

(7) Don: You've impressed several people with your... innate ability to handle trouble. And that's why I called and inquired about your availability.

Tony: OK, here's the deal. I got no problem being on the road with you. But I ain't no butler. I ain't ironing no shirts, and I'm not polishing nobody's shoes. You need someone to get you from point A to point B? You need someone to make.

This is what Tony says during the interview that he can do for Don. "You need someone to make" violates The Maxim of Manner that the dialogue should avoid obscurity. Tony's words imply that there will be a lot of trouble in the future, but because the audience doesn't know what will happen next when they see "You need someone to make", they will guess whether there will be trouble and what kind of trouble there will be. For the audience, it seems less direct and more difficult to understand. In fact, racial discrimination gets worse as people go south in America, and it's obviously impossible for a black man to travel alone, so hiring Tony will help Don out of trouble [10].

(8) Don: So stooping down in the gravel pitching dice for pocket change makes you a winner?

Tony: What are you giving me shit for? Everybody was doing it.

Don: They didn't have a choice whether to be inside or out. You did.

Don talks to Tony after seeing Tony win money at poker with a group of black people. "So stooping down in the gravel pitching dice for pocket change makes you a winner" violates The Maxim of Manner that the dialogue should avoid verbosity. "stooping down in the gravel" and "pocket change" are both expressions of verbosity because Don only wants to express that he doesn't like Tony's gambling habit. The reason why Don says this is to make Tony realize that this way of winning money is low-level, and the money won is only small change that whites don't care about. It also implies that Tony can make money in other ways, but blacks can only win money in this low-level way. It can be seen that Don envies Tony in his heart, and warns him to cherish his white identity and make money in the right way. Making money is only one aspect of the boundaries between black and white, and the two races have a bigger gap in other aspects like security, politics and justice.

5 Conclusion

This paper explores the various racial discrimination against the black Don in Green Book from the perspective of violating the Cooperative Principle, and highlights the importance of his white driver, Tony, to help him out of trouble along the way. From the beginning of mutual distrust to the last understanding of each other, the two finally become close friends in life. The purpose of this paper is to analyze the conversational implicature of racial discrimination caused by violation of the four maxims of the Cooperative Principle in Green Book, to reflect how great the blow of racial discrimination is to black people, to guide people to have correct ideas, to pay attention to words and deeds, and to combat racial discrimination. This paper only gives the example of Green Book, which is not comprehensive. It is better to find other relevant news, books, films and television works to conduct a deeper and broader discussion on racial discrimination.

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