

Violation of Cooperative Principles in Conversation Involving Gender Role and The Word “terserah”

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Abstract. This research is designed to investigate how the expression ‘terserah’ (English, whatever) is potentially misinterpreted in conversation between men and women. It focuses on its divergent interpretations and the factors that contribute to misunderstanding. This research applies a descriptive qualitative method, analyzing dialogues from selected conversational scenes. Using Grice’s Cooperative Principles Theory, the phenomena are depicted through discourse analysis. Additionally, this research highlights how women’s violations of cooperative principles convey implicit intentions, which are influenced by gendered language behaviors. The result indicates that the expression terserah that is frequently used by women, often violates the maxims of cooperation as a way to conceal their true intentions. Furthermore, cultural stereotypes influence language choices that contribute to communication breakdowns. One key finding describes that this language strategy - violating cooperative principles - functions as a test of whether men can recognize underlying meanings in female speech.

Keywords: Misinterpretation, Cooperative Principle, Feminine Language, Masculine Language, Gender Role

1. Introduction

In everyday conversation, the Indonesian expression terserah (English, “whatever”) often carries unintended implications. It can lead to misinterpretation and reinforce gendered stereotypes. While terserah is seemingly neutral, female speakers frequently use it in indirect and ambiguous ways. These uses may infract or violate Grice’s cooperative principles, and create misunderstanding - particularly in cross-gender interactions. Such subtle communicative choices are often misread, contributing to stereotypes of women as “passive-aggressive” or “indecisive.” In the digital era, where social interactions are dominated by text-based communication - on messaging apps and social media - the absence of contextual cues makes these misinterpretations greater. This research examines the pragmatic violations and socio-cultural factors that lead female speakers to use terserah as a response. It also explores the potential implicatures behind the Indonesian expression terserah, and proposes strategies to

reduce miscommunication, basically promoting inclusivity in digital discourse and ensuring that the language innovation supports rather than blocks mutual understanding.

Previous research has explored various aspects of gendered communication, particularly in relation to religion, indigenous social values, cultural norms, and social roles - especially within Indonesian society. Focusing on social roles - both public and domestic - Jalil (2018) argued that differing worldviews between women and men, along with their word choices, contribute to biased perceptions that often lead to misinterpretation. He asserted that it is society, rather than religion, that constructs gender inequality [1].

Expanding on society's role in shaping values and norms, Susanti et. al. (2023) claimed that women are often expected to uphold values such as modesty and emotional restraint. The modesty value is frequently used to suppress women, framed within a victim-blaming narrative that reinforces harmful stereotypes and results in restrictive social expectation [2]. Supporting this idea, Febriani (2021) observed that women's modesty, especially within Javanese cultural context, is reflected in their use of deferential address terms like Kakang and Kang (an honorific term used to address a male sibling or spouse as a form of politeness) which men do not use in daily conversation sometime [3]. This linguistic behavior is understood as a form of polite conduct. Furthermore, Kaplan & Offer (2022) findings demonstrated gendered differences in rejecting requests, invitations, suggestions, or offers. While men tend to respond directly, women are more likely to reject indirectly, in alignment with social expectations of emotional restraint [4].

These evolving and dynamic phenomena are also reflected in women's language choices when they respond to men during interactions. In intimate settings, there is one commonly observed expression in Indonesian conversation that illustrates this shift, that is, *terserah*. While it is likely neutral, the ambiguous meanings of *terserah* often expose tension, expectation and power. That frequently leads to miscommunication and can eventually cause misunderstandings that continue between the two parties. When it is intended not to explicitly communicate the intended meaning, the possible various meanings of *terserah* may be considered to be violation of Grice's cooperative principles [5-7].

It is debatable that social roles and cultural values significantly influence women's language behavior, contributing to stereotypes of women as "passive-aggressive" or "indecisive." Highlighting to the *terserah* phenomenon, this research investigates the pragmatic violations and socio-cultural factors that influence women's decision when they choose to say *terserah* in response to men's requests, invitations, suggestions, or offers. Instead of offering a freedom of choice, women's *terserah* often carries some hidden expectations that are not directly stated. To explore the issues, this research adopts a descriptive qualitative method.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

In order to create an effective and constructive communication, it is essential to establish a set of guidelines or principles to ensure that conversations proceed in a manner that is aligned with interlocutor's intended purposes. When an utterance or expression has overly various in meaning, implicature can serve as a heuristic device to determine whether it contains a secondary or implied meaning. Herbert Paul Grice (1975), also known as Grice, proposed a theory that contributes both to a conversation that meets its goal, and to adjust one's utterance to suit the communicative context [8]. According to Grice's ideas, when a speaker and a listener engage in conversation, the conversation should be informative and effective, without

overstatement or paucity of information [9]. Grice's four maxims serve as the benchmarks for evaluating whether a conversation adheres to the principles of cooperation, or whether it creates ambiguity and violates these principles.

(i) Maxim of Quantity

Maxim Quantity is a maxim where a conversation or communication is made as informative as possible and does not add unnecessary things to the conversation. There are two quantity maxims;

- a. **Make your contribution as informative as possible.** Provide all the information to fulfil the purpose of the conversation and don't leave out any information.
- b. **Do not let your contribution be more informative than necessary.** Provide information that is efficient and effective, do not add unnecessary information to a conversation.

Studies in the Way of Words Show How Important Maxim of Quantity Is, it is proposed that one should provide sufficient information to be understood.

(ii) Maxim of Quality

Maxim Quality is a maxim that requires a person to speak in accordance with reality in a conversation. It also requires the speaker to be honest, open and straightforward when providing information.

(iii) Maxim of Relevant

Maxim Relevant is a maxim that requires the speaker to make a contribution that is relevant to what is being discussed. Maxim Relevant requires a conversation to be in line with the topic being discussed and not outside the context of the conversation taking place. This is consistent with [10] about speakers having to be related or relevant when having a conversation.

(iv) Maxim of Manner

Maxim of Manner is a maxim that requires a statement or conversation to be clear and easy to understand. The Maxim of Manner requires that a conversation does not create ambiguity and that information is shortened to focus more on the core of a topic of conversation.

As mentioned earlier, sometimes an utterance leads to a bias. It seems that the utterance violates Grice's four maxims. In intimate conversation, the violations do not always reflect the experiences of all women. Instead, such linguistic choices are often constructed by social structures and gender-based expectations. Differences in communication style, context, and perception influence language use [11]. These factors contribute to the categorization of feminine and masculine language. For example, it is often argued that women tend to use indirect statements to meet social expectations of politeness or other stereotypes like emotional control, while men, who it is claimed as logical creatures, frequently use direct speech [1].

In this case, language reflect extended ideological systems, where socially constructed values of femininity and masculinity make such distinction. From this perspective, women's language is not inherently because of biological sex but is constructed by cultural and societal norms [1-3]. Therefore, in this research, it is debatable that in conversations between women and men, women tend to violate Grice's four maxims more than men. It is suggested that gender roles have an impact on conversational dynamics. Thompson (2004) proposed a theory on the influence of gender roles in communication. Oakley's argument asserts that women's thought processes are shaped by the societal construction of gender roles. These roles emerge from the interplay of social, cultural and environmental influences [11].

3. Method

To explore the communicate patterns, this study employs a qualitative method, focusing on naturally occurring conversation between women and men. The primary sources include scenes from Indonesian film and television series. The first data source is the film *The Architecture of Love* that has attracted significant attention. The film, released in 2021, is a romantic drama that tells a relationship story between a writer and an architect. The second source is the television series *Wedding Agreement*. These selections were made because both works depict naturalistic, intimate conversation between female and male characters. Thus, the data capture the actual cases of language behavior.

Data were collected from selected scenes where the utterance *terserah* was used by female speakers in response to various types of men's requests. The research subject involved situations where a confusing situation occurred due to the use of *terserah*. The research object was the utterances containing the expression *terserah*. Since these interactions illustrate the confusing situation, they were identified as violating utterances of Grice's cooperative principles.

Using Grice's theory, potential violations in the selected utterances were evaluated. In addition, the socio-cultural background of the women, as speakers, was considered to understand the contextual motivations behind the use of *terserah* and its pragmatic implications. In analyzing level, data were explained in a narrative and descriptive manner. Grice's maxims and Oakley's gender theory are implemented to analyze data collected. It should be noted that the data taken is solely the conversations in the selected scenes.

4. Results and Discussion

4.1. Women's Expression "Terserah"

The present research aims to determine how some principles of cooperation are violated by women when using the utterance '*terserah*' (English, whatever), and which gender roles influence such violations. Grice's four maxims are applied to analyze and describe how such a violation occurs when the utterance '*terserah*' is uttered by a woman.

In the film *Architecture of Love*, the conversation between River and Raia was highlighted. They were talking about the next place to go (Netflix, 2021). The conversation was also captured in social media TikTok, and gained greater attentions. The conversation is as follows (see Figure 1).

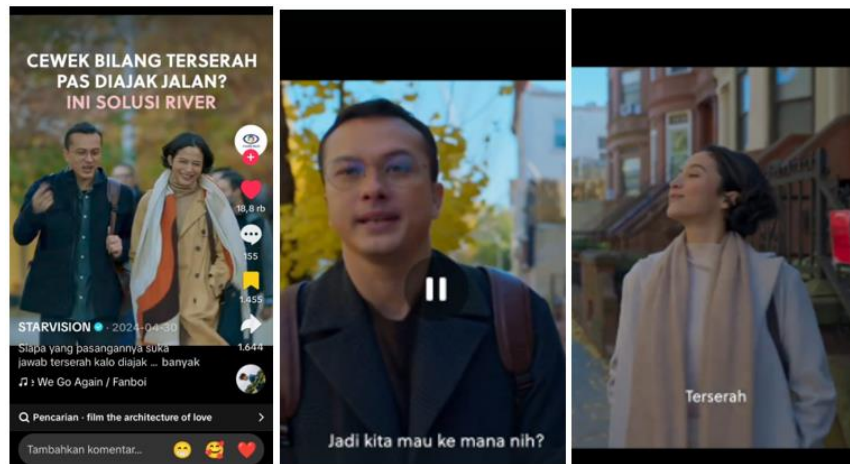


Figure 1. Tiktok page (Source: <https://www.tiktok.com/@starvisionofficial/video/7363559536432516357>).

3.2. Conversation 1

In below conversation, River wanted to take Raia on a tour of New York City, but River was confused about where to take her and was afraid that the place he wanted to go was not the place Raia wanted to go. These are some of the maxims that Raia violated at the beginning of the conversation.

River : "So, where are going today".

Raia : "Whatever".

(i) Maxim of Quantity

In this conversation, Raia violated maxim quantity because Raia did not provide the information River wanted. Although River responded casually in the film, the information Raia given was not informative and effective. The meaning of the information Raia gave, by mentioning the word "terserah" was either that she was confused about the location, or that Raia had a general meaning of telling River to be free to choose wherever he wanted. Little information affects the time efficiency of a conversation [7].

(ii) Maxim of Quality

Another maxim that is violated is quality. Data shows that Raia uttered "terserah" which meant that this expression was still biased. There was another meaning behind this utterance "terserah". In this conversation, Raia had been dishonest in answering River's question because "terserah" had different meanings when Raia mentioned it.

(iii) Maxim of Relevant

Maxim relevant was also violated by Raia because Raia did not continue the topic that River had given. The topic that River had given, instead she opened a new topic that was not relevant to the previous one. In the conversation, River made the context of the conversation about a place. River expected Raia to respond with a location in the New York area, but instead Raia mentioned an utterance that caused River to have to answer her own question; which made River answer his own question. At In the end, the communication is a one-way communication. In this case, constructive communication does not occur [12].

(iv) Maxim of Manner

Raia also violated the maxim of manner by giving an answer that is unclear and ambiguous (Grice, 1991). By responding with the utterance 'terserah,' Raia created a communication that did not follow the rules of the principle of cooperation. The ambiguity created by Raia

's utterance made River think what Raia wanted with her answer, making the conversation ineffective and creating a confusing impression for River.

3.3. Conversation 2

Another datum was taken from Indonesian series, "Weeding Agreement: The Series." The scene was also taken from video social media tiktok. This series is a romance about married couples who did not know each other. In this series, a conversation was taken when the main character Bian was at the food court with his wife, and Bian, the male lead, asked his wife for the food she wanted. The conversation is as below (see Figure 2).

Bian : "What do you want to eat?"

Tari : "Whatever, Mas Bian".

Bian : "Whatever?"

Tari : "Yeah".

Bian : Alright then. (Heads toward the pizza place)

Tari : "Hey, where are you going? We just had pizza last week".

Bian : "But you said, whatever. What do you want to eat?"

Tari : "Gado-Gado".

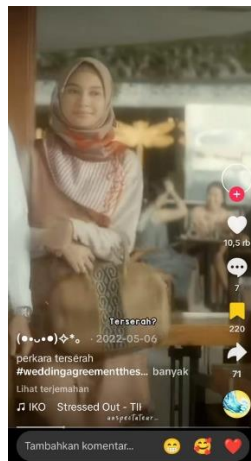


Figure 2. Tiktok page

(https://www.tiktok.com/@unspectateur/video/7094453457549004058?is_from_webapp=1&sender_device=pc&web_id=7447472086840526344).

In Figure 2, the case is the same as the previous case in Figure 1, except that in this case they had decided what they wanted to eat. In the conversation 2, Bian was seen to be confused by Tari's utterance 'terserah', but once Bian had chosen, the wife actually was questioning his decision. The contextual situation of 'terserah' illustrated that Tari expected that her husband must be sensitive to what she wanted. They were a married couple. So, it was supposed to be that Bian could figure out what Tari wanted at that time. Learning from the situation, there are some maxim violations that can be described as follow.

(i) Maxim of Quantity

The first violation was in the area of quantity, where Tari did not provide clear information when answering a question. Tari gave too little information, making the communication ineffective and uninformative. Too little information or too little contribution to the conversation confused Bian, the speaker. Expression such as, 'terserah' required more information to be clearly understood. Thus, what is communicated is really communicated

and there is no misunderstanding later. It seems that there is Tari' s hidden intention to act polite [3], as well as to learn Bian' s sincerity.

(ii) Maxim of Quality

Maxim of Quality was clearly violated in the Tari' s utterance, 'terserah.' Tari was not honest about what she wanted. In the context of this conversation, the utterance 'terserah' created a double meaning. Thus, that communication was not effective. The information given by Tari became convoluted because she did not say it explicitly but implicitly, which was a waste of time in a conversation.

(iii) Maxim of Relevant

For Maxim Relevant, Tari violated Relevant Maxim when the husband said 'ya udah' and Tari replied 'iya' (English, Yeah) The conversation should continue with another topic because the word 'iya' indicates that a topic of conversation had ended. However, Tari continued with the previous topic if they both agreed that the man who chose, but Tari wanted to choose another topic, which was not relevant because a topic had ended.

(iv) Maxim of Manner

Tari uttered 'terserah,' which created an ambiguous meaning. The conversation was already clear when Tari said 'yes', but this conversation became unclear because Bian was misunderstood with what Tari intended. Tari thought that she was going to have 'gado-gado,' another food. Thus, 'terserah' made the conversation unclear. Tari' s 'terserah' did not aligned with what she intended.

The lesson learned is that the expression 'terserah,' which is often used by a woman, turns out to have a different meaning. That lead to violate all the principles of cooperation. The principles that are violated mostly concern too little information or ambiguous or double meanings. The reason for this is that women prefer to utter 'terserah' when they want to hide their true intention [13]. It is argued that they will use gestures as a sign to what they are really meant. They want to be understood. This leads to the gender role we will discuss later.

3.4. Gender Roles Effect on Women's Language

Before discussing the implications of gender roles, clearly noted that what 'gender' is differs from what is often misunderstood in society. 'Gender' is not the same as 'sex'. Gender is a concept that people create socially through their interactions with each other and their environment, but is very dependent on biological differences between men and women [14]. Thus, gender roles are things that are socially expected of women and men. Speaking about masculine and feminine, in traditional cultures, it is believed that women are more nurturing than men, so a woman is called feminine because she has to be more nurturing [15]. The meaning of being feminine is to be graceful, elegant, loving and full of love [16].

In traditional culture, men are seen as leaders [1]. This is why men are called masculine, because men have to be the man of the house and decide everything in the household. However, with the passage of time, these ideas began to evolve. In modern views, men are no longer necessary to be leaders. This means that a man is not always the leader in all aspects. Another modern thought is that a woman does not always have to nurture a man. With the feminist movement, women don't have to stay at home all the time, they can work, be leaders and make decisions [2]. With all the factors, women' s language behaviors gradually change; they tend to violate the maxims. There are reasons or aspects that influence an individual to do so. These are the various aspects that influence the violation of the principle of cooperation by women when they say the utterance or the expression 'terserah.'

(i) Whether or not men can be expected to lead

The point of this sentence is that sometimes a woman only tests her boyfriend or husband to decide what is best for her and her family [13]. In this case, women have a cognitive or habitual tendency to always judge. Therefore, women are more perceptive when they are asked to criticise someone, although sometimes the arguments given are too emotional without further logical reasoning [1]. With the thought that women can now be leaders, the woman just wants to see how far he can lead from her.

(ii) Social stigma of always understanding women

The stigma referred to here is the doctrine of society or local culture that influences a woman's view to be more complex and ignores gender equality. Stigmas such as women need to be chased, don't want to be chased, don't want to be with men who are inconsiderate, etc. This affects women who always need to be understood [16], because in social life women is not being understood; they are women worthless or cheap. Society thinks that if a woman is too begging for a man, her value in society is drastically reduced. That is why a woman's self-esteem is higher than a man's today's.

(iii) Women are more emotional than logical

The last one is that women prefer to speak or say words that are related to emotions [1]. When a woman says the word 'terserah', she wants her boyfriend or husband to be more sensitive to what she wants and to guess her emotions rather than guessing the meaning of the word or utterance 'terserah.'

Some aspects influence gender roles, including the perception that women are more emotionally driven because they have strong feelings. Gender roles, in this context, refer to the socially constructed meanings and expectations associated with women's roles in society. However, these aspects do not apply to all women. An individual's personality, regardless of gender, is constructed more by environment, and their life experiences than by gender alone [1].

From those arguments, it appears that women tend to violate Grice's cooperative principles often by using implied meanings rather than direct statements. As shown in the selected film and series, female character uttered the expression 'terserah' to engage in ambiguous conversations. That requires male character to repeat or clarify the questions. This violation is rooted in gender roles that are constructed by society. For example, some women may expect men to show his sincerity and understanding using expression like 'terserah' as a mean to test or evaluate the men's choice.

4. Conclusion

As outlined in Grice's cooperative principles, effective and constructive conversation engages mutual cooperation to reach understanding between speakers, particularly between women and men in romantic relationships. This research confirms that in female-male conversations, particularly in the analyzed film and series, women used the utterance *terserah* ("whatever") in ways that violated all four of Grice's maxims. As a result, the conversational messages become ambiguous and lead to miscommunication. Although seemingly passive, *terserah* carries implicit expectations constructed by social and cultural values. These patterns emphasize how gender role influence conversational dynamics. To extend the scope of analysis, future research is encouraged to involve more cases to explore the motives behind such language choices.

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