

A Study of Modern American Short Stories from the Perspective of Gricean Maxims

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Abstract

Communicative interaction between human beings usually takes place by means of linguistic expressions. Pragmatics is the study of the way humans use their language in communication. In order to communicate with readers via dialogues, modern American short story writers have opted for multiple writing techniques such as Rhetorical questions, Understatement, Overstatement, Metaphor, Ambiguity, and Ellipsis. The present research analyses selected modern American short stories from the perspective of Gricean Maxims. Using Paul Grice's Theory of Conversational Maxims (Quantity, Quality, Relevance, and Manner), the study looks at the selected short stories of Richard Matheson, Jesse Stuart, Ray Bradbury, and Langston Hughes via. Through identifying instances of flouting of Gricean maxims in the dialogues of the selected stories, the research argues that these stories use Gricean maxims as persuasive tools of dialogue and argumentation.

Keywords: quantity, quality, relevance, manner, short story, flouting

Introduction

Human communication is significantly based in language. It is a continuous process in which the interlocutors cooperate by maintaining certain rules and regulations to continue the conversation effectively. These conversational principles fall in

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the domain of Pragmatics. Pragmatics is the study of the ways human beings use their language in communication (Yule 34). However, Grice argues that in order to correctly interpret what someone else is saying, some kind of Cooperative Principle must work. Grice based his cooperative principle on four sub-principles or maxims. These are the maxims of quality: *be true for what you have evidence*; quantity: *be informative as much as required*; relevance: *be relevant to interaction*; and manner: *be clear and avoid ambiguity*” (111).

Grice also suggested that these maxims should be considered as norms or conventions, and not as strict rules that could not be broken. These rules can be broken, flouted, or even violated to go beyond the literal meaning of words. The 20th century modern American short story writers such as Richard Matheson, Jesse Stuart, Ray Bradbury, and Langston Hughes have employed different writing techniques in their works. These include, “terseness of expressions, Dramatic irony, literary devices, Stream of Consciousness and wit”. Therefore, these writing styles do not always convey the literal meaning of words; sometimes they give the meaning intended to be conveyed by a writer. Writers adopt this writing style to create a more persuasive and effective way of communication. Conversely, writers often do not follow these rules to convey their intended message. This study has been conducted to shed light on the nature of the various writing styles found in the selected short stories. It also demonstrates that Grice’s four maxims are not fixed, and they may be broken or flouted on certain occasions. An attempt has been made to analyse the short stories written by selected American short story writers from a similar perspective. The analysis includes four short stories to understand the impact of Gricean maxims on modern American short stories.

Research Question:

How are Gricean Conversational Maxims reflected in the short stories of the selected twentieth-century American writers?

Literature Review

Pragmatics is the study of the relationship between linguistic forms and their meanings in certain contexts. Pragmatics is appealing because it is about how people make sense of each other linguistically (Yule 4). One of the most important areas of Pragmatics is the study of conversational maxims given by Paul Grice. According to Grice, a specific quantity of screws is required in order to mend a car; genuine quality of sugar is required in order to bake a cake; appropriate relations are required for tasks; and clarity of manner are important in making contributions. Therefore, these four analogies explain the concept of four conversational maxims. These are the maxims of quantity, quality, relation, and manner. The Maxim of Quantity proposes that the information exchanged should be sufficient for the current needs of a conversation. The Maxim of Quality requires that the speakers' contributions should be true (with adequate evidence) and must avoid what is believed to be false. The Maxim of Relation requires the utterances to be relevant to the situation. The Maxim of Manner urges the interlocutors to avoid "obscurity and ambiguity" (45-47). The main concern of any conversational exchange is that the participants cooperate. Grice is of the view that speakers must follow such maxims in order to "make a conversational contribution as much as required" (Yule 145).

According to Grice, conversational maxims play an important role in our everyday conversations (45). Grice's suggestion to speakers is the maintenance of cooperative principles in order to shape their utterances (48). According to Aitchison:

We human beings are odd compared with our nearest animal relatives. Unlike them, we can say what we want, when we want. All normal humans can produce and understand any number of new words and sentences. Humans use the multiple options of language often without thinking. But blindly, they sometimes fall into its traps. They are like spiders who exploit their webs, but themselves get caught in the sticky strands. (68)

Leech says “while irony is a friendly way of being offensive, the type of verbal behavior known as ‘banter’ is an offensive way of being friendly” (144). The use of irony seems friendly but gives somehow a negative connotation whereas sarcasm is also such a form of irony along with a negative impression. According to Andresen, different characters in the comedy series named “Community” flout different Gricean maxims in order to create comedy. He examines eight episodes of this series in order to study the use of flouting by different characters in different situations. He points out that the maxim of quantity was mostly flouted. Also, some characters used more flouts than others. This varies in accordance with their personalities. The major objective of the study was to explore the frequency of this flouting in order to create comic situations.

According to Andresen, sometimes indirect meaning is conveyed by writers through the use of language. Indirectness of meaning is mostly conveyed by the non-observance of Gricean maxims. Different types of non-observance of Gricean maxims are flouting, violating, infringement, opting out, and suspending a maxim. Flouting involves the speaker’s deliberate deviation from following a maxim but not deceiving others. The violation involves deviation from a maxim to deceive others. Infringement occurs mostly when language abilities are underdeveloped; speaker and listener are unable to understand each other. Opting out involves deviation in order to “withhold the truth for ethical or private reasons” (4-6).

In the study of Eskritt, Whalen & Lee, the language of three-to-five-year-old kids was studied to check the level of their understanding of Gricean maxims (2008). Three maxims, relation, quantity, and quality were observed in the course of the study. The results showed that initially, children were only successful in recognizing the maxim of relation. However, later, their performance regarding the maxim of quantity was better than that of the maxim of quality. This study indicated that pre-school children were sensitive to the violation of the relation, quality, and quantity maxims at least under some conditions” (435).

Brown and Levinson's Politeness theory also talks about the use of irony in different situations. Juez has worked on Brown and Levinson's politeness theory. She investigated "how by being ironic, a speaker or writer can flout not only maxim of quality but the other three maxims as well" (25). However, the use of irony is one way of violation or flouting of Gricean maxims in order to give the desired effect to a piece of writing. According to Grice "adherence to the cooperative principles is a reasonably rational behavior, because it benefits the participants and reflects their communicative competence" (qtd. in Hamid & Behija 6).

Hamid & Behija studied the violation of different maxims by selected politicians. They selected some famous speeches of western politicians and observed the violation of different maxims. They found that all maxims such as manner, relation, quantity, and quality are violated throughout the speeches of all politicians. But the violation of the maxim of quality appears quite frequent. Therefore, violation of the maxim of quality means the truthfulness of the speakers is not up to the mark, and violation of this maxim made it difficult for the other three maxims to follow properly. In this way, violation of maxims is interconnected (1-21).

As asserted by Abidin, Gricean maxims can be used as an effective tool to study coherence in basic student writings. Cohesion plays an important role in understanding a given text better. But, to some extent, cohesion is mixed up with coherence. This study visualizes cohesion and coherence as separate terms. They are interconnected to each other, and cohesion originally contributes to coherence as well. Gricean maxims are violated during the study of basic student writing. This violation of maxims results in incoherence within the writings. Incoherence in written material is due to many reasons including students' lack of attention, focus over the material, and non-organization of related ideas (1-4).

According to Sinclair, Grice has given ideal conversational maxims. These maxims can be applied to legislative speech as well. Legislative speech has many similarities to a common conversation, but there are many distinctions between the two:

“These similarities and differences will determine the applicability of Grice’s maxims to legislative speech and thus to statutory interpretation” (Grice 376). According to Grice, our talk exchanges do not normally consist of a succession of disconnected remarks and would not be rational if they did. This work of Sinclair is mostly based on the concept of conditions in making conversations meaningful. The common conversation is totally or partly different from legislative speech. In this, he has attributed a very different style to legislation. He found that “all can be found in a judicial opinion in the less explicit form” (Grice 420). Therefore, it shows that “Pragmatics, as an approach to the use of language, focuses on the actual use of words in the full context of their use” (Grice 420).

As highlighted by Muslah, in “violating and flouting the cooperative principle in some selected short stories”, the application of pure conversational maxims on short stories is evident since short stories do have a sufficient amount of conversation in the form of dialogues. Muslah selected three short stories written by different authors for analysis and highlighted the importance of the application of Gricean maxims in the process of conversation. These maxims may help a reader get a better understanding of stories. He wanted to check the “role of language in communication”. This study focused on the context-dependent meaning of a conversation. Like Grice, Muslah also pointed out that these four Gricean maxims do not follow fixed rules. These rules can be flouted or violated for one or another reason (62). According to Grice, “maxims are considered as norms, conventions and not strict rules that cannot be broken” (65). Therefore, it shows that these conversational maxims may be flouted or violated by the writers (65).

According to Grice, a conversation is a cooperative activity (293) in which both speaker and listener cooperate. This provides a very smooth direction to the ongoing conversation. Considering the conversation as a cooperative activity, Grice suggested that there are some sets of rules, obeying which helps and promotes the accepted cooperation within a conversation

(45). These rules are named cooperative principles. Cooperative principles are followed by the observance of maxims of quantity, quality, manner, and relevance. Another possibility is the non-observance of these maxims. Non-observance can be in terms of violation, flouting, opting-out, infringement, and suspending (qtd. in Fatmawati 13-21). According to Brown and Levinson, understatement, overstatement, and tautology can be forms of flouting the maxim of quantity. Irony, metaphor, and rhetorical questions are forms of flouting the maxim of quality. A total change of topic on part of one speaker refers to flouting the maxim of relevance. Obscurity, ambiguity, and ellipsis lead to flouting the maxim of manner (220-233).

This study focuses on the flouting of Gricean maxims by some modern American short story writers. Modern writers flout these maxims for different reasons. Many new writing techniques have been adopted by these writers such as the use of wit, irony, sarcasm, and use of metaphor and simile. These techniques are the strategies or tactics that are used in the practice of flouting. According to Grundy, "rhetorical strategies . . . involve tautology, metaphor, overstatement, understatement, rhetorical questions, and irony" (qtd. in Fatmawati 28). According to Fatmawati, tautology is the manifestation of meaning in a simple, understandable way such as *a girl will be a girl*. Overstatement is the opposite of understatement and is similar to hyperbole. A metaphor gives a direct comparison between two opposite entities. "Rhetorical question is a rhetorical strategy in which a question is used to make a statement, not to get an answer but to deliver a statement". Irony also gives indirect meaning. It includes banter and sarcasm (28-35). This study is meant to highlight the implications of Gricean maxims for modern American stories and the strategies used by authors in this regard. These strategies may include metaphor, irony, understatement, and overstatement. All previous studies mentioned above have mostly focused on either frequency or intensity of flouting in different areas of research. All of them end up with the qualitative analysis of the number of flouting or violating but the present study mainly investigates the major themes or

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reasons behind this flouting. The article argues that sometimes writers deliberately flout some of the maxims to give new dimensions to the piece of writing and facilitate the readers in coming up with more versatile interpretations.

Theoretical Framework

Modern American short story writers have a persuasive writing style i.e., these writers leave an impact on their readers through their writing at multiple levels. Through the characteristic writing style, a writer establishes a relationship with his/her readers. This style includes use of different literary devices for effective communication with readers. Literary devices include irony, metaphor, simile, and the use of wit. To explore different literary devices and techniques used by modern American short story writers along with reasons behind the application of these literary devices, the researchers have selected four conversational maxims given by Paul Grice in 1975. These are the maxims of quantity, quality, relevance, and manner. The Maxim of quantity directs the participants to be as informative as required. Maxim of quality directs the participants to be truthful in conversation. Maxim of relevance directs the participants to be relevant to the situation. Maxim of manner directs the participants to be clear and precise. The selected texts of the modern American short stories have been analyzed in view of these maxims.

Research Method

A research design determines the ways opted for the research while conducting a study. It enables the study to be carried out logically and coherently. The current study is descriptive and explanatory. Application of Gricean maxims on the conversation presented in the selected short stories provides information about the unique writing styles adopted by the selected American short story writers. The descriptive research design of the present study explains various instances of flouting and violation of Gricean maxims in the conversations taking place in these short stories. The explanatory research design of the study further explains the reasons behind the flouting and deviations from set patterns of conversation. In

addition to this, the study is also qualitative in nature. It highlights the presence of persuasive tools and rhetorical devices in American short stories in the perspective of Gricean maxims and generates information about the effects of these maxims on a conversation. The researchers have delimited the data to the following four short stories: (i) "Button, Button" by Richard Matheson; (ii) "Clearing in the Sky" by Jesse Stuart; (iii) "Dark they were, and Golden-Eyed" by Ray Bradbury; and (iv) "Thank you, M'am" by Langston Hughes.

Data Analysis

This section analyses four short stories written by different modern American writers. Chunks of conversation have been selected from these different stories in which these Gricean maxims are observed, violated, or flouted in one or another way. The first short story selected for analysis is "Button Button" written by Richard Matheson (1926-2013). Matheson is an American short story writer, famous for his novel *I Am Legend* (1954), along with a variety of short stories and television episodes of dramas. In this short story, Matheson narrates a conversation among three characters: Norma (wife), Arthur (husband), and Mr. Steward (an agent). In this conversation, Mr. Steward is convincing the couple, especially Norma, to push a button that will kill some unknown person in the world. However, Arthur is against this idea and calls it murder. Norma accepts Mr. Steward's offer in the temptation of a huge amount of money. She pushes that button and gets her husband killed. These conversational interactions among different characters consist of instances of flouting, observation, and violation of Gricean maxims. Some instances of flouting of different maxims are:

A: "May I come in?" asked Mr. Steward

B: "I am rather busy" replied Norma (1).

Norma's reply to this question can be "yes please" or "no" but Norma gives an irrelevant answer. The reason behind this reply can be interpreted in different ways. She wants to say "No" but in order to maintain norms of politeness, Norma gives an

indirect reply. In this example, the maxim of relevance is flouted. Another example of flouting is:

A: "It could prove very valuable" Mr. Steward

B: "Monetarily" Norma (1)

Steward tells her that pushing the button is very valuable. Norma replies ironically as she knows that killing someone is not valuable. Here the maxim of quality is flouted. The Next event of flouting is:

A: Arthur came out of the living room. "Something wrong?"

B: Mr. Steward introduced himself. "Oh, the". (1)

Here Steward's hesitation shows his negativity and uncertainty in behavior. It shows he wants to hide some information from Arthur. Steward's reply consists of information less than required at the spot, thus violating the maxim of quantity. Another observed instance is:

A: "Is this a practical joke?" asked Arthur.

B: "Not at all. The offer is completely genuine." Steward (2)

In this example, Arthur considers Steward's explanation about the button as a form of a joke. But Steward makes him believe that the offer is beneficial without any harm, although Steward is aware that it is very harmful and dangerous. Steward is not true enough in his conversation, and thus violates the maxim of quality.

The next piece of dialogue is:

A: Norma slid beneath the covers. "Well, I think it's intriguing," she said.

B: Arthur turned off the lamp. "Good night," he said (3).

Norma is insisting on the same question; therefore, Arthur tries to change the subject or to quit the debate by giving an

irrelevant answer to Norma's question. Thus, Arthur flouts the maxim of relevance during the conversation. Further conversation is:

A: "Suppose it's a genuine offer?" she said.

B: Arthur stared at her. "Suppose it's a genuine offer?"

B: "Murder someone?"

A: Norma looked disgusted. "Murder" (4).

Here, Arthur and Norma being engaged in conversation about that button repeat their dialogues. This conversation is similar to tautology in that it includes repetition of the same ideas in diverse ways. Both members do not provide enough information required in the answer. Therefore, the maxim of quantity is flouted since the replies of both characters are not clear, and lead to violation of maxim of manner. At the end of the story, the most important conversation conveys the whole concept in a few words:

A: "You said I wouldn't know the one that died!"
Norma.

B: "My dear lady," Mr. Steward said. "Do you think you knew your husband?" (7).

Thus, Norma pushes that button and, as a result, her husband dies. Now she is in extreme regret. She calls that man who asked her to do that dangerous job. Mr. Steward replies in an extremely ironic manner that she does not know her wise and loving husband. Now it is useless to scream. Mr. Steward's ironic reply is a violation of the maxim of quality.

The next story presented for analysis is "Clearing in the Sky" by Jesse Stuart (1907-1984). Jesse Hilton Stuart is an American short story writer also famous for his poetry and novels. He was honoured as "poet laureate of Kentucky" in 1954. He has also written books on diverse topics as well as about 460 short stories. "Clearing in the sky" is one of his well-read stories in which Jesse narrates long stretches of conversation between two characters: Jesse and his father. In this conversation, the

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father vividly expresses his love for the beauty of nature. He is a passionate admirer of nature and anxiously tells his son about his efforts with their piece of land on top of a mountain. He is a heart patient and despite being warned by doctors, he regularly travels high steeps in order to fulfill his dreams about the land.

The following conversation between the two characters is full of instances of flouting of Gricean maxims. The first example is:

A: "I want to show you something you have not seen for many years!" Father.

B: "Isn't it too hot for you to do much walking?" said Jess (1).

The Father wants to start a conversation about nature. He wants to increase his son's interest and curiosity, but Jess wants to change the topic of conversation. Jess wants to take his father's attention towards the doctor's advice: not to walk on steeps. This abrupt alteration in conversation shows that the speaker is flouting the maxim of relevance. Another example of flouting is: "I like these woods, Jess. Remember when we used to come here to hunt for squirrels? Remember when we sat beneath these hickories and the squirrel threw green hickory shells down at us?" (1). In these lines, the father shows his deep affiliation with nature. This dialogue consists of a series of rhetorical questions. According to Brown and Levinson's model, these types of questions are mostly asked to emphasize a specific point of view, not to get an answer. So, rhetorical questions lead to the flouting of the maxim of quality.

The next instance of flouting is:

A: "Look at the fertile land we have in the valley!" Jess

B: "Fertile" he laughed as he reached down. Father (3).

Jess wants to convince his father about fertile land in the valley. In this way, his father might follow the doctor's advice about his health. Jess wants to stop his father who is happily walking on steeps. But his father makes an ironic remark about Jess's

suggestion. This irony shows that the maxim of quality is being flouted by one speaker in the conversation. Another example is:

A: "It's pleasant to touch too" Father

B: "But, Dad ____." Jess (3).

His father is excited about the perfume of wet dirt and mud. But the reply of Jess does not contain the required information. This understatement in the form of this reply leads to the violation of the maxim of quantity.

The third story presented for analysis is "Dark they were, and Golden-eyed" written by Ray Bradbury (1920-2012). Ray Douglas Bradbury, born in 1920, is an American short story writer, famous for his unique themes on diverse topics. He is famous for his novel "Fahrenheit 451" (1953). The title of the story reflects the most common themes of his writings such as fantasy, science fiction, horror, and mystery. This selected story is a science fiction story. Bradbury narrates a long series of conversations between different characters. A family fled from the earth as a result of nuclear war. Now they are trying to adapt and survive on Mars, but Mr. Harry Bittering still admires his early life on the earth. He thinks of returning to the earth. But in the end, he starts getting adjusted to this alien planet and forgets about his dreams of a return to the earth. Therefore, their conversation with each other consists of instances of flouting of conversational maxims. Some of these occurrences of flouting are:

A: "One day the atom bomb will fix the Earth. Then we will be safe here." Cora (Mrs. Bittering)

B: "Safe and insane!"

B: "Nonsense" Mr. Bittering (2).

In this example, Mrs. Bittering is trying to justify their life and stay in the land of Mars. But Mr. Bittering is still obsessed with the dream of moving back to the earth. Therefore, he replies sarcastically. He scolds his wife about the concept of safety on Mars. Mr. Bittering's ironic reply flouts the maxim of quality.

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“Hello, Harry,” said everyone.

“Look,” he said to them. “You did hear the news, the other day, didn’t you?”

They nodded and laughed. “Sure. Sure, Harry.”

“What are you going to do about it?”

“Do, Harry, do? What can we do?”

“Build a rocket, that’s what!”

“A rocket, Harry? To go back to all that trouble? Oh, Harry!”(2).

Above is the conversation between town people and Harry. Harry is fully absorbed in the dream of building a rocket. This rocket will take them back to the earth. The townspeople are addressing Harry with a sarcastic tone. They know about his obsession with building a rocket and going back to the earth. In a way, they are ironically mocking Harry’s ideas. They all are making different rhetorical questions. These abrupt questions need not be answered. These questions strongly emphasize the narrator’s point of view about the personality of the characters. All this conversation reflects flouting regarding the maxim of quality. The Next example related to the topic is:

A: “It’s supper time, Harry,” they said.

B: “I won’t touch it,” he said. “I’ll eat food from our deep-freeze. Food that came from the Earth. Nothing from our garden.” (3).

This is a piece of conversation between Mr. Bittering and his wife. A normal reply on the invitation of supper time could be, “okay, coming”, but Mr. Bittering’s hatred for this planet is shown in his overstatement. He has given more information than required. This overstatement flouts the maxim of quantity.

The Fourth story selected for analysis is “Thank you, Ma’am” written by Langston Hughes (1902-1967). James Mercer Langston Hughes is an American poet, social activist, novelist, playwright, and columnist from Joplin, Missouri. He is a

famous American short story writer as well. His most memorable work is "Harlem Renaissance". In this story, Hughes narrates an incidence of street crime involving a boy and a young lady. This young lady catches the boy and decides to teach him a lesson. In the end, she is successful in making him a good-mannered person. There is a series of interesting dialogues between the boy and the young lady. These dialogues consist of instances of flouting of different maxims. Some of these dialogues are:

A: "What did you want to do it for?" Lady

B: "I did not aim to" boy (1).

In this conversation, as the boy is being caught, the lady asks him the reason for snatching her purse. Here, the boy is not providing true information to the lady. Such a style of speaking violates the maxim of quality. Another example of flouting is:

A: "You gonna take me to the jail?" Boy

B: "Not with that face, I would not take you nowhere"
Lady (2).

The lady takes that boy to her place. The boy's appearance is dirty, so she asks him to wash his face first. The boy is afraid that he may be going to jail. The lady makes an ironic remark to the boy, or maybe she wants a sudden change in the topic of conversation. This situation leads to the flouting of maxims of relation and quality. The next example is:

A: "Um-hum! Your face is dirty. I got a great mind to wash your face for you. Ain't you got nobody home to tell you to wash your face?" lady

B: "No'm" said boy

"Then it will get washed this evening," said the large woman, starting up the street, dragging the frightened boy behind her.

The woman said, "You ought to be my son. I would teach you right from wrong. Least I can do right is to wash your face. Are you hungry?"

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A: “No’m,” said the being-dragged boy. “I just want you to turn me loose.”

“Was I bothering you when I turned that corner?” asked the woman.

B: “No’m.” (1).

In this dialogue, the lady is giving unnecessary information about the boy’s appearance. In response, the boy provides information that is less than required. This situation leads to flouting the maxim of quantity. Replies are also not complete as they have ellipsis in the word “ma’am”. The boy says “m” instead of “ma’am”. According to Brown and Levinson, ellipsis shows a violation of the maxim of manner (223-233).

Conclusion

Thus, the study concludes that the selected modern American writers employ diverse types of conversational dialogues in their short stories. Each writer tries to adopt a different style of conversational communication as per their own understanding and their background knowledge. The Conversational style of each character is different, which reflects that each character has unique qualities and personality of his/her own. Modern American writers create different characters utilizing a conversational style that is easily understandable to readers who will be able to relate a particular style to a particular character. These characters flout different conversational maxims in their dialogues as per Gricean maxims.

Modern American writers are more convincing, influential, and understandable because they use persuasive tools and language. The tools also involve flouting of conversational maxims in the text of the short stories. The theme of a story may determine the deliberate flouting of a particular maxim in a certain context. The frequency of flouting varies concerning the nature of the themes by different writers. In the first short story “Button Button” whose themes are suspense, crime and murder, all four maxims are flouted equally by the three characters. In the second story “Clearing in the sky” whose theme is love of nature, the maxim of quality is mostly flouted by the two

characters. In the third story “Dark they were, and Golden-eyed” whose theme is science fiction, the maxim of quality is mostly flouted. In the fourth story “Thank you M’am” whose themes are kindness and guilt, the maxims of manner and quality are mostly flouted. The study concludes that the selected modern American writers use conversational maxims to be more persuasive, convincing, and accessible. It further concludes that the strategies of understatements, overstatements, irony, metaphor, and rhetorical questions may also help increase the curiosity level of the readers besides giving a suave tone to the stories.

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