

# A Comparative Study of Chinese and American Marital Conflicts Under Cooperative Principle

—Taking *Desperate Housewives* and *Marriage Battle* as Examples

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## Abstract

As an important theory in pragmatics, Cooperative Principle has been used in the process of in-depth researches on various language phenomena, such as euphemism, irony, humor, vagueness and so on, whereas similar research on conflict discourse has not received extensive attention yet. Among all the conflict discourse, marital conflict is daily but exceptionally complicated. What makes it even more complicated is that marital conflicts under different cultural contexts have distinctive features. Under Cooperative Principle, this paper focuses on two TV series, *Desperate Housewives*, an American drama, and *Marriage Battle*, a domestic drama, and analyzes the construction patterns of Chinese and American marital conflict talk from the perspective of comparative study.

**Keywords:** marital conflict talk, cooperative principle, comparative study, conflict discourse

## 1. Research Theory

This research is based on the Cooperative Principle. The Cooperative Principle, abbreviated as CP, is one of the key theories of pragmatics. American philosopher of language, Grice, approved that there is a tacit agreement between speaker and hearer in all linguistic communication activities, a principle that both parties should follow. In 1975, he formally named it “the Cooperative Principle”, which consists of four guidelines: Quantity Maxim, Quality Maxim, Relevance Maxim, and Manner Maxim.

## 2. Body

Conflict discourse generally includes the opening move, the conflict move, and the ending move. According to the definition of the four maxims (Quantity Maxim, Quality Maxim, Relevance Maxim, and Manner Maxim), and the division of the three moves (the opening move, the conflict move, and the ending move), the content is arranged as follows: in view of the opening move, this paper examines the Quantity Maxim; in view of the conflict move, this paper interprets the Quality Maxim and the Relevance Maxim; in view of the ending move, this paper analyzes the Manner Maxim.

### 2.1 The Opening Move-Quantity Maxim

The opening move is often associated with the Quantity Maxim of the Cooperative Principle. According to Grice, what people say is expected to contain the needed information and should not contain more information than is needed. If the information is insufficient, the conversation will not achieve its purpose. By contrast, if excessive information is conveyed, it will interfere with the conversation and lead to inconvenience. Therefore, the couples should provide the right amount of information, i.e., follow the Quantity Maxim, or conflicting words are to form. Excerpt 1 and 2, the marital conflict talks of American and Chinese couples, illustrate the violation of Quantity Maxim.

Excerpt 1.

1 Susan: Oh my god. This is about MJ's drawing, isn't it?

2 Mike: what?

3 Susan: He does not love Jackson more than you. He knows who his father is.

4 Mike: I know that. Can't a guy get his kid a bike without being psychoanalyzed?

5 Susan: So you are totally fine with that drawing?

6 Mike: Well, I won't go sticking it in my fridge anytime soon. But yeah!

[Mike: Susan's ex-husband; Susan, Mike's ex-wife; MJ, Mike and Susan's son; Jackson, Susan's current boyfriend]

Susan and Mike, the divorced couple, had a son named MJ. MJ's teacher asked each kid to draw a family painting and show it at the parents' meeting. Surprisingly, Mike found that there was an uninvited guest in the family painting except the family of three – his ex-wife's current boyfriend Jackson. At first, Mike didn't seem to take too much notice of this fact. As seen in turn 4, the rhetorical question shows that Mike didn't seem to have any doubts about Susan's statement that his son loved him more than Jackson. The whole conversation was harmonious until turn 6 when Mike violated the Quantity Maxim. Instead of answering Susan's question with "yes" or "no", Mike claimed that he wouldn't go sticking the painting in his fridge anytime soon, conveying unnecessary information. What Mike implied was that Susan should not have put that painting on the fridge, letting all the neighbors know that she had a new boyfriend. In other words, Mike was still in love with Susan, and the jealousy hidden in the unnecessary information foreshadowed further marital conflicts.

Excerpt 2.

1 李梅: 我告诉你, 郭洋, 现在的女人家里家外身上担了两份义务, 又要做好又要任劳任怨, 我容易吗我? ! 哪会你也做做我, 当个家庭主妇, 你就知道什么滋味了。

2 郭洋: 行啊, 只要咱俩一个人能挣俩人的钱, 另外那个就回家带孩子做饭, 你要能挣, 我保证忍气吞声卷包回家。

3 李梅: 你别说你不是大男子主义, 真要有那天你别反悔!

4 郭洋: 谢谢老婆, 前人的辙, 后人的车, 赶紧追随杨丹, 兰心, 去做大女人, 解放我享受天伦之乐吧。

5 李梅: 哎, 你成心哪壶不开提哪壶是不是? !

*English translation*

1 Li Mei: I tell you, Guo Yang, women now have more than one obligation, inside the family, and outside the family. Those exhausting chores and working aren't easy as pie, are they? You will know how it fucks you up if you become both a househusband and a professional, just like me.

2 Guo Yang: All right. As long as one of us can earn money for us two, the other one can then quit the job, and stay home to take care of the children and make meals. If you can make it, I promise, I will pack up and go home without complaint.

3 Li Mei: Don't try to deny that you're a male chauvinist! Promise you won't go back on your word!

4 Guo Yang: The forefathers made tracks, the posterity drove trucks. My dear, just go and follow Yang Dan, Lan Xin to be a 100% professional woman, and free me to enjoy the joy of family life.

5 Li Mei: You don't have to rub it in!

[Guo Yang: the husband; Li Mei: the wife; Yang Dan & Lan Xin: Li Mei's colleagues, professional women, and Yang Dan and her husband just divorced]

Guo Yang and Li Mei had a conflict in the value of "outer-man and inner-woman". In turn 1, this excerpt is opened by Li Mei's claim that women today carried heavy burdens to do both work and housework. Turn 2 is when different views emerged. On the surface, Guo Yang expressed his support for his wife's idea, whereas the phrase "swallow one's anger" ("ren qi tun sheng") indicates that Guo Yang was actually expressing his opposition in a sarcastic manner. Although the couples had different standpoints, they still appeared to be "peaceful" until turn 4. In turn 4, confronted with Li Mei's assumption that she surpassed Guo Yang in the career, Guo Yang didn't express his unequivocal approval or disapproval. Instead, he indicated the unnecessary information — Yang Dan's divorce. Apparently, the Quantity Maxim is violated in turn 4. Li Mei was unwilling to refer to her friend Yang Dan's divorce, thus Guo Yang's providing unnecessary information is undoubtedly the fuse of conflict between the couples, as shown in turn 5.

According to the above analysis, the conflicts between Chinese couples are particularly similar to those between American couples from structure to pattern in the opening move. In view of the Quantity Maxim, the provision of unnecessary and excessive information brings dissatisfaction and unhappiness to both Chinese and American couples.

## 2.2 The Conflict Move —Quality Maxim, Relevance Maxim

### 2.2.1 Quality Maxim

The conflict move is often associated with the Quality Maxim of the Cooperative Principle, which largely exacerbates the intensity of the conflict. Grice holds that if one side of the conversation conveys the information that he or she knows to be false or insufficiently substantiated, he or she has violated the Quality Maxim. Excerpt 3 and 4, the marital conflict talks of American and Chinese couples, illustrate the violation of Quality Maxim.

Excerpt 3.

1 Gabrielle: Do you know how long it takes me to schlep out here to this hellhole?

2 Carlos: Exactly. It's the only way I can guarantee you'll come and visit me.

3 Gabrielle: That's ridiculous. You're my husband. I love you. Obviously, I would come to visit.

4 Carlos: I thought it was obvious that when you love someone, you wouldn't have an affair. I was wrong, wasn't I?

[Carlos, the jailed husband; Gabrielle, the wife]

In turn 1, Gabrielle complained about the prison visit. Then Carlos expressed with subtle sadness that this was the only possibility of getting his wife's visit. Turn 3 is Gabrielle's defense. The expression "that's ridiculous" at the beginning of turn 3 should be "how ridiculous you are to say so", implying the wife's anger and criticism, and the marital conflict officially begins here. She tried to refute Carlos' words by emphasizing that she, as a wife, was sure to love her husband. However, this is obviously in contradiction with the fact that Gabrielle had an affair proposed by Carlos later. Accordingly, Carlos' stronger "counterclaim" can be seen in turn 4. Carlos obviously took his wife's words as a lie, so he used questioning and sarcasm to express his strong dissatisfaction. The violation of the Quality Maxim raised the husband's anger to a higher level and exacerbated the conflict.

Excerpt 4.

1 李梅: .....谁电话呀?

2 郭洋: 客户啊。

3 李梅: 客户电话干嘛躲着我呀?

4 郭洋: 我没躲你, 你干嘛老盯着我呀?

*English translation*

1 Li Mei: ... Who was on the phone?

2 Guo Yang: A customer.

3 Li Mei: Then why did you avoid me?

4 Guo Yang: No. I didn't. Why spying on me?

[Guo Yang, the husband; Li Mei, the wife]

Guo Yang was making a phone call in his study in order to hide from his wife Li Mei. Li Mei had already found out that the caller was Zhang Jin, Guo Yang's beautiful colleague. In turn 1, she deliberately asked Guo Yang who was calling. In order to avoid unnecessary troubles and quarrels, Guo Yang did not tell her the truth, but answered "a client" to prevent his wife from further questioning. Turn 2 is Guo Yang's first lie. Then in turn 3, Li Mei raised further question, asking the reason of Guo Yang's hiding behavior. And turn 4 is Guo Yang's second lie. The two consecutive lies intensify the conflict.

An interesting phenomenon is that once a lie appears in marital conflict, it seems that more lies need to be covered up. The occurrence of continuous lies is more common in Chinese marital conflicts. Under Chinese cultural context, people are inclined to compromise and tell a lie so as to avoid direct conflict and maintain temporary peace. And lies in marital conflict would not be directly blamed (like "you are lying" or "what a liar you are") in most cases. With the help of irony (Excerpt 3) or putting forward a new round of questions to make the lie untenable (Excerpt 4), the violation of Quality Maxim is accompanied by a "counterclaim" by one side of the couple with criticism not apparent but implied.

### 2.2.2 Relevance Maxim

The conflict move is also associated with the Relevance Maxim of the Cooperative Principle, which further intensifies the conflict discourse. According to Grice, the contents of both sides should be interrelated. The more

interrelated the contents are, the more the Relevance Maxim is observed. However, when the listener is too nervous, excited, or insufficiently knowledgeable to understand what the speaker is saying, the listener will unconsciously violate the Relevance Maxim. In addition, when the Relevance Maxim and the Quality Maxim are in conflict, the communicator always deliberately violate the Relevance Maxim in order to comply with the Quality Maxim. Excerpt 5 and 6, the marital conflict talks of American and Chinese couples, illustrate the violation of Quality Maxim.

Excerpt 5.

1 Mike: You went through my cabinets.

2 Susan: What? Oh, I can explain.

3 Mike: Get out of my house.

4 Susan: Mike...

5 Mike: Get out!

[Mike, the husband; Susan, the wife]

Susan accidentally found a pistol in Mike's cupboard, so when Mike left home, she secretly went into Mike's house to check again. However, this happened to be discovered by Mike, and he got so angry that he directly blamed Susan for searching his cupboard in turn 1. In turn 2, Susan didn't respond directly whether she did it. Her answer shows an attempt to avoid question with a guilty heart or to pretend to have failed to understand by asking "what". In a word, the accusation of Mike is quite direct, but Susan didn't receive Mike's signal correctly and gave irrelevant information, which undoubtedly made Mike more in a rage. In turn 3, Mike didn't want to listen to Susan's explanation or excuse at all, and asked Susan to leave his house right now. Mike's words in turn 3 are actually not related to Susan's request to explain, so turn 3 is also a violation of the Relevance Maxim. Out of anger and discontent, Mike deliberately violated the Relevance Maxim. In the above 5 turns, the Relevance Maxim is violated twice. And it is conceivable that the whole conflict is quite fierce.

Excerpt 6.

1 陈梦: 你今天必须给我一个明确的答复, 我要出去恢复工作。行, 还是不行?

2 老常: 哎呀, 怎么又提这茬儿啊。

3 陈梦: 我是认真的, 你今晚必须得表态。

4 老常: 女人啊, 终其一生追求的就是安逸生活, 我已经给了你一份现成的安逸生活了, 你非要到外面去折腾, 没听说过吗, 多少人都主张, 女人干得好不如嫁得好, 你怎么身在福中不知福啊。

*English translation*

1 Chen Meng: Give me a clear answer. I'm going out to work. Yes, or no?

2 Chang: I've been getting an earful of that.

3 Chen Meng: Come on, I'm serious. Take a clearcut stand tonight!

4 Chang: What a woman pursues all her life is just a comfortable life. And I've already given you that! Why bother outside? Everyone acknowledges that a happy woman is who marries well, rather than who works well. Some people just don't know when they're well off.

[Chang: the husband; Chen Meng, the wife]

In turn 4, after Chen Meng asked Chang to take a clearcut stand for the second time, Chang still didn't clarify his position. Instead, he made a statement that women only needed to pursue a comfortable life, which implicated that he didn't approve of his wife returning to work. The method Chang took was to demonstrate the rationality of "Opinion B", which is contrary to his wife's "Opinion A", so as to express his disapproval attitude. This method is not closely related to Chen Meng's require for Chang to give a clear answer. Therefore, it is obvious that the Relevance Maxim is violated, which is not conducive to the harmonious communication between the couple.

According to the above analysis, the conflicts of Chinese couples are largely similar to those of American couples in view of the Relevance Maxim. There are two main reasons for the violation of the Relevance Maxim for both Chinese couples and American couples: one is over-intense emotion, such as excessive tension or anger; the other is insufficient understanding, which is sometimes pretended by the speakers in order to avoid direct contradiction. The violation of the Relevance Maxim in Excerpt 5 is caused by over tension and over anger,

while the violation of the Relevance Maxim in Excerpt 6 is related to “insufficiently knowledgeable to understand what the speaker is saying” (although the “insufficient understanding” in Excerpt 6 was pretended for the purpose of avoiding confrontation).

### 2.3 The Closing Move-Manner Maxim

The closing move is often associated with the Manner Maxim of the Cooperative Principle, which relates to the ending of the marital conflict. According to Grice, the discourse should be clear, concise, and organized, and should avoid obscurity, excessive length, and clutter. Excerpt 7 observes the Manner Maxim well, which is conducive to the relatively smooth resolution of the conflict between the couple; while Excerpt 8 is just the opposite of Excerpt 7.

Excerpt 7.

1 Tom: What the hell are you doing, talking to me like that in front of my staff?

2 Lynette: Well, I'm sorry, but you totally blindsided me out there.

3 Tom: No, I was the one who was blindsided. You just went off on me without hearing what my reasons were.

4 Lynette: Well, I'm sorry. Let's hear them. What are your reasons for bringing back Austin?

5 Tom: I'll tell you if you drop that tone and stop making that face.

6 Lynette: What is...

7 Tom: This was a business decision. In case you hadn't noticed, and hadn't, until the waitresses pointed it out to me, Austin is hot. He's gonna bring in every girl from Fairview High and half the boys in the chorus. What's more, Edie is gonna include our menu in the welcome packet she gives to new homeowners. I'm not sure she'd feel so generous if we fired her nephew. Those reasons working for?

8 Lynette: Yeah. I just wish you'd told me before you rehired him. I mean, I am the manager.

[Tom: the husband; Lynette, the wife; Austin, an employee of the couple's restaurant, first fired by Lynette and then hired back by Tom.]

Lynette found out that Austin, who was fired a few days ago by her, was hired back to her restaurant by her husband Tom. Lynette was so angry that she yelled to her husband; and Tom was also angry because he, as a boss, was criticized by his wife in front of the staff, which left him with a badly bruised ego. Surprisingly, the conflict, which should have been fierce because of the rage of both sides, ended peacefully. In essence, the comparatively successful solution to the marital conflict is because of the propiate manner adopted by the couple. From turn 1 to turn 3, Tom and Lynette expressed his or her discontent respectively. From turn 4 to turn 6, Lynette gradually calmed down and expressed the willingness to accept her husband's explanation although there still existed discontent and anger. In turn 7, Tom began to explain his re-employment of Austin. It is inevitable that Tom's expression reflects some bad mood (as seen in his asking a question in turn at the end of turn 7). In spite of this, his explanation is concise, clear and organized on the whole. He did not dodge or avoid the problem — on the contrary, he made an objective explanation to respond to his wife's dissatisfaction. Lynette's words in turn 8 shows that she generally accepted the explanation. Obviously, the adoption of concise, clear and organized manner is conducive to the smooth resolution of the marital conflict.

Excerpt 8.

1 郭洋: 要是夫妻双方都出轨了, 这孩子归谁, 财产怎么分配呀?

2 李梅: 你胡扯什么呀? 为了小洋, 我也不可能干那种蠢事啊!

3 郭洋: 那可说不准, 一般女的要是误入歧途比男的心更狠。

4 李梅: 那你们男的远远比女人滥情呢——男方必须改掉每天下班后不及时回家的坏毛病!

5 郭洋: 这算什么坏毛病啊? 我哪天晚回家, 那都是因为工作, 那是正经事啊!

6 李梅: 你那什么正经事啊? 你不就是喝酒应酬, 吹牛拉关系吗, 正经事非要在酒桌上谈啊, 这不是坏毛病是什么啊?

7 郭洋: 喝酒吹牛是男人的天性, 拉关系是生意场上的规矩, 坏毛病也不是我一人想改就能改的啊!

8 李梅: 那行行行, 这条先搁置改天再议。

#### English translation

1 Guo Yang: If both the husband and the wife are errand, how to distribute the custody of children and the

*property?*

*2 Li Mei: What the hell are you talking about? Anyway, I won't do that stupid thing even for Xiao Yang!*

*3 Guo Yang: Well, maybe. But you know women tends to be more cruel than men after the liaisons.*

*4 Li Mei: Then you men are far more promiscuous than women. Men must get rid of the bad habit of not returning home in time after work, if you ask me.*

*5 Guo Yang: Come on! When did I come back late not because of work?*

*6 Li Mei: On please! Didn't you just socialize, boast and indulge in excessive drinking? Why do you men have to talk business at the dining table? What an incomprehensible bad habit!*

*7 Guo Yang: It's men's nature to drink and boast, and men's rule to do business through social networking. I can't change the so-called bad habits alone even if I am willing to!*

*8 Li Mei: All right, all right. Why don't we change the subject?*

*[Guo Yang, the husband; Li Mei, the wife; Xiao Yang, the son]*

Contrary to Excerpt 7, the marital conflict remained unsolved until the end. In turn 1, Guo Yang put forward the problem of the distribution of the custody of children and the property when both husband and wife were errand. However, in turn 2, Li Mei only focused on her husband's absurd assumption, and did not pay attention to his question as if she had not heard it. As a consequence, the problem remained unsolved. In turn 4, Li Mei required Guo Yang to return home in time after work. What is interesting is that, Guo Yang, same as his wife, ignored the other party's demand completely. Instead, he laid emphasize on the words "bad habit" used by Li Mei (turn 4 and turn 6), and the discussion on the problem of his late return was shelved. The outcome of this conflict is predictable — neither the problem of the distribution of the custody of children and the property nor the problem of Guo Yang's late return has been resolved. When the couple were directly faced with the problems that needed to be solved, they took measures to avoid further conflict with obscure and lengthy expressions in the process as if by prior agreement. It is obvious that they both violated the Manner Maxim, and the violation of the Manner Maxim is responsible for the unsolved conflict.

How to make a conversation come to an end is one of the most important issues of discourse analysis. Once a conflict talk is initiated, no matter how long it lasts, it is sure to come to an end. Previous studies have shown that termination of conflict talks takes a variety of forms. In his analysis of American family disputes at dinnertime, Vuchinich (1990) has summed up five formats of the termination: submission, compromise, third-party intervention, withdraw and stand-off. According to Vuchinich (1990), verbal conflict ends when the oppositional turns cease and other activities are taken up. In general, based on different types of termination of conflicts and the analysis of collected data, the marital conflict talks can be divided into unsolvable conflict talks and solvable ones.

There are significant differences between Chinese marital conflict and American marital conflict from the perspective of Manner Maxim, and compliance with the Manner Maxim is positively correlated with conflict resolution. American couples tend to face the arising problems directly and make an effort to solve the problems, with clear and organized manners in the process, which contributes to the smooth resolution of the marital conflict; while Chinese couples tend to adopt compromise strategies to end conflict conversations, with obscure and lengthy expressions in the process, which hinders the resolution of the conflict between the couples.

### **3. Conclusion**

In conclusion, there are few differences between Chinese and American marital conflict talks from the perspective of Quantity Maxim and Relevance Maxim, while the differences are mainly reflected from the perspective of Quality Maxim and Manner Maxim. From the perspective of the Quality Maxim, continuous lies are more common in marital conflicts in China than in America. From the perspective of the Manner Maxim, American couples tend to solve their problems in a direct and rational way, such as making specific and targeted explanations, whereas Chinese couples are inclined to avoid the problems with obscure, lengthy, and disorganized words, and leave it unsolved.

On the one hand, the similarities between Chinese and American marital conflicts reflect the core and the general mode of conflict, i.e., the provision of unnecessary and excessive information, and the incoherence of information of each party due to over-intense emotion or insufficient understanding. On the other hand, the differences between Chinese and American marital conflicts implicate the different cultural contexts. Chinese culture, with the nature of implicit, emphasizes peace and collectivism, thus people tend to avoid the problems and direct conflicts, which is quite different from American cultural context. Cooperative Principle and

cross-cultural comparative research play a significant role in guiding us to understand the construction patterns of Chinese and American marital conflicts more systematically. In this way, we are more likely to have targeted responses and countermeasures to deal with marital conflicts and maintain a harmonious marital relationship in daily life.

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