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Cooperative Ground and Oblique Meaning in Usman Ali's The Guilt



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Abstract

Applied Gricean stylistics has consistently reported dramatic dialogue as characteristically non-cooperative, with flouting and violation treated as the dominant machinery of literary meaning. This article argues that the finding is substantially an artefact of sampling. Working from a full-coverage sequential annotation of Usman Ali's absurdist three-hander *The Guilt*, in which every character turn in the 3,160-word dialogue stratum was coded rather than selected, the study records 502 evidence-supported Gricean instances across the complete taxonomy of maxim behavior proposed by Grice (1975) and systematized by Thomas (1995). Three results emerge. First, cooperation is the ground rather than the exception, since observance and suspension together account for 68.5% of coded behavior while violation accounts for 0.4%. Second, implicature is not coextensive with flouting, since 48.9% of the 88 particularized implicatures recorded attach to turns coded as observant or suspended rather than flouted. Third, generalized conversational implicature returns a categorical zero, a divergence from Levinson's (2000) default-inference account attributable to the play's telegraphic and non-quantificational lexicogrammar. The study further argues that the equation of absurdist dialogue with relevance failure, established largely on Beckett, is an over-generalization, and that a second absurdist grammar exists in which characters remain topically cooperative while suspending the truth-conditional frame. Pragmatic profile is shown to constitute characterization, with the writer, the actor, and the dancer distinguishable on purely distributional grounds.

Keywords: *conversational implicature, Gricean pragmatics, cooperative principle, pragmatic stylistics, Pakistani Anglophone drama, suspension, Usman Ali*

Introduction

Within the field of pragmatics, conversational implicature offers a systematic account of how interlocutors recover speaker intention from utterances that do not encode it (Benotti & Blackburn, 2014). Grice (1975) postulated that effective communication rests on the adherence of interlocutors to conversational norms that facilitate mutual understanding, and he articulated those norms as an over-arching Cooperative Principle realized through four maxims. In literary contexts, this apparatus explains how authors embed irony, satire, and subtext beneath seemingly cooperative discourse, prompting readers to reconstruct meanings that remain deliberately unsaid.

The applied literature that has grown around this apparatus is now substantial, yet it exhibits a methodological uniformity that has gone largely unexamined. Studies of implicature in drama, fiction, and film almost invariably proceed by selecting a small number of striking utterances, coding them for maxim departure, and generalizing from the resulting distribution.

Nadeem et al. (2025) analyze sixteen chosen lines of *The Dear Departed*; comparable film-based studies analyze between seventeen and seventy selected utterances. Such designs are well suited to demonstrating that flouting occurs and to explaining how particular flouts generate particular inferences. They are structurally incapable, however, of establishing how often flouting occurs relative to everything else a character does, because they contain no denominator. The recurrent conclusion that dramatic characters continuously break the maxims may therefore describe the sampling procedure as accurately as it describes the text.

A second and related limitation concerns the coding scheme itself. Most applied studies operate with a reduced taxonomy of flouting and violation, and several conflate the two. Thomas (1995) distinguishes five modes of non-observance, adding infringement, opting out, and suspension to the familiar pair. The last of these is analytically consequential, since it identifies in-world communicative situations, such as storytelling, joking, ritual exchange, and performative speech, in which a maxim is not so much broken as rendered inapplicable. Where suspension is not coded, the material it would capture does not disappear. It is reallocated, typically to flouting or to violation, and the resulting figures overstate non-cooperation.

This article addresses both limitations through a full-coverage sequential annotation of a single dramatic text. Usman Ali's *The Guilt* is a three-hander concerning a writer, an actor, and a dancer whose forty-five-year theatrical partnership disintegrates against a background of national atrocity. The play is short enough for exhaustive manual annotation and dense enough in oblique meaning to warrant it. Every character turn was coded, in order, against the complete Gricean taxonomy, and nothing was selected retrospectively. The study asks three questions:

- What is the distribution of maxim behavior in a dramatic text?
- Is implicature coextensive with flouting, as the operational practice of the applied literature assumes?
- Do the pragmatic profiles of individual characters differ in ways that constitute characterization rather than merely reflecting it?

The answers, set out below, qualify several established claims. They also bear on the reading of Pakistani Anglophone drama specifically, since the pragmatic evidence locates the play's diagnosis of cultural decline not in its imagery but in the distribution of interactional privilege among its three speakers.

2. Theoretical Framework and Related Research

2.1. The Cooperative Principle and Its Maxims

Grice (1975) recognized the Cooperative Principle to explain how interlocutors attain mutual understanding in ordinary talk. He proposed that speakers in a successful conversation cooperate with one another and that, instinctively, they aim to make their contribution appropriate to the

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conversational purpose. The pursuit of conversation may be compared to a business partnership in which the partners have agreed, implicitly and unconsciously, to be bound by a set of rules. The principle is realized through four maxims.

1. **Quality.** Statements should be true. Speak only what you believe to be true and for which you have sufficient evidence.
2. **Quantity.** Statements should be informative. Provide the required quantity of information, neither too little nor too much.
3. **Manner.** Statements should be clear. Communicate briefly and in an orderly way, avoiding obscurity and ambiguity.
4. **Relation.** Statements should be relevant to the topic under discussion.

Grice emphasized that these maxims are not unyielding rules but rational expectations that direct cooperative talk. Listeners assume that speakers are observing the maxims unless there is clear evidence otherwise, and when an utterance appears to break a maxim, the hearer searches for a plausible reason. The additional meaning inferred from that search is a conversational implicature, and it allows the apparently non-cooperative utterance to be interpreted as cooperative after all (Grice, 1989).

Grice recognized that observance is not always possible or intended (Benotti & Blackburn, 2014). Speakers may observe, flout, infringe, violate, opt out of, or suspend the maxims, and they may face a clash in which fulfilling one maxim prevents the fulfilment of another. A maxim can be violated covertly, flouted overtly, or opted out of explicitly, and each mode of non-observance prompts the hearer to draw a different kind of inference while still assuming the Cooperative Principle to be in force. Thomas (1995) structured this fuller typology, and it is her scheme rather than the reduced flouting-and-violation pair that the present study operationalizes.

2.2. Generalized and Particularized Implicature

Generalized conversational implicatures (GCIs) arise as default interpretations, require shared linguistic convention rather than specific context. Scalar triggers such as *some*, which ordinarily implicates *not all*, or the indefinite article *a*, which implicates non-uniqueness, are the standard illustrations (Levinson, 1983, 2000). These inferences are so embedded that interlocutors rely on them without explicit negotiation, and they align with the maxim of Quantity, since a speaker's choice of a less informative expression suggests the negation of a stronger one. Because GCIs are context-independent or minimally context-dependent, they demonstrate how interlocutors draw on stable conventional pragmatic principles.

Particularized conversational implicatures (PCIs), on the contrary, hinge on heavily on situational and background cues. If one enquires whether Mr Smith can attend a meeting and receives the reply that he has been caught in heavy rain, the local situation licenses the inference

that he may be late or unable to attend. PCIs draw on shared cultural knowledge, situational information, and interpersonal history, and even slight alterations in circumstance may produce a different reading (Thomas, 1995; Haugh, 2013). Here the speaker manipulates the maxims creatively, often by flouting Relation or Manner, to produce meanings calibrated to the particular occasion.

Grice (1975) additionally distinguished conversational from conventional implicature. Conversational implicatures are context-sensitive and cancellable, whereas conventional implicatures are embedded in particular expressions and carry fixed implications irrespective of the surrounding context. The distinction accentuates that meaning operates on two levels, one flexible and contextually enriched, the other stable and lexically anchored.

2.3. Refinements of Gricean Model

Subsequent scholarship has refined Grice's account in three directions. Levinson (2000) developed the theory of generalized implicature into a full account of utterance-type meaning governed by Q-, I-, and M-principles, treating such inferences as default and computationally prior. Sperber and Wilson (1986, 1995) recast communication as an ostensive-inferential process and introduced the explicature and implicature distinction along with the notion of echoic mention, a concept of particular value for modelling irony, satire, and narratorial stance. Carston (2002) extended this line by analyzing cancellability and processing-oriented reasoning rather than corpus frequencies, demonstrating that many meanings traditionally labelled implicature, especially in metaphor, metonymy, and hyperbole, are better categorized as pragmatically constructed components of what is said, produced through lexical modulation and ad hoc concept formation. Genuine implicatures, on her account, remain context-driven and cancellable inferences. A third strand has emphasized the socio-cultural rooting of inferential norms, arguing that what counts as a cooperative contribution is itself culturally calibrated (Thomas, 1995; Haugh, 2013).

2.4. Implicature in Literary and Applied Stylistics

Implicature theory has been applied extensively to literary text (Black, 2006; Chapman, 2023; Bekmurodova, 2023). Leech and Short (2007) established how the Gricean framework elucidate voice, evaluative stance, and stylistic effect in fictional prose, working from carefully selected excerpts of dialogue and narrative. They examined observance and flouting of the four maxims alongside conventional implicature markers such as *but* and *even*, pragmatic hedges, tag questions, irony, understatement, litotes, hyperbole, reported speech, and free indirect discourse. Their findings show that writers systematically deploy implicature, echoic reporting, and procedural cues to construct irony, unreliable or focalized narrative voices, characterization, humor, and thematic implication, and that much of fictional style be contingent on what is left unsaid or signaled indirectly, though such readings remain interpretively variable and require

integration with lexical, syntactic, and discourse-level analysis.

Attardo (1994) applied a comparable approach to humor, integrating Gricean implicature with the script-based models of Attardo and Raskin (1991) across a small purposeful corpus of jokes, riddles, cartoons, comic dialogue, and satirical prose. He found that flouting frequently functions as a pragmatic signal that a non-serious frame or script shift is intended, marking punchlines, irony, and satire, but that flouting alone is insufficient, since humor emerges from the interaction of flouting with script opposition, narrative timing, target, and shared cultural knowledge.

Within the applied Gricean literature on drama and film, four studies bear directly on the present analysis. Nadeem et al. (2025) analyze *The Dear Departed* and report Quality as the most flouted maxim, with ten of twenty-two floutings, followed by Manner, Relation, and Quantity. Saif et al. (2025) find Quality and Manner most flouted in *Arms and the Man*, with Quantity least. Al-Husseini and Alyan (2024) identify Manner among the two most flouted maxims in Crimp's *Attempts on Her Life* and associate Manner-departure with the post dramatic text's stylistic program. Imran et al. (2024) find Violation of Quality and Manner dominant in Pakistani television drama and read those violations as the linguistic machinery of patriarchal ideology. Film-based studies diverge, with analyses of *Divergent* and *Coco* reporting Quantity as dominant and an analysis of *Hotel Transylvania* reporting Relation.

A separate line of work has addressed absurdist drama specifically. Al-Juboury (2022) restricts his analysis of *Waiting for Godot* entirely to the maxim of Relation and concludes that violation and flouting of relevance have become characteristic features of the play, with violation the more frequent. Kareem and Azeez (2025) extend the approach across *Waiting for Godot* and *Endgame* and read persistent non-observance as a linguistic index of psychological inertia and existential stagnation. The equation of absurdist dialogue with relevance failure is thus well established, and the present study tests it against a text belonging to the same dramaturgical lineage in the sense set out by Esslin (1961).

Two features unite this body of work. None of the studies cited codes observance, so none reports a baseline against which flouting might be scaled. None codes suspension. The present study addresses both gaps.

3. Methodology

This study adopts a pragmatic-stylistic research design that is mixed in method but qualitative in orientation, applying the analytical apparatus of linguistic pragmatics to literary discourse in order to explain how conversational implicature operates as a resource for

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characterization, interpersonal positioning, and thematic meaning. The design is sequential. Systematic quantification identifies the patterns, and close contextual interpretation accounts for their meaning, so that the two components together yield a fuller description than either could alone.

The distinguishing feature of the design is full coverage. Every character turn in the text was processed in sequence from beginning to end, and no instance was selected retrospectively. This procedure is more laborious than the example-selection designs that dominate the applied literature, but it is the only means of generating the denominator that claims about relative frequency require.

The text examined is *The Guilt* by Usman Ali, a three-act absurdist play with three characters. The play consists of 15,449 words, of which 3,160 constitute conversation and 12,289 comprise the narratorial and stage-direction. Per-character dialogue totals are Shera 1,426 words, Gamma 1,091 words, and Billa 643 words.

The play was carefully chosen on three grounds. First, dramatic dialogue is presented directly and is not filtered by the reporting apparatus that frames conversation in narrative fiction, so the character-to-character plane can be isolated cleanly and the maxims can be assessed against what speakers actually say to one another rather than against a narrator's rendering of it. Second, the play is short enough to permit exhaustive manual annotation, which a novel-length text would not, and full coverage is the condition on which the study's central claim depends. Third, the play belongs recognizably to the absurdist tradition depicted by Esslin (1961), which makes it a strong test case for the well-established claim that absurdist dialogue is constituted by relevance failure.

3.1. Analytical Framework

The theoretical framework is the Gricean model of conversational implicature (Grice, 1975) as extended by Thomas (1995), with the generalized-particularized distinction drawn from Levinson (1983) and its stylistic application supported by Cutting (2002). Grice supplies the Cooperative Principle, the four maxims, and the core opposition between observing and failing to observe a maxim; Thomas systematizes the fuller typology of non-observance i.e., flouting, violation, infringement, opting out, and suspension that the coding scheme requires. Clash is treated, after Grice, as an implicature-generating mechanism rather than a co-ordinate species of non-observance.

Data are annotated manually and exhaustively, turn by turn, each text processed sequentially from beginning to end so that no instance is selected retrospectively. The annotation is layered. The first layer records the stylistically marked trigger such as an idiom, a metaphor, or an evaluative epithet; the second records the maxim profile of the utterance; and the third records the implicature itself, and only where an inferable

meaning is genuinely generated. Keeping these layers analytically distinct prevents the common error of treating every stylistically striking phrase as though it automatically produced implied meaning, and it allows maxim behavior and implicature to be quantified as separate dimensions. Analysis then proceeds in two stages. The coded instances are first quantified: raw frequencies and percentages for each maxim, derivation mechanism, and implicature type are tabulated and their distribution examined across speakers and texts, with per-character figures normalized to that character's own coded turns so that speakers with unequal dialogue volume remain comparable. These frequencies are subsequently interpreted qualitatively through close contextual reading, which explains how each implicature is derived and what interpersonal and stylistic work it performs; the quantitative layer identifies the patterns, and the qualitative layer accounts for their meaning. A final comparative pass sets the three texts against one another to establish similarities and differences in pragmatic-stylistic use, both between texts and between principal speakers. This sequential mixed-methods design systematic quantification feeding contextual interpretation yields a fuller account of implicature than either component alone.

4. Results

The annotation returns 502 evidence-supported Gricean instances across 15,449 words, of which only 3,160 constitute character speech. Table 1 reports the full distribution, with relative frequencies per 1,000 dialogue words given in parentheses.

Table 1. *Distribution of Gricean instances in The Guilt by speaker, with relative frequencies per 1,000 dialogue words*

Category	Shera	Gamma	Billa	Narrator	Total
Total words	1,426	1,091	643	12,289	15,449
Generalized Conversational Implicature	0 (0.0)	0 (0.0)	0 (0.0)	0	0 (0.0)
Particularized Conversational Implicature	24 (16.8)	45 (41.2)	19 (29.5)	0	88 (5.7)
Subtotal, Implicatures	24 (16.8)	45 (41.2)	19 (29.5)	0	88 (5.7)
Observance, Quality	44 (30.9)	37 (33.9)	29 (45.1)	0	110 (7.1)
Observance, Quantity	1 (0.7)	4 (3.7)	3 (4.7)	0	8 (0.5)
Observance, Relation	37 (25.9)	44 (40.3)	9 (14.0)	0	90 (5.8)
Observance, Manner	2 (1.4)	6 (5.5)	0 (0.0)	0	8 (0.5)

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Category	Shera	Gamma	Billa	Narrator	Total
Subtotal, Observance	84 (58.9)	91 (83.4)	41 (63.8)	0	216 (14.0)
Flouting, Quality	6 (4.2)	14 (12.8)	4 (6.2)	0	24 (1.6)
Flouting, Quantity	3 (2.1)	6 (5.5)	1 (1.6)	0	10 (0.6)
Flouting, Relation	2 (1.4)	9 (8.2)	2 (3.1)	0	13 (0.8)
Flouting, Manner	2 (1.4)	9 (8.2)	1 (1.6)	0	12 (0.8)
Subtotal, Flouting	13 (9.1)	38 (34.8)	8 (12.4)	0	59 (3.8)
Violation, Quality	1 (0.7)	1 (0.9)	0 (0.0)	0	2 (0.1)
Violation, Quantity	0 (0.0)	0 (0.0)	0 (0.0)	0	0 (0.0)
Violation, Relation	0 (0.0)	0 (0.0)	0 (0.0)	0	0 (0.0)
Violation, Manner	0 (0.0)	0 (0.0)	0 (0.0)	0	0 (0.0)
Subtotal, Violation	1 (0.7)	1 (0.9)	0 (0.0)	0	2 (0.1)
Infringement	3 (2.1)	1 (0.9)	2 (3.1)	0	6 (0.4)
Opting Out	1 (0.7)	0 (0.0)	0 (0.0)	0	1 (0.1)
Suspension	35 (24.5)	53 (48.6)	40 (62.2)	0	128 (8.3)
Clash	0 (0.0)	1 (0.9)	1 (1.6)	0	2 (0.1)
Total Gricean instances	161 (112.9)	230 (210.8)	111 (172.6)	0	502 (32.5)

Once normalized against speech volume, the three speakers prove pragmatically unequal in a way that maps closely onto the play's power structure. Gamma produces 210.8 coded instances per 1,000 words, Billa 172.6, and Shera, who speaks most, only 112.9. Shera talks the most and means the least indirectly, whereas Gamma talks less and means most obliquely.

Two features of the aggregate distribution require comment before the categories are treated individually. First, Observance (216 instances, 43.0%) and Suspension (128, 25.5%) together account for 68.5% of all coded behavior, while the entire family of non-observance, comprising Flouting, Violation, Infringement, Opting Out, and Clash, accounts for 13.9%. Second, Generalized Conversational Implicature returns a categorical zero. Both results diverge from the published norm in Gricean literary stylistics, and it is argued below that both are artefacts of method as much as of text.

5. Analysis and Discussion

5.1. The Absence of Default Inference

GCI is inference arising from the form of an utterance independently of any special

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context, corresponding to what Levinson (2000) terms utterance-type meaning, governed by the Q-, I-, and M-principles and defeasible but default. The diagnostic applied was whether the inference would arise in a neutral context from the words themselves, as with *some* implicating *not all*, *warm* implicating *not hot*, or *or* implicating *not both*. No utterance in the corpus met this test.

The result does not indicate an absence of inference, since 88 implicatures were coded. It indicates an absence of default, form-triggered inference, and the explanation lies in the play's lexicogrammar. Ali's dialogue is telegraphic, nominal, and imagistic, as in 'Coals.', 'Embers.', 'spit.', 'Hell!' and 'smoke.' The scalar and quantificational vocabulary that generates GCIs, including *some*, *most*, *might*, *or*, and *try*, is almost entirely absent. Where numerals occur they are exact and informative rather than scalar, so that Gamma's 'Ninety dead, sixty-five injured, thirty lost' carries a bare-numeral reading rather than an at-least reading awaiting Q-strengthening. The play's characteristic meaning-making is situational rather than lexically default.

This constitutes the study's sharpest divergence from theory. Levinson (2000) treats GCIs as pervasive and computationally prior, and on that account a corpus of some 15,000 words ought to yield many. That it yields none lends support to the context-driven critique of default theories and, more locally, to the observation that dramatic dialogue in the absurdist tradition strips away the very quantificational scaffolding on which GCIs depend. Comparable studies do not report this pattern because they seldom separate GCI from PCI, since Nadeem et al. (2025), Saif et al. (2025), and Al-Husseini and Alyan (2024) all code implicature as a single undifferentiated category. The zero returned here is therefore a contribution to reporting practice as much as a substantive finding, since the GCI and PCI distinction remains analytically live in literary corpora and ought to be operationalized rather than assumed.

5.2. Particularized Implicature as the Medium of Unequal Intimacy

PCI is inference recoverable only from the specific occasion, that is, from the preceding turn, the relationship, and the shared history of the interactants (Grice, 1975; Thomas, 1995). Every implicature in this corpus is of this type, and the distribution is steeply skewed, with 45 instances for Gamma, 24 for Shera, and 19 for Billa. Once normalized, Gamma implicates at 41.2 instances per 1,000 words against Shera's 16.8, which is to say that he means indirectly roughly two and a half times as often as the man with whom he lives.

PCI in this play functions as the medium of unequal intimacy. Because the three men share forty-five years of theatre history, almost nothing needs saying in full, yet that same shared ground allows Gamma to withhold, wound, and evade without ever becoming answerable for a proposition. The promise sequence of Act One is the most illustrative adjacency pair.

SHERA. (*taking up the emptied cup of coffee with one finger and laughing cynically*)

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You promised to write a play for me.

GAMMA. You know, Shera.

The second-pair-part is formally a reply but propositionally empty. It provides neither an affirmation, a refusal, nor a date, and its vagueness becomes legible only against the specific history of an un-honored promise. The implicature, namely that Gamma has no intention of writing the play and that Shera already knows as much, is unrecoverable in a neutral context and is hence paradigmatically particularized. The power effect deserves notice as well, since Shera holds the empty cup, the material sign of a hospitality already consumed, while Gamma answers with a semantic emptiness that mirrors it.

A second pair shows PCI operating as the evasion of a life-decision.

GAMMA. You are leaving the theatre you worked at for forty-five years?

SHERA. (*He glances towards the window on the left.*) It is still dark outside, Gamma.

Shera's retort implicates that this is not a conversation he will have, and the stage direction documenting the glance supplies the contextual anchor that licenses the inference. The forty-five years are not denied so much as stepped around. The play's darkest implicature is condensed into three words. After Gamma asks for a knife, the exchange runs as follows.

BILLA. (*taking a knife out of his pocket*) I have one.

GAMMA. Would it do for two?

BILLA. No. Only for one.

The words *two* and *one* denote literally to sufficiency for peeling, yet set against the guilt plot and Gamma's earlier direction to Billa concerning Shera, they implicate a shared and unnamed intention. The exchange is a textbook Gricean case in which the literal answer stays fully cooperative while the implicature is homicidal.

PCI here encodes a hierarchy of authorship. Gamma, the one seated at the typewriter, controls what is meant but not said, whereas Shera, the embodied stage actor, is the one meant at. Durrani, Shahnaz, and Kanwal (2022) read the play's sign system as a semiotics of Pakistani cultural decline. The pragmatic evidence refines that reading by locating the decline within a specific interactional asymmetry, namely the writer's capacity to signify obliquely as against the actor's obligation to signify plainly.

The dominance of context-dependent implicature accords with the socio-pragmatic position that an utterance's conversational significance is shaped by its particular context of use, and with the link between flouting and implicature documented by Nadeem et al. (2025). It diverges, however, from studies that treat implicature as coextensive with flouting, since 43 of the 88 PCIs recorded here, or 48.9%, attach to turns coded as observant or suspended rather than flouted.

5.2. Observance of the Maxim of Quality

The speaker says what he believes to be true and has adequate evidence for it (Grice, 1975). The code was applied only where sincerity is analytically informative, never mechanically. Quality-observance is the largest single sub-category and is led by Shera with 44 instances, followed by Gamma with 37 and Billa with 29. Within each speaker's own profile, however, the picture inverts, since 27.3% of Shera's coded behavior is Quality-observance as against 16.1% of Gamma's. Shera is the play's truth-teller, and the play punishes him for it. The function of the category is testimonial. Where Gamma composes and Billa performs, Shera reports. His most consequential lines are flat, evidenced assertions concerning his own degradation.

SHERA. **'He tortures me under the guise of slapstick.'**

The utterance is sincere, supported by the rehearsal scenes the audience has already witnessed, and delivered without hedging. It nonetheless carries an implicature, namely that the frame of performance has been laundering real violence, which is why the turn is double-coded as Observance of Quality together with PCI. The pairing matters theoretically, since sincerity and implicature are orthogonal dimensions, and this corpus demonstrates the point repeatedly. Billa's Quality-observance performs a different office, in that it constitutes confession. The adjacency pair in the rehearsal scene is representative.

SHERA. 'You punched me four times. We had a deal that you would stop at three. You were also supposed to mime.'

BILLA. **'Miming does not create laughter anymore.'**

Shera's first-pair-part is exemplary Quality-observance, being specific, countable and verifiable in its reference to four punches and an agreed three. Billa's answer is not a denial. It concedes the fact and shifts to justification, which is why the turn is coded as Flouting of Quantity rather than as Violation. Two turns later Billa again observes Quality with damaging candor, remarking that *'Plastic does not create a sound, Shera. It was not something new. We have done that in the past also.'* The truth is admitted and only its moral weight is negotiated. This is the play's ethical signature, since nobody lies about what happened, and it is precisely that candor which makes the guilt inescapable. Gamma's Quality-observance, by contrast, is characteristically weaponized rather than confessional.

GAMMA. 'But he hates actors, and particularly **you!**'

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The claim is true, well supported by the guilt scenes, and cruel. The emphatic ‘you’ generates the implicature that Gamma holds Shera responsible for having earned that hatred. The three men’s Quality profiles produce three distinct ethical positions, in that Shera testifies, Billa confesses and Gamma prosecutes. Sincerity in this play is not a virtue that protects the speaker, since the character with the highest sincerity rate is the character who ends the play on the folded stage floor.

This constitutes the study’s principal quantitative divergence from the literature. Nadeem et al. (2025) report Quality as the most flouted maxim in *The Dear Departed*, with 10 of 22 floutings, and Saif et al. (2025) likewise find Quality and Manner most flouted in *Arms and the Man*, while Imran et al. (2024) find Quality and Manner most violated in Pakistani television drama. In the present corpus Quality is overwhelmingly observed, with 110 instances against 24 floutings and 2 violations, a ratio of roughly four to one in favor of observance. The divergence does not so much contradict those studies as correct their sampling, since Nadeem et al. analyze sixteen chosen lines and comparable film studies analyze between seventeen and seventy selected utterances. Full-coverage annotation reveals that the flouts such studies isolate stand as figure against a substantial cooperative ground.

5.3. Observance of the Maxim of Quantity

The contribution is as informative as required and no more so (Grice, 1975). Only eight turns were coded, four for Gamma, three for Billa and one for Shera, and the scarcity is itself the finding. The maxim is rarely observed in this play because the default mode of the dialogue is either radical under-informativeness, coded elsewhere as Flouting or Suspension, or else ritual repetition. Where Quantity-observance does occur it clusters at moments of factual traffic, and the effect is a sudden jolt of ordinariness.

GAMMA. ‘Show today?’ SHERA. ‘Eleven o’ clock.’

Two turns later the same pattern recurs.

SHERA. ‘**Who told you?**’ GAMMA. ‘Billa.’

The second-pair-parts are exactly adequate, offering a time and a name respectively, and nothing is implicated. Stylistically these micro-exchanges function as tonal ballast, establishing that the men can speak plainly when they choose, so that the surrounding obliquity registers as a choice rather than a constitutional limitation. The most disturbing instance turns the same plainness against the audience.

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GAMMA. 'Shera! Shera! Ninety dead, sixty-five injured, thirty lost.'

Three exact figures are delivered, adequately informative and without embellishment. The horror is produced not by any pragmatic departure but by the absence of one, since atrocity arrives in the register of a bus timetable. Shera's dissociative reply, 'Louder.', is coded as Infringement and discussed in section 4.12. The contrast between the two turns, in which perfectly calibrated information meets perfectly broken uptake, is among the play's most efficient effects.

Most comparable studies do not code Observance at all and therefore report no baseline against which flouting might be scaled. Where a baseline is reported, as in the EFL-classroom study cited by Nadeem et al. (2025), which finds only 2% non-observance, the pattern runs opposite to that of the literary corpora. This suggests that the quantity of flouting reported by any given study is substantially a function of genre and of whether the analyst counts what is not flouted. The present study's contribution lies in making that denominator explicit.

5.4. Observance of the Maxim of Relation

The contribution is relevant to the ongoing talk exchange (Grice, 1975). Relation-observance is the second-largest category, with 44 instances for Gamma, 37 for Shera and 9 for Billa, and it is unexpectedly Gamma who leads it. The apparent contradiction with section 4.2 dissolves on inspection, since Gamma proves highly relevant and highly implicating at once. Relevance, for him, is the delivery system for the barb rather than an alternative to it. The clearest demonstration occurs in the play's fourth exchange.

GAMMA. '(lost in the typed pages) **Art is cruel!**'

SHERA. 'More than you.'

Shera's reply is elliptical, in that the hearer must supply the word *cruel*, yet it is squarely on topic and converts Gamma's abstract lament into a personal accusation. The turn is coded as Observance of Relation together with PCI, which is the corpus's most frequent double-code and the formal signature of this play's dialogue, namely relevance carrying more than it says. Relation-observance also structures the play's rare moments of genuine mutual work. The write, dance and peel triad in Act Three constitutes a three-turn collaborative completion.

GAMMA. '(throws both hands on the typewriter) Can't be written.'

BILLA. 'Can't be danced.' BILLA. 'But...it can be peeled.'

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Each turn is structurally parallel to its predecessor and relevant to it, and the sequence resolves cooperatively. That this is one of the few passages of unforced cooperation in the play, and that it concerns the failure of all three men's arts, renders the play's central irony at the level of turn design. Billa's low count of nine is diagnostic rather than incidental. He is the character least able to sustain topical relevance under pressure, and his failures are distributed instead into Suspension, with 40 instances, and Infringement, with 2. Relevance is the terrain on which the play's authority is contested. When Shera pursues the topic of Billa's deterioration, the sequence runs as follows.

SHERA. 'Something is happening to Billa.'

GAMMA. 'The face has swollen in puffs and nothing is...'

Gamma's reply is coded as Flouting of Manner, yet Shera's persistence across three consecutive turns is coded as Relation-observance in each case. The pattern amounts to a sustained refusal to be deflected, and it is the only sequence in which Shera exerts interactional control over Gamma. For the powerless character, relevance operates as a form of resistance.

Beckett-focused pragmatic studies report relevance failure as the constitutive feature of absurdist dialogue, generating what those analyses describe as ambiguity and absurdity. Al-Juboury (2022) restricts his analysis of 'Waiting for Godot' entirely to the maxim of relation and concludes that violation and flouting of relevance have become characteristic features of the play, with violation more frequent than flouting. Kareem and Azeez (2025) extend the same approach across *Waiting for Godot* and *Endgame* and read the characters' persistent non-observance as a linguistic index of psychological inertia and existential stagnation. The present corpus, though clearly belonging to that dramaturgical lineage in the sense established by Esslin (1961), behaves otherwise, since relevance is the second most observed maxim and the absurdist texture is generated instead by Suspension of Quality, as discussed in section 4.14. The divergence is substantive rather than terminological. It suggests that the equation of absurdist dialogue with relevance failure is an over-generalization from Beckett, and that a second absurdist grammar exists in which characters remain topically cooperative while suspending the truth-conditional frame altogether.

5.5. Observance of the Maxim of Manner

Clarity, brevity and order are maintained, and obscurity and ambiguity are avoided (Grice, 1975). Eight instances are recorded, six for Gamma, two for Shera and none for Billa, in a play

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whose dominant idiom is fragmentary and elliptical. Manner-observance is therefore marked, and every instance occurs at a moment of crisis management. All six of Gamma's are imperatives or vocatives directed at a disintegrating Shera.

SHERA. 'I continued to search the signs of movement, **the warmth of hands, the shoulders, the face, the fingers, the nose, the forehead, the hair, and the shoes...**'

GAMMA. 'Shera! Stop it.'

The same clarity returns at the play's most controlled moment.

GAMMA. 'Quiet! (Long pause.) **Watch. Carefully.**'

Two clipped imperatives and a pause are all that is offered, and nothing in them is obscure, ambiguous or disordered. The stylistic function is one of tonal reversal, in that sudden clarity within a text where obscurity is the norm signals that the speaker has stopped playing. Gamma's 'Shera. Last warning.' belongs to the same set and is chilling precisely because it admits of no ambiguity. That Billa records no Manner-observance is consistent with his profile throughout, since he is the character who cannot make himself clear, and whose failures to do so are coded as Infringement or Suspension rather than as deliberate obscurity.

Al-Husseini and Alyan (2024) found Manner among the two most flouted maxims in Crimp's *Attempts on Her Life* and associated Manner-departure with the post dramatic text's stylistic program, while Saif et al. (2025) likewise found Manner heavily flouted in Shaw. In the present corpus Manner is neither substantially observed, with 8 instances, nor overwhelmingly flouted, with 12, but rather suspended, with 30. That reallocation, discussed in section 4.14, is the methodological consequence of taking Thomas's (1995) suspension category seriously rather than folding ritual and performative speech into flouting, as most published analyses do.

5.6. Flouting of the Maxim of Quality

An overt and hearer-recognizable departure from truthfulness, whether through irony, sarcasm, hyperbole or pointed metaphor, which invites inference (Grice, 1975; Thomas, 1995). This is the most frequent flout in the corpus and Gamma's signature device, with 14 instances for Gamma, 6 for Shera and 4 for Billa. Its function is status attack under cover of wit. The paradigm case is an insult adjacency pair in Act One.

SHERA. '(entreating GAMMA) **Take me! I can push your story a little.**'

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GAMMA. '(sarcastically) **You stink, Shera!**'

The first-pair-part is a sincere offer, while the second is a literally false and overtly sarcastic dismissal implicating that Shera has nothing to contribute and is repellent besides. The narratorial tag recording sarcasm supplies the intention-evidence the protocol requires. The exchange establishes the relational template for the entire play, and Shera's later echo, '*These tales **stink***', returns Gamma's own hyperbole to him and weaponizes it against the classical romances Gamma reveres. The most theoretically interesting flouts are choric. Late in Act Three all three men, watching the same violence, speak in rotation.

SHERA. '**What a virtue!**'

'BILLA. '**What a virtue!**'

GAMMA. '**What a virtue!**'

Shortly afterwards the phrase '**What a nation!**' circulates in the same rotation. Each utterance is transparently counterfactual, since the acts being described are atrocities rather than virtues. The flout is collective rather than dyadic, and the implicature, which amounts to a bitter national indictment, is generated by the trio jointly, with no addressee inside the fiction other than one another. It is at this point that the play's ideological stance surfaces most nakedly, since irony ceases to be an individual rhetorical resource and becomes a shared civic verdict. Billa's four Quality-flouts are by contrast meta-poetic.

GAMMA. 'Who will read my story?'

BILLA. '**Stories are not meant for reading, Gamma.**'

GAMMA. 'What are they for then?'

BILLA. '**For peeling.** (Laughter)'

The four-turn chain of question, answer, question and answer is unusually well formed for this play. The flout resides in the word *peeling*, a literal falsehood whose implicature, namely that stories are as disposable as vegetable skin, delivers the play's thesis about art in the form of a joke, with the laughter tag confirming shared recognition.

The ranking of Quality first converges strongly with Nadeem et al. (2025) on *The Dear Departed*, where Quality is most flouted and is followed by Manner, Relation and Quantity, and with Saif et al. (2025) on *Arms and the Man*, where Quality and Manner predominate. It diverges

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from the film-based literature, since the *Divergent* study by Fitri and Qodriani and the *Coco* study by Pradika and Rohmanti both report Quantity as dominant, while Anyelina and Firmawan's *Hotel Transylvania* study reports Relation. The pattern suggests a genre effect worth flagging. Stage drama built on long-standing intimate relationships privileges Quality-flouting through irony and sarcasm, because the shared ground required to recognize counter factuality is already established, whereas ensemble film comedy privileges Quantity-flouting through over-explanation, because it must build that ground as it proceeds.

5.7. Flouting of the Maxim of Quantity

Information is conspicuously insufficient or excessive, and overtly enough so to invite inference. Six instances are recorded for Gamma, three for Shera and one for Billa. The category divides cleanly into two opposed stylistic devices. Under-informativeness belongs to Gamma and serves to withhold commitment, as in the promise-evasion '**You know, Shera.**' and in the audible self-repair that follows.

SHERA. '(relaxing a little...) **That was my first performance.**'

GAMMA. 'You **could** become...I mean a great actor, Shera.'

The mid-clause correction constitutes the flout, since *could* is retracted and replaced, and the retraction implicates the withheld fuller assessment, namely that Shera could have become a great actor and did not. Nothing false is asserted, yet something true is conspicuously left unsaid. Over-informativeness belongs to Shera and marks psychic collapse.

GAMMA. 'Shera! Stop it.'

SHERA. '**Lips, ears, breathing, legs, thighs...**'

The catalogue continues after an explicit command to stop, and continues again when Gamma reverses himself and invites him to go on. The excess is overt and addressee-recognisable, and it implicates that Shera cannot stop searching for signs of life in an audience that showed none. Coding the turn as Flouting rather than Infringement rests on Shera's demonstrated control of the list's rhetorical shape and on his defiance of the command.

Saif et al. (2025) found Quantity the least flouted maxim in *Arms and the Man*, and Nadeem et al. (2025) likewise rank it last with only three instances. The present corpus agrees as

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to relative rarity, with 10 of 59 floutings, while diverging as to function. In the comparison studies Quantity-flouting serves to conceal material self-interest, whereas here it divides between the avoidance of commitment and traumatic excess, neither of which is instrumental in the acquisitive sense.

5.8. Flouting of the Maxim of Relation

An obviously off-topic contribution signals an intended inference. Nine instances are recorded for Gamma, two for Shera and two for Billa. Relation-flouting is the play's mechanism of topic control, and its distribution serves as a direct index of power, since Gamma deflects and the others are deflected. The clearest case is Gamma's response to Shera's repeated attempt to raise the matter of Billa's deterioration.

SHERA. 'Where is Billa?'

GAMMA. '(typing and speaking) **the smoke refuses to come out of the mouth.**'

The reply is a line of composition rather than an answer. The implicature is not that Gamma does not know where Billa is, but that he will not be recruited into worrying about him. A comparable move follows Billa's confession of the reason for the punches.

BILLA. '(taking his hands off his face) **For hurting, Shera!**'

GAMMA. '**Come on.**'

Gamma's dismissive non-uptake implicates that the guilt is not to be taken seriously, and it prepares his cruelty two turns later, when he responds with laughter and the phrase '**The vicious circle of guilt.**' Billa's two Relation-flouts run in the opposite direction, away from an answer he cannot give.

GAMMA. 'What afterwards!'

BILLA. '(putting his both hands on his face) **Forgive me, Gamma.**'

A demand for information is met with a plea for absolution. The turn does not constitute Opting Out, since no refusal is voiced, but rather an overt swerve implicating that what happened cannot be stated. Relation-flouting is where the play stages the writer's immunity. Gamma can leave any topic at will and pay no interactional cost, because the typewriter licenses his non-sequiturs as composition. The actor and the dancer possess no equivalent cover.

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Anyelina and Firmawan report Relation as the dominant flout in animated film, and the Beckett literature treats relevance failure as constitutive of absurdism. Here Relation-flouting ranks third and, more importantly, is asymmetrically distributed by character rather than evenly diffused through the text, which indicates that in this play relevance failure is a property of a person rather than of a world.

5.9. Flouting of the Maxim of Manner

Deliberate obscurity, ambiguity or unusual formulation invites inference. Nine instances are recorded for Gamma, two for Shera and one for Billa. Two devices predominate. The first is conspicuous incompleteness, used to convey scale.

GAMMA. 'Main stage changed into... **the curtain into...the room behind the stage into...**'

GAMMA. '**Two long pillars...the magnificent doors...the balcony...the plaster...the costumes of actors...the seats of audience...**'

Every item is left with its predicate unstated. The hearer must supply the destruction, and the unfinished syntax implicates a scale that completing the sentences would diminish. The second device is strategic non-reference, and it produces the play's most sinister line.

GAMMA. 'Shera! Not loud enough.

Shera! **Do it. No delays. Do it. No delays.** Leave. Shera! Leave. Shera!'

The referent of *it* is conspicuously unsupplied. Because the phrase repeats verbatim Gamma's earlier instruction to Billa concerning Shera, and recurs here amid fire imagery, the obscurity is inference-inviting rather than merely elliptical. The same device produces '**Would it do for two?**', Shera's two Manner-flouts are reactive and defiant. Against Gamma's dismissal the exchange runs as follows.

GAMMA. 'This is nonsense.'

SHERA. 'This is the **only sense**, Gamma.'

The paradoxical formulation, in which *only sense* is predicated of what has just been called nonsense, implicates that Gamma's category of sense is bankrupt. Later Shera literalises Gamma's own idiom, since after Gamma observes that everyone spits on that kind of theatre, Shera answers '**I wonder if people have any spit.**' The re-literalization constitutes the flout, and the implicature is that the audience has been so drained of vitality that it can no longer manage

even contempt.

Al-Husseini and Alyan (2024) found Manner among the two most flouted maxims in a post dramatic text and linked Manner-departure to repetition as the dominant figure. The present corpus supports the association of Manner-departure with fragmentation but reallocates most of the repetition to Suspension rather than Flouting, on the ground that ritualised choric echo does not invite an inference so much as suspend the expectation of orderly informativeness altogether.

5.10. Violation of the Maxim of Quality

Covert non-observance is undertaken with intent to mislead, and requires textual evidence of deceptive intention at the moment of speaking (Thomas, 1995). Only two turns cleared this evidential bar, one from Shera and one from Gamma, and both concern petty domestic betrayal rather than deception at the level of plot.

SHERA. 'It is tasty. It inspires.'

SHERA. '**You waste coffee.**'

Shera has been narrated sipping approvingly from Gamma's cup one clause earlier, so that the accusation covertly misattributes the depletion. Gamma's reaction is confusion and displeasure rather than the shared recognition that would indicate a joke, which is why the turn is coded as Violation rather than Flouting.

SHERA. 'Yes I am. Shera is always ready.'

GAMMA. '(He coldly opens the packet of cigarettes...) **For smoke.**'

The narration states that Shera is betrayed by Gamma's response, which constitutes direct evidence of a covert substitution of referent for the word *ready*. Shera believed himself to be invited to act, whereas he was being invited to smoke.

The near-total absence of Violation is this study's most consequential negative finding. A play organized around guilt, complicity and a possible killing contains almost no lying between characters. What the men do to one another, they do openly. The moral architecture is therefore not one of concealment but of acknowledged complicity, in which everyone knows, everyone says, and no one stops.

The result diverges sharply from Imran et al. (2024), who find Violation of Quality and

Manner dominant in Pakistani television drama and read those violations as the linguistic machinery of patriarchal ideology, and equally from the political-discourse literature in the same tradition. It also diverges from Nadeem et al. (2025), whose analysis of *The Dear Departed* is built almost entirely on concealed falsehood. The contrast is instructive. Where commercial and political discourse ideologises through deception, Ali's stage ideologises through disclosure. The comparison strengthens rather than weakens the argument of Imran et al., since it shows maxim-violation to be a genre-specific ideological instrument rather than a general feature of Pakistani dramatic dialogue.

5.11. Infringement

Failure to observe is unintentional and arises from stress, emotional disturbance, confusion or incapacity rather than from communicative design (Thomas, 1995). Three instances are recorded for Shera, two for Billa and one for Gamma. Every instance is anchored in explicit narratorial evidence of disturbance, as the protocol requires. The category's stylistic function is to mark the boundary at which a character ceases to operate as a pragmatic agent. The clearest case is Shera's response to atrocity.

GAMMA. 'Another one.'

SHERA. 'Louder.'

The word *louder* is emotionally dissonant as an uptake of mass death, and the narration that follows, in which Shera's face becomes a stone, his hands are frozen and his soul is said to have left him, supplies the dissociation evidence that distinguishes Infringement from a flout. Shortly afterwards Shera produces a self-contradiction under the tag recording pathos, saying '**No one laughed...it never happened...**' The two clauses cannot both hold, and the framing establishes disorientation rather than a hearer-directed inference. Billa's two infringements are Quantity shortfalls under the pressure of guilt.

GAMMA. 'Are you punching him **well**?'

BILLA. 'Well and hard. **But afterwards...**'

GAMMA. 'What afterwards!'

The answer breaks off mid-clause. Read forward against the guilt that organizes the whole scene, the incompleteness indicates reluctance under emotional strain rather than calculated withholding, a distinction the protocol enforces and which most published analyses collapse. Infringement is

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where the play locates its most humane moments. Shera's line in Act Three, delivered as his hands begin to tremble, '**Are they mine?**', recurs the dissociative episode and shows the pragmatic system failing in real time.

Infringement is very rarely coded in the applied literature, since most studies operate with flouting and violation alone and several explicitly conflate the two. By retaining the category, the present study can distinguish Shera's collapse from Gamma's evasion, which a two-category scheme would render identical. That distinction represents the analytical payoff of following Thomas's (1995) fuller taxonomy rather than the reduced version in common circulation.

5.12. Opting Out

The speaker openly and consciously refuses to supply the expected information, as in explicit formulations of the kind 'I can't tell you' or 'no comment'. Silence, hesitation and ordinary non-answers are expressly excluded (Thomas, 1995). A single instance is recorded, and it belongs to Shera.

SHERA. 'I know.'

GAMMA. 'What?' SHERA. '**Shit!**'

GAMMA. '(louder) **What!**'

Shera asserts knowledge, is asked to specify, and answers with an expletive that supplies nothing. No content is ever subsequently provided. Read against Gamma's immediately preceding and equally vague 'You know, Shera', with the two men trading the same withholding move, the exclamation reads as a pointed refusal rather than mere hesitation, and it is this that licenses the code.

The scarcity is significant. Opting Out presupposes an interactional right to decline, and in this household, no one possesses such a right, since the men are too enmeshed to invoke privacy. What resembles refusal is almost always something else, whether Suspension in the echo-games, Flouting in Gamma's deflections, or Infringement in Billa's breaking off. The protocol's strict exclusion of silence proves decisive here, since Billa's unanswered question 'Any regrets, Shera?' is met with silence and is not coded, though a looser scheme would certainly have counted it.

Comparable studies report Opting Out at similarly negligible rates or omit the category entirely, and neither the *Dear Departed* nor the *Arms and the Man* analyses code it at all. The

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finding here is therefore best read as a validation of the category's restrictiveness rather than as a claim about the play. Opting Out is a feature of institutional and public discourse, such as interviews, testimony and press exchanges, far more than of intimate dramatic dialogue, and its near-absence in a domestic three-hander is the expected result.

5.13. Suspension

An in-world communicative situation renders a maxim normally inapplicable, as in storytelling, joking, ritual exchange, and ceremonial or performative speech (Thomas, 1995). The protocol expressly forbids coding Suspension merely because the text is fiction, since only conditions internal to the story world qualify. Suspension is the second-largest category overall, and by density it yields the most striking result in the study. Billa suspends at 62.2 instances per 1,000 words, Gamma at 48.6 and Shera at 24.5. Distributed by maxim, Quality accounts for 71 instances, Manner for 30, Quantity for 27 and Relation for none. The largest single cluster comprises Gamma's typewriter poetry, which Shera answers in kind.

GAMMA. '(pressing keys randomly) **It slices flesh into stanzas.**'

SHERA. 'Gone are those days when suffering set the story going.'

GAMMA. 'Cuts the heart into lines. Peels the skin of the meter. Stands over the bones.'

SHERA. 'Good.'

Gamma's lines are not assertions and are not evaluated as true or false by Shera, whose 'Good.' appraises the composition rather than endorsing a proposition. Truthfulness is not the operative expectation. The same frame licenses Shera's one-word images, 'Coals.' and 'Embers.', which continue an imagistic duet rather than making claims. Post-performance exchange suspends Quantity.

GAMMA. 'Congratulations! Good performance.'

BILLA. '(good-humoredly) **You were good too.**'

The information conveyed is nil and none is expected. The device turns savage later, when Gamma delivers 'Congrats! **Brilliant.**' moments after discovering the auditorium empty, so that the formula runs on automatically over a void.

The echo-game. A five-turn stretch suspends Manner entirely.

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GAMMA. 'Please.'

SHERA. '(smiles) **Please!**'

GAMMA. 'Leave!'

SHERA. '(laughs) **Leave!**'

Each speaker returns the other's word. Nothing is clarified because clarity is not the point, since the exchange is play, and the tags recording smiling and laughter establish that both parties recognize it as such.

The Act Three sequence in which all three men cycle the same clause, moving from 'They are setting fire to homes.' through 'They are spitting on them.' to 'They are mutilating them.', is coded as Suspension of both Quantity and Manner. Repetition here is liturgical rather than informative. That Billa, the dancer, records the highest suspension density is the study's most suggestive characterological finding. His art is non-verbal, and when he speaks he most often speaks in modes where propositional accountability has been switched off. Suspension is thus the pragmatic trace of a body that cannot be rendered in sentences, which is precisely his stated predicament, namely that the spirit of dancing refused to enter his body.

This constitutes the study's principal methodological divergence. Suspension is almost entirely absent from the applied Gricean literature, since neither Nadeem et al. (2025), Saif et al. (2025), Al-Husseini and Alyan (2024) nor Imran et al. (2024) identify it, and the Beckett studies reallocate exactly this material to violation of Relation, producing the familiar conclusion that absurdist dialogue breaks the maxims in order to generate absurdity. The present analysis suggests that this conclusion is a coding artefact. Once storytelling, ritual and play are recognized as in-world suspensions rather than failures, a quarter of the corpus moves out of the non-observance column, and the resulting picture is not one of communicative breakdown but of characters cooperating fluently inside frames where truth and informativeness were never the operative demands.

5.14. Clash

Fulfilling one maxim necessarily prevents the fulfilment of another. Clash is coded as a secondary reason alongside the resulting maxim behavior and never as a substitute for it. Both instances involve Quantity set against Quality, one belonging to Gamma and one to Billa, and both cluster around the unsayable.

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BILLA. 'Afterwards?'

GAMMA. 'One gets hardened soon. Just do it.'

Gamma offers vague reassurance where a concrete account of what happens afterwards is called for. He cannot supply more without asserting something for which neither man has evidence, so that the Quantity shortfall is licensed by the Quality constraint.

GAMMA. 'Running after what?'

BILLA. '**Something in the space.**'

Billa's answer is maximally underspecified, yet specifying further would require him to claim knowledge of a referent he does not possess. The turn is double-coded with PCI, since the vagueness itself implicates that what he pursues has no nameable object. Clash is rare because it requires the speaker to be attempting both truthfulness and informativeness at once, a good-faith condition that this play's antagonistic dialogue seldom meets. Where it does occur, it marks the two moments at which a character genuinely reaches the edge of what he can honestly say, and both concern the aftermath of violence. Clash therefore constitutes the corpus's small reservoir of epistemic humility.

Grice (1975) introduced clash chiefly as an explanatory device for under-informativeness rather than as a countable category, and virtually no applied study operationalizes it. The two instances recorded here suggest that it is worth retaining, precisely because it separates the inability to say more from the refusal to say more, a distinction that carries substantial characterological weight and that would otherwise be flattened into Flouting of Quantity.

Three patterns cut across the categories and together constitute the chapter's argument. First, cooperation is the ground rather than the exception. Observance and Suspension together account for 68.5% of coded behaviour, while Violation accounts for 0.4%. The play offers no portrait of communicative breakdown. It offers instead a portrait of men who understand one another exactly and continue anyway. This directly qualifies the dominant claim in the applied literature, namely that dramatic dialogue is characteristically non-cooperative, by showing that claim to rest on selective sampling. Where Nadeem et al. (2025) analyse sixteen chosen lines and conclude that characters continuously break the maxims, the sequential full-coverage design employed here shows the same phenomena occupying a minority of turns.

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Second, implicature is not coextensive with flouting. Of the 88 PCIs recorded, 45, or 51.1%, attach to flouted turns, while 43, or 48.9%, attach to turns coded as Observance or Suspension. Nearly half of the play's implicit meaning is generated without any maxim departure at all, arising instead through ellipsis, emphatic stress, structural parallelism and shared history. This directly challenges the widespread operational assumption, visible across the film-based and drama-based literature, that counting flouts is equivalent to counting implicatures.

Third, pragmatic profile constitutes characterization. The three men are distinguishable on purely distributional grounds. Gamma leads on flouting and implicature, which reflects the writer's privilege of meaning without saying. Shera leads on proportional Observance, at 52.2% of his own coded turns, which reflects the actor's exposure, in that he says what he means and is destroyed for it. Billa leads on suspension density, which reflects the dancer whose meaning lives outside the proposition. The semiotic reading offered by Durrani, Shahnaz and Kanwal (2022), in which the three men figure as cultural representatives, is thus corroborated from an independent methodological direction, since what their sign-analysis locates in props and images the present pragmatic analysis locates in turn design.

6. Discussion

Three patterns cut across the categories and together constitute the argument of this article. Cooperation is the ground rather than the exception. Observance and Suspension together account for 68.5% of coded behavior, while Violation accounts for 0.4%. The play offers no portrait of communicative breakdown. It offers instead a portrait of men who understand one another exactly and continue anyway. This directly qualifies the dominant claim in the applied literature, namely that dramatic dialogue is characteristically non-cooperative, by showing that claim to rest on selective sampling. Where Nadeem et al. (2025) analyze sixteen chosen lines and conclude that characters continuously break the maxims, the sequential full-coverage design employed here shows the same phenomena occupying a minority of turns. The divergence does not so much contradict such studies as correct their sampling, since full-coverage annotation reveals that the flouts they isolate stand as figure against a substantial cooperative ground. The finding also carries a methodological implication that extends beyond this text, namely that the quantity of flouting reported by any given study is substantially a function of whether the analyst counts what is not flouted.

Implicature is not coextensive with flouting. Of the 88 PCIs recorded, 45, or 51.1%, attach to flouted turns, while 43, or 48.9%, attach to turns coded as Observance or Suspension.

Nearly half of the play's implicit meaning is generated without any maxim departure at all, arising instead through ellipsis, emphatic stress, structural parallelism, and shared history. This challenges the widespread operational assumption, visible across the film-based and drama-based literature, that counting flouts is equivalent to counting implicatures. The theoretical corollary is that sincerity and implicature are orthogonal dimensions, and the corpus demonstrates the point repeatedly through its most frequent double-code, Observance of Relation together with PCI.

Pragmatic profile constitutes characterization. The three men are distinguishable on purely distributional grounds. Gamma leads on flouting and implicature, which reflects the writer's privilege of meaning without saying. Shera leads on proportional Observance, at 52.2% of his own coded turns, which reflects the actor's exposure, in that he says what he means and is destroyed for it. Billa leads on suspension density, which reflects the dancer whose meaning lives outside the proposition. The semiotic reading offered by Durrani, Shahnaz, and Kanwal (2022), in which the three men figure as cultural representatives, is thus corroborated from an independent methodological direction, since what their sign-analysis locates in props and images the present pragmatic analysis locates in turn design.

7. Conclusion

This article has presented a full-coverage Gricean analysis of Usman Ali's *The Guilt*, coding every character turn in the play's dialogue stratum rather than selecting illustrative instances. The design was adopted in order to supply the denominator that the applied literature on implicature in drama has generally lacked, and the results indicate that the denominator matters considerably.

The study makes three contributions. Substantively, it shows that a play organized around guilt, complicity, and a possible killing is conducted almost entirely without deception, and that its moral architecture is one of acknowledged complicity rather than concealment. Methodologically, it demonstrates that taking Thomas's (1995) full taxonomy seriously, and in particular retaining suspension, infringement, and clash as live categories, reallocates roughly a quarter of the corpus out of the non-observance column and produces a materially different picture of how absurdist dialogue works. Theoretically, it records a categorical zero for generalized conversational implicature in a corpus of some 15,000 words, which bears on the default-inference account developed by Levinson (2000), and it argues that the equation of absurdist dialogue with relevance failure is an over-generalization from Beckett. A second absurdist grammar exists, exemplified here, in which characters remain topically cooperative while suspending the truth-conditional frame altogether.

Three limitations qualify these claims. The analysis rests on a single short play, so the distributional findings are best read as a demonstration of what full-coverage annotation reveals rather than as norms for the genre. The annotation was conducted by a single coder, and inter-rater

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reliability was therefore not established, though the requirement of explicit textual evidence for violation and infringement constrains the most interpretively unstable decisions. The confinement of coding to the character-to-character plane, while methodologically necessary, leaves the play's substantial narratorial and stage-direction stratum unanalysed, and the pragmatics of that stratum in dramatic text remains an open question.

Three directions follow. Full-coverage annotation of a wider set of Pakistani Anglophone plays would test whether the cooperative ground documented here is a property of this play, of absurdist dialogue, or of the dramatic mode more generally, and the comparison with Imran et al. (2024) on Pakistani television drama suggests that the answer will be genre-sensitive rather than national. The zero-GCI result invites replication across corpora with differing lexico-grammatical profiles, since if the absence of default inference tracks telegraphic style rather than genre, the finding has consequences for how GCI is theorized. And the reallocation of ritual and performative speech to suspension invites reanalysis of the Beckett corpus itself, where the same material has consistently been coded as violation of Relation.

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