

PRAGMATICS OF BREADCRUMBING: IMPLICATURE AND MAXIM VIOLATIONS IN MANIPULATIVE COMMUNICATION

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Abstract

This study examines the role of conversational implicatures and maxim violations in manipulative communication, particularly in the phenomenon of breadcrumbing. Breadcrumbing is a subtle manipulation tactic in romantic relationships characterized by ambiguous messages to maintain someone's interest without commitment. Using a qualitative content analysis approach, data were collected through an open-ended online questionnaire aimed at individuals who had experienced breadcrumbing. By applying Grice's implicature theory, this study identifies how maxim violations (quantity, quality, relation, and manner) contribute to creating ambiguity and false hope in breadcrumbing. These deliberate violations aim to maintain an emotional connection while avoiding clear intentions in the relationship, thereby preserving ambiguity within it. The findings reveal that perpetrators of breadcrumbing often use vague and unclear language as a communication manipulation strategy that creates emotional uncertainty in the victim. This study also highlights the psychological impact of breadcrumbing on victims, such as emotional uncertainty and decreased self-esteem. The work emphasizes the value of pragmatic linguistic analysis in uncovering subtle forms of emotional manipulation in romantic relationships and suggests potential strategies for awareness and prevention.

Keywords: *breadcrumbing; conversational implicature; gricean maxim; manipulative communication; pragmatics*

1. Introduction

Khattar et al. (2023) state that breadcrumbing is a subtle manipulation tactic in romantic relationships, where the perpetrator "shows love, affection, and sexual interest toward their partner at the beginning of the relationship, often pretending to be attractive, flirtatious, and charming," which eventually turns into inconsistent behavior characterized by a lack of commitment and avoidance of interaction.

In linguistics, specifically in the field of pragmatics, breadcrumbing often relies on conversational implicature. The analysis of conversational implicature emphasizes how context contributes to meaning beyond the literal interpretation of words. Navarro et al. (2020) assert that breadcrumbers do not definitely stop calling but occasionally send direct messages (DMs) or text messages to keep the receiver interested, though not enough to allow the relationship to progress.

For instance, breadcrumbing messages such as *"We'll just see how it goes"* suggest interest while avoiding commitment. Pragmatically, that utterance uses implicature by leaving the meaning open to interpretation, making the recipient conclude an ongoing emotional engagement. This intentional ambiguity reflects a manipulative use of language that goes in line with the violation of Grice's maxims.

Conversational implicature, a concept introduced by H.P. Grice (1975), explains how people use language—in other words, a theory about how people communicate. According to Yule (1996, as cited in Ariyanti et al., 2020), implicature is an additional conveyed meaning. This means that meaning is derived not only from the words themselves but also from their underlying or implied meaning. Grice (1975) divided implicatures into two basic sorts: conventional implicatures and conversational implicatures, depending on whether the intended meaning requires additional information or not (Ariyanti et al., 2020).

Dewi et al. (2023) state that the ability to communicate effectively requires the use of language. According to Morreale et al. (2000, as cited in Cantikawati, et al., 2024), effective communication hinges on adherence to rules or principles of cooperation, a discipline that transcends boundaries. Cooperative principles are one of the communication principles, and they contain four maxims: maxim of quantity, maxim of quality, maxim of relation, and maxim of manner. However, not all conversations follow these maxims strictly. Some speakers intentionally violate these maxims, which can lead to the generation of implicatures or hidden meanings. In the context of breadcrumbing, such violations will give false hope to the recipient and may affect their perception of the relationship.

While previous studies do not specifically investigate how breadcrumbing functions as a method of conversational manipulation, this study aims to analyze the use of conversational implicature in manipulative communication, especially in breadcrumbing relationships, and also identifies how violation of maxims is used to keep someone emotionally invested in the relationship. To answer the current study's objectives, the following research questions are formulated. 1. How is conversational implicature used as a form of manipulative communication in breadcrumbing relationships? 2. How does violation of the maxim of conversation contribute to creating uncertainty and false hope in breadcrumbing?

2. Literature Review

A lot of studies have been authored that parallel the writer's topic by examining conversational implicature, violations of maxims, manipulative communication, breadcrumbing, and Grice's theory. Some notable scholars have researched this phenomenon, including Rayhona, 2025; Su and Zhang, 2025; Aditama et al., 2025; Efizahane and Afriana, 2022; Eragamreddy, 2025; Azzahra, 2024; Dewi et al., 2023; Siddik & Prihandini, 2025; Nafi et al., 2025; Reboul, 2021; Brown & Molete, 2024; Navarro et al., 2020; Navarro & Simil, 2025; and Jaspal & Lopes, 2025.

Conversational implicature is a concept that is widely chosen for research in pragmatic theory. Rayhona (2025) explores the role of humor in pragmatic theory, particularly in conversational implicature and its meaning shaped by social and cultural factors. Meanwhile, research by Su and Zhang (2025) shows that diachronic changes in conversational implicature can turn into coded meaning. Other studies on conversational implicature in the context of media such as podcasts, films, and social media have also been raised by Aditama et al. (2025) with the object *Warung Kopi Podcast on the Has Creative Youtube Channel*, Efizahane and Afriana (2022) with the topic of the function of

conversational implicature in the movie “Doctor Strange in the Multiverse of Madness,” and Eragamreddy's (2025) research with the specific topic of digital communication stating that people often use implicature on Reddit to communicate indirectly.

In research on conversational implicature, the topic often narrows down to maxim violation. One study that is quite closely related to the author's topic is Azzahra (2024), which examines the way people violate maxims in conversation during the courtship phase just to manage the relationship. In addition, research on maxim violation often takes characters in movies and TV shows as its object, such as Emily in the movie *Emily in Paris* by Dewi et al. (2023), Moana in the movie *Moana 2* by Siddik & Prihandini (2025), and research by Nafi et al. (2025) on the *Steve TV Show*, which reviews the contribution of maxim violation to humor production in a talk show format.

Violations of maxims often create manipulative communication. For example, Reboul (2021) identifies that people use indirect or vague language to mislead others without explicitly lying. From a pragmatic point of view, such speech is considered manipulation because the speaker deliberately uses it to protect themselves while controlling how the listener understands the message. That way, if a lie is exposed, their reputation is not ruined because they can blame the interlocutor for misunderstanding. In addition, similar research on the use of manipulative language was also studied by Brown & Molete (2024) with the object of political discussion on Facebook.

Breadcrumbing is a phenomenon that is currently widely found as a subtle manipulation tactic in romantic relationships. Navarro et al. (2020) stated that people nowadays commonly experience breadcrumbing and ghosting behavior, while Navarro & Simil (2025) measured how often people in Spain experience breadcrumbing through the CEB test. Furthermore, Jaspal & Lopes (2025) highlight that these dating behaviors (breadcrumbing, ghosting, and gaslighting) can negatively affect mental health by making victims feel lonely, helpless, and less satisfied with life.

Although these studies offer significant insights, they do not specifically investigate how breadcrumbing functions as a method of conversational manipulation. This study seeks to fill that void by examining breadcrumbing through the framework of Gricean maxims, uncovering pragmatic techniques used to generate ambiguity and maintain emotional uncertainty in interpersonal interactions, including presenting the forms of maxim violation in the sentences that breadcrumbing perpetrators use towards their victims.

3. Research Method

This study uses a qualitative approach with a content analysis method to examine the phenomenon of breadcrumbing in interpersonal communication. According to Denzin and Lincoln (in Moleong, 2017, cited in Setyaningrum & Ningsih, 2023), the qualitative approach focuses on understanding phenomena in a natural setting using various existing methods. Creswell (2017) also emphasizes that qualitative research is a method for exploring and understanding the meaning individuals or groups ascribe to a social or human problem. This type of research involves emerging questions and procedures, collecting data typically in the participant's setting, analyzing data inductively by building from specific details to broader themes, and interpreting the meaning of the data. This approach was chosen because it allows researchers to analyze linguistic data in depth based on the theory of conversational implicature and maxim violation in the principle of conversational cooperation proposed by Grice (1975).

Furthermore, content analysis is considered appropriate in this study because it enables researchers to interpret textual data such as ambiguous messages. Content analysis is used to make conclusions that are reproducible and valid while taking into account the context in which communication occurs (Bungin, 2019, as cited in Devi & Ningsih, 2025).

Data was collected through an open-ended questionnaire created in Google Forms, and it was distributed via social media platforms. The sampling technique was purposive, with the criterion that the participants were Generation Z in Indonesia who had experienced manipulative communication in the form of breadcrumbing, especially in romantic relationships. Participants ranged in age 20 to 24 years old, with the majority of questionnaire respondents being female.

The questionnaire contained three sections. The first section asked about demographic information such as age and gender. The second section focused on the participants' experiences, including whether they had ever been in a breadcrumbing relationship and what kind of things the perpetrators said. The third section explored perceptions and interpretations of them while receiving the messages, with questions such as how they felt, whether it was confusing, whether they considered it manipulative, and whether they perceived any hidden meanings behind the messages.

Data analysis was conducted by identifying forms of conversational implicature as well as maxim violations such as the maxims of quantity, relation, and manner to find out how vagueness and false expectations are formed in conversations. To ensure that the data obtained was correct and reliable, the researcher used several different but still relevant theoretical frameworks and asked for opinions from the supervisor. In addition, direct quotes from respondents were also used as evidence in the analysis. This research also adheres to ethics by keeping the identity of the participants confidential and asking their permission first before filling out the questionnaire.

4. Results and Discussion

Based on the content analysis of the utterances that were submitted by the people who had been in a breadcrumbing relationship in the Google Form, the results were presented. There are eight data points indicating maximum violations, including two violations of maximum quantity, two violations of maximum quality, one violation of maximum relation, and three violations of maximum manner.

Table 1

Percentage of Maxim Violation

Types of maxim violation	Number of violation	Percentage
Quantity	2	25%
Quality	2	25%
Relation	1	12.5%
Manner	3	37.5%
Total	8	100%

From the table 1, maxim of manner are the most frequently violated, occurring three times (37.5%), followed by maxim of quantity and quality, each occurring twice (25%), while

maxim of relation are the least frequently violated, occurring only once (12.5%). These results indicate that breadcrumbing perpetrators often use vague and unclear language. These violations function as a communication manipulation strategy that creates emotional uncertainty in the victim.

Perpetrators use implicature or implied meaning that is not explicitly stated, allowing victims to interpret the meaning behind ambiguous statements on their own. This creates false hope and emotional confusion, which are characteristic of breadcrumbing dynamics.

Additionally, violations of the maxims of quantity and quality also contribute to manipulative communication. Violations of quantity arise from providing too little or too much information, leading to ambiguity, while violations of quality involve conveying information that is dishonest or unfounded.

1. Violation of Maxim Quantity

The sentence "Aku nyaman sama kamu" violates the maxim of quantity because it provides too little information, making it very likely that the recipient of the message will be confused about what makes the speaker feel comfortable, thus creating expectations without clarity about the relationship between the two.

In contrast to the first sentence, the sentence "Aku suka banget ngobrol sama kamu... kamu beda dari yang lain... kamu bikin aku ngerasa dihargain... tapi kadang aku ragu sama diriku sendiri apalagi hubunganku yang sebelumnya berat banget..." violates the maxim of quantity because it provides too much information, yet the speaker fails to convey a clear relational meaning, thereby creating ambiguity in the conversation.

2. Violation of Maxim Quality

Statements such as "Aku suka banget chattingan sama kamu." and "Nanti klo aku seriusin kamu jgn kaget ya" violate the maxim of quality because they provide information without strong evidence and give the impression of manipulation, especially regarding exclusivity. These phrases appear playful but are somewhat ambiguous, indirectly implying future commitment while also creating emotional ambiguity. The lack of strong evidence is also evident in "(*padahal juga chat dengan banyak cewek*)" where, at the end of the relationship, the victim realizes that the exclusivity was not genuine.

3. Violation of Maxim Relation

Example 1

Dinda: Di roomchatku gaada apapun, makanya aku kira kamu ngilang lagi

Adit: I think we should try to sposess again.

The conversation above belongs to the violation Maxim of Relation, because it is irrelevant to Dinda's statement which implies disappointment over Adit's absence in the previous conversation. The implicature that emerges is that Adit is trying to avoid a serious conversation and opts for a casual activity (Spotify session), thus covering up his absence with a positive invitation. In the context of breadcrumbing, this strategy serves to maintain emotional attachment without providing clarification or commitment, creating uncertainty and false expectations.

4. Violation of Maxim Manner

Example 2

Gia: Menurut kamu kita bakal gimana?

Farhan: We'll just see how it goes aja lah.

Example 3

Nada: Kamu tuh kemana aja sih?

Rizky: So busy lately, just wait for me ya.

The statements in example 2 and 3 are indicated as violating the maxim of manners because the answers given by Farhan and Rizky are very vague and unspecific. These unclear answers create uncertainty about the relationship questioned by Gia and Nada earlier.

Meanwhile, in the statement “Walaupun hubungan kita sekarang gak jelas, tapi aku cemburu kalau kamu dideketin sama cowok lain,” the violation of the maxim of manner is caused by the demand for exclusivity while the status of the relationship is still unclear. This can confuse the emotional feelings of the interlocutor or victim of this breadcrumbing.

The finding is in line with the previous research by Navarro et al. (2020), which describes breadcrumbing as a form of emotional manipulation in digital relationships. In several cases, violations of maxims result in implied meanings that need to be interpreted by the interlocutor, and if not understood correctly, can trigger uncertainty or misinterpretation (Azzahra, 2024). According to Campaioli et al. (2022), in another case like ghosting, being a victim (ghosted) of an unclear relationship status also could make participants feel frustrated, angry, or stressed or even could affect their self-esteem. The ambiguity resulting from these implicatures and violations of maxims not only affects communication but also influences the emotional state of the victim. Victims tend to get trapped in uncertain expectations and find it difficult to escape the ambiguous signals continuously sent by the perpetrator (breadcrumbing). Similar research by Jaspal & Lopes (2025) also shows that dating behavior such as breadcrumbing, ghosting and gaslighting can negatively affect mental health by making victims feel lonely, helpless and less satisfied with life.

Such forms of manipulation are getting harder to recognize in the context of today's online communication because they are delivered in a smooth and indirect way. Therefore, analyzing how people communicate using Grice's theory is helpful in understanding communication patterns that are seemingly normal but actually have hidden intentions and can be used to manipulate other people's emotions in a relationship.

5. Conclusion

The eight utterances identified in this study violate Grice's maxims and conversational implicatures, which are commonly used by perpetrators of “breadcrumbing” to maintain ambiguous relationship status, create false hope, and manipulate emotional feelings. The linguistic patterns are used as manipulative tools by perpetrators against victims through mutual communication. These findings highlight the importance of applying pragmatics, particularly Grice's theory, to uncover the dynamics of online romantic relationships. It is hoped that this research will help identify manipulative online behavior and, by recognizing these patterns, make online dating safer. Future research could be expanded to analyze manipulative communication such as breadcrumbing from the perspective of the perpetrator or a specific gender.

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