

The Art of the Unsaid: Analyzing the Use of Conversational Implicature in Political Communication

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Abstract

This study investigates the use of conversational implicature by Saudi Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman (MBS) during a September 2023 interview with Fox News. The research is grounded in Grice's conversational maxims and the theory of implicature, focusing on how conversational implicature is strategically utilized to navigate sensitive topics and influence public perception. Using a qualitative research design grounded in Grice's theory of implicature, the analysis highlights the frequent flouting of conversational maxims—particularly quantity, relation, and manner—to avoid direct responses, reframe controversial questions, and maintain diplomatic flexibility. The findings indicate the frequent use of particularized conversational implicatures (PCI) tied to specific geopolitical contexts, where MBS relies on context to imply meaning without making explicit statements. Conversely, generalized conversational implicatures (GCIs) were observed in broader discussions on Saudi Arabia's military and economic strategies, where meaning is naturally inferred without dependence on specific contexts. The findings suggest that MBS effectively employs implicatures to manage multiple audiences, deflect criticism, and shape public perception. Future research could expand on these findings by analyzing a wider range of interviews and incorporating non-verbal cues.

Keywords: cooperative principle, conversational implicature, generalized implicature, particularized implicature, political communication

1. Introduction

Conversational implicature is a fundamental concept in pragmatics, closely tied to Grice's cooperative principle, which he initially conceptualized. Grice's theory (1989) proposed that speakers typically follow certain conversational norms to facilitate effective communication. These norms are represented by four maxims: quantity (providing the right amount of information), quality (being truthful), relation (being relevant), and manner (being clear and orderly). Implicature occurs when these norms are intentionally violated, allowing speakers to convey indirect meanings while still being understood within the context. When speakers purposefully flout these maxims, they create what Grice termed conversational implicatures, which add layers of meaning, often involving irony, sarcasm, or other indirect forms of communication, depending on the situation (Çiftlikli & Demirel, 2022). Grice categorized conversational implicatures into generalized conversational implicatures (GCIs) and particularized conversational implicatures (PCIs). A generalized implicature refers to meaning that can be inferred without specific contextual knowledge—listeners can grasp the additional meaning without needing extra background information. In contrast, particularized implicature relies on the specific context of the conversation. Here, the listener interprets meaning based on the speaker's word choice, tone, and immediate circumstances, shaping communication beyond the literal words (Blome-Tillmann, 2013).

Implicature plays a crucial role in political discourse, where language is often deliberately indirect or vague for strategic purposes. Political discourse offers a valuable lens for analyzing the communication strategies of world leaders, revealing more than just the spoken words. These high-stakes interactions explore the subtleties of language use, considering the content of responses and the strategies employed to deliver messages, maintain diplomatic relations, and project a carefully curated image (Wilson, 2015). Politicians frequently use implicature to convey subtle meanings, avoid controversial topics, or appeal to different audiences without making explicit commitments. This form of communication highlights the complex relationship between language, politics, and discourse, showing how leaders handle sensitive issues while managing public perception. Wilson (1990) argues that political discourse hinges on the balance between what is explicitly stated and what is implied. Using implicature in political communication goes beyond mere subtlety; it allows politicians to test new ideas or policies, gauge public reactions, and adjust their positions based on how implied statements are received. Understanding and analyzing implicature in political discourse is key to decoding the true intentions and messages behind carefully crafted statements. Through strategic language use, political figures like MBS shape public perception, skillfully navigating sensitive topics while safeguarding national and personal interests internationally.

MBS, who serves as deputy prime minister, chairperson of the Council for Economic and Development Affairs, the Council of Political and Security Affairs, and minister of defense, is widely regarded as the de facto leader of Saudi Arabia. He plays a pivotal role in the

Kingdom's transformation, mainly through his Vision 2030 initiative (Heibach, 2024). MBS's leadership style and strategic media use, including royal interviews and public speeches, have positioned him as a key figure in global discussions (Al-Rasheed, 2018; Krieg, 2019; Ulrichsen, 2020). He is known for shaping his public image through these appearances, skillfully navigating sensitive topics while maintaining diplomatic flexibility. Two significant interviews with U.S. news outlets, notably the 2018 CBS and 2023 Fox News, stand out as critical moments in his engagement with U.S. media. These televised discussions captivated audiences, building anticipation and sustaining interest throughout their broadcast.

While numerous studies have examined political discourse and diplomatic language, there is still a lack of in-depth analysis of the nuanced linguistic strategies and conversational implicatures used by the Saudi Crown Prince in high-stakes political interviews with U.S. media channels. This gap raises questions about how his reforms and intentions are interpreted, which is critical for domestic and international audiences. This study explores the types and functions of conversational implicatures employed by MBS in the 2023 Fox News interview. It contributes to pragmatics and discourse analysis by offering more profound insights into how language navigates complex international dynamics. Specifically, it examines how political leaders use implicatures to communicate controversial positions and shape global perceptions without making explicit statements. The 2023 Fox News interview was chosen for several reasons. First, it provides a more comprehensive view of Saudi Arabia's evolving geopolitical role and economic alliances than the 2018 CBS interview, which primarily focused on domestic reforms. Second, unlike the 2018 interview, the 2023 interview was MBS's first conducted in English, offering valuable insights into how his communication style and strategic messaging have evolved, particularly in engaging an English-speaking audience. Third, this interview allows for an in-depth analysis of how MBS addresses sensitive topics, such as human rights, sports investments, and energy policy, using implicature to navigate controversial issues without making direct admissions. Finally, the 2023 interview offers a timely perspective on how MBS is framing Saudi Arabia's future policies, with a focus on Vision 2030. Davidson (2022) notes that MBS has effectively used these platforms to consolidate his power and project a modernized image of Saudi Arabia while still maintaining the traditional autocratic elements of its leadership.

To address these objectives, the following questions are posed:

1. What types of conversational implicatures are used by the Saudi Crown Prince in his interviews with U.S. Fox News?
2. How does the Saudi Crown Prince use implicature to communicate controversial positions without making explicit admissions in his interviews with U.S. Fox News?

2. Literature Review

2.1 Implicature

Grice's work on implicature has been highly influential in pragmatics, linguistics, and the philosophy of language, offering critical insights into how meaning is constructed and interpreted in communication. His theories provide valuable frameworks for understanding the nuances of indirect meaning and how speakers navigate both literal and implied communication. Implicature refers to the way speakers imply or suggest meaning beyond the literal content of what is said.

Grice (1975) proposed that conversations are generally seen as a collaborative effort governed by the Cooperative Principle and four maxims: quality, quantity, relevance, and manner. These maxims guide how people engage in dialogue, ensuring that exchanges are clear, truthful, relevant, and sufficiently informative. However, in real-life communication, these maxims are often intentionally violated, allowing speakers to convey meanings beyond explicitly stated, leading to implicature. According to Grice (1975), implicatures arise from a combination of the literal meaning of the utterance, "what is said," and the context in which it occurs, shaped by the listener's assumptions about the speaker's intentions. These implicatures can guide how listeners interpret messages based on context, social norms, and shared knowledge (Levinson, 1983). This makes communication more strategic and context-dependent, often reflecting hidden desires or intentions (Brown & Yale, 1996).

Grice (1975) distinguished between two types of implicatures: conventional and conversational. Conventional implicatures stem from the inherent meaning of specific words or expressions, independent of the context or the speaker's adherence to conversational norms. They are tied to the lexical meaning of the words. In contrast, conversational implicatures are context-dependent and emerge from the speaker's intentional adherence to or violation of the maxims. These implicatures rely on the broader situational context and the assumption that speakers and listeners cooperate to ensure efficient communication.

2.2 Conversational Implicatures

Grice's concept of conversational implicature is central to his work in pragmatics, particularly in "Logic and Conversation" (1975). He differentiated between what is explicitly said (literal meaning) and what is implied (implicature) in conversation. The literal meaning refers to what is dictated by truth-conditional semantics, while implicature refers to meaning beyond truth conditions, falling under pragmatics. Conversational implicatures are not directly stated but can be inferred based on context and the assumption that the speaker is cooperative. They are also cancellable, meaning the speaker can retract or clarify the implicature without causing a contradiction. For instance, if someone says, "I ate some of the cookies," the implicature might be that they did not eat all of them, but this can be cancelled by adding, "In fact, I ate all of them."

Conversational implicatures are classified into two main types: generalized conversational implicatures (GCIs) and particularized conversational implicatures (PCIs). GCIs arise when no specific background knowledge is required to infer the additional meaning,

whereas PCIs depend heavily on context, requiring listeners to make inferences based on specific circumstances. According to Blome-Tillmann (2013), GCIs arise naturally across most contexts, while PCIs are less frequent and highly context-dependent. For example, "I am meeting a man for dinner tonight" usually implies that the man is not the speaker's husband, which is an example of a GCI. PCIs, in contrast, depend on unique conversational cues or background information that might not be present in every situation.

Identifying conversational implicatures is crucial for distinguishing between literal meaning, semantic entailments, and conventional implicatures. Grice's cooperative principle and maxims serve as the foundation for the calculability test, which helps determine whether implicatures arise when conversational maxims like quantity or relevance are flouted. This is particularly important in political and diplomatic discourse, where speakers may intentionally violate maxims to communicate strategically without making explicit statements (Adai & Mahdi, 2024). The context-dependent nature of implicatures also allows for the cancellability test, which determines whether an implicature holds in a particular context and can be retracted without contradiction (Franke et al., 2020). For example, the statement "I ate some of the cookies, but actually, I ate all of them" cancels the initial implicature without causing a contradiction.

Another key strategy for identifying implicatures is the non-detachability test, which confirms that implicatures remain tied to the utterance's context, even if the wording changes. This ensures that implicatures, unlike conventional meanings, cannot be separated from their situational relevance (Franke et al., 2020). Additionally, Rett (2020) argues that conversational implicatures can be reinforced and embedded and are sensitive to discourse context. The reinforceability test shows that implicatures can be reiterated without redundancy or infelicity. For example, in "Some of the students passed the exam, but not all of them," the implicature is reinforced without issue, distinguishing it from presuppositions, which become redundant when restated. Implicatures are also discourse-sensitive, meaning their cancellability and interpretation depend on how they address the central topic or question under discussion. This sensitivity to discourse context helps determine how implicatures are interpreted within a conversation.

2.3 Functions of Conversational Implicatures

Conversational implicatures serve various functions within different frameworks of pragmatics. According to Grice's Cooperative Principle and maxims, implicatures convey meaning that is not explicitly stated but understood within the context of the conversation. This often involves flouting conversational maxims, where a speaker gives an indirect response, allowing the listener to infer an unstated message. This phenomenon is common in political discourse, where ambiguity enables speakers to avoid direct commitment (Franke et al., 2020). Van Dijk's (2006) socio-cognitive approach highlights how political figures manipulate conversational implicatures to shape audience perception while maintaining a cooperative appearance. This allows politicians to appeal to multiple audiences with a single message, leaving room for interpretation based on reactions received.

Implicatures play a strategic role in political communication by enhancing ambiguity and persuasion, enabling politicians to avoid direct responsibility, especially when an utterance has multiple interpretations. This ambiguity often stems from cultural or contextual differences. Francesch and Payrató (2023) emphasize that varying cultural conventions can affect how implicatures are understood, leading to challenges in communication and translation. According to Franke et al. (2020), speakers use implicatures to deliver information while avoiding accountability for misunderstandings, subtly guiding the listener toward a specific conclusion, often in a deceptive manner. This strategy is particularly effective in political communication, where ambiguity can mask true intentions.

Implicatures also help navigate social dynamics such as politeness, allowing speakers to soften potentially face-threatening acts, like criticisms, without explicitly violating social norms (Levinson, 1983). Abbas and Mahdi (2024) argue that implicatures allow politicians to discuss sensitive topics and maintain politeness while delivering their intended message, offering flexibility and plausible deniability. Implicatures facilitate indirect communication, enabling speakers to convey messages subtly through shared knowledge and context, especially in educational and political talk shows (Levinson, 2000). Moreover, in advertising, implicatures enhance communication by making messages more memorable, arousing curiosity, and allowing advertisers to avoid responsibility for implied claims (Fajri, 2017).

Politicians often flout Grice's maxims, such as those of relevance or quantity, to manipulate meanings and control interpretations. This strategic language helps them indirectly communicate complex or controversial ideas, significantly when obscuring their true intentions or avoiding direct confrontation (Chilton & Schöffner, 2002). Ayasreh and Razali (2018) examined how Syrian leader Bashar Al-Assad flouted conversational maxims in an interview with the ARD channel. The study revealed that Assad violated these maxims to convey meanings favorable to his position, even if they were not fully transparent to all parties. The research concluded that political leaders often flout maxims to manipulate meaning, gain social power, and influence public opinion.

Nuzulia (2020) conducted a pragmatic analysis of Donald Trump's interview with *TIME* magazine, focusing on how he flouted Grice's maxims. Using a descriptive qualitative method, the study found that Trump frequently flouted the maxim of quantity by providing more information than required, which served to reinforce his power as president and express nationalism. This illustrates how political figures can manipulate conversational norms to shape their public image and political authority, using implicatures as tools to assert dominance and nationalistic identity in political discourse.

Recently, Al-Mazari and Rababah (2023) studied the flouting of Grice's maxims in *Sawt Al-Mamlakah*, a Jordanian TV talk show. Using a descriptive qualitative approach, their research identified the types, functions, and frequency of flouted maxims. The findings showed that all four maxims were flouted, with quantity being the most frequently violated. Strategies included evading questions, giving lengthy or irrelevant responses, and creating a playful atmosphere. These flouts were context-dependent, serving functions such as maintaining social relationships, politeness, image protection, and sharing sensitive information. Similarly, Adena, Zuindra, and Mulia (2024) studied

conversational implicatures generated by the non-observance of Grice's maxims in an interview with Indonesian President Joko Widodo on BBC News Indonesia. Their descriptive qualitative study revealed that non-observance of maxims led to the generation of conversational implicatures, which served various communicative purposes, allowing political figures to manage public perception and convey strategic messages.

In the Saudi political context, Arubaiya (2024) conducted a linguistic analysis of Crown Prince MBS's speech at the G20 Summit. The study focused on discourse strategies, rhetorical patterns, and communicative style, highlighting how MBS employed optimistic and collaborative language to emphasize mutual goals and strengthen bilateral relations, mainly through economic initiatives like the India-Middle East-Europe Corridor. Arubaiya's findings reveal that MBS strategically uses diplomatic framing and forward-looking discourse to manage Saudi Arabia's global image, aligning with Vision 2030's objectives. This study provides valuable insights into how MBS leverages language to balance diplomacy and international cooperation, contributing to the broader understanding of implicatures in Saudi political communication. Similarly, Jeshei and Ghazi (2024) analyzed MBS's speeches and dialogues, focusing on the communicative dimensions and media messages they conveyed. The study employed a qualitative approach and discourse analysis to identify the persuasive methods used, including emotional and logical appeals. Findings indicated that MBS frequently employs credibility and reasoning to shape public opinion and enhance Saudi Arabia's image, aligning with the goals of Vision 2030. Additionally, the study highlighted how MBS avoids intermediaries, such as opinion leaders, in favor of direct communication with his audience, ensuring the clarity and authenticity of his message. He effectively addresses sensitive topics and directs attention to key national issues, demonstrating how linguistic and communicative strategies serve as tools of influence in Saudi political discourse.

In conclusion, the literature on conversational implicatures underscores their essential role within political discourse, where ambiguity and indirect communication serve strategic functions. While previous studies have explored the manipulation of implicatures by political figures to shape meaning, control interpretations, and navigate sensitive issues, there remains a gap in understanding how MBS employs these strategies, particularly in high-profile media interviews. This study aims to fill this gap by focusing on his use of conversational implicatures in his 2023 Fox News interview, providing a nuanced analysis of how he navigates sensitive political topics while maintaining diplomatic flexibility. The findings will contribute to the broader fields of pragmatics and political discourse analysis, offering new insights into the strategic use of language in international political communication.

3. Methodology

3.1 The Study Design

The study adopts a qualitative descriptive design to explore the use of conversational implicature in the Saudi Crown Prince's interview with Fox News. Data collection involved transcribing the entire interview for coding and analysis. The sample selection was deliberately limited to instances where the interviewee addressed high-profile political issues involving Saudi Arabia's strategic diplomacy and regional security. These topics included the normalization of relations with Israel, peace in Yemen, Saudi Arabia's involvement in the 9/11 attacks, Saudi-Iran relations, the murder of Jamal Khashoggi, U.S.-Saudi relations, the possibility of a defense pact with the U.S., and criticisms of Saudi Arabia's sports investments as "sportswashing." These topics were navigated using conversational implicatures to avoid direct admissions and maintain diplomatic flexibility.

3.2 Instrumentation and Data Collection Procedure

The primary data for this study were collected from a video interview conducted by Fox News chief political correspondent Bret Baier with the Saudi Crown Prince in September 2023 and published on YouTube. The interview was selected for three key reasons: (1) it offers a broader perspective of Saudi Arabia's geopolitical and economic alliances, (2) it is his first full interview in English, offering insights into his communication strategy with the international audience, and (3) it allows for an analysis of how he uses implicature to navigate sensitive topics like human rights and energy policy without making direct admissions.

The researchers watched the video and then transcribed the entire interview into a written format to prepare it for coding and detailed analysis. The co-author verified the authenticity and completeness of the transcription to ensure an accurate representation of the content. The coding process involved two stages. First, each instance of conversational implicature was identified based on its connection to Grice's cooperative principle and conversational maxims. Second, these instances were categorized by type (generalized or particularized) and strategic function (e.g., deflection, reinforcement, persuasion). These categorizations ensured that the analysis systematically addressed the research objectives.

The data were coded and categorized in Microsoft Word, focusing on instances of conversational implicature and violations of Gricean maxims related to the most sensitive and controversial issues discussed in the interview. Finally, the coded data were subjected to pragmatic analysis to identify the functions of the conversational implicatures, with attention to the context and the communicative strategies employed by the interviewee to navigate sensitive political topics.

3.3 Data Analysis

The study adopted a qualitative content and pragmatic analysis grounded in Grice's cooperative principle and the theory of implicature (Grice, 1989). The analysis began with a thorough review of the transcribed interview. The first stage of the analysis involved coding the transcript for instances where the interviewee appeared to flout the Gricean maxims. Each flout was examined for its potential to generate conversational implicatures, which were then categorized based on their type (generalized or particularized) and function (e.g., deflection,

reinforcement, persuasion etc.) in shaping public perception and conveying politically sensitive messages. For example, violations of the maxim of quantity were coded when MBS provided less information than expected while flouting the maxim of relation, which was identified when he redirected conversations to broader, less specific topics.

To ensure the reliability and validity of the findings, a second researcher cross-checked the initial coding and analysis, reducing bias and confirming the identified implicatures' consistency. After coding, the implicatures were analyzed in relation to the political and communicative context of the interview, focusing on how these indirect strategies were used to convey complex political messages and shape public perception. This involved looking not only at the explicit content of the interviewee's responses but also at what was left unsaid, yet implied, through the strategic use of language. The researchers encountered some challenges during coding, such as distinguishing between generalized and particularized implicatures in instances where both types seemed applicable. These challenges were addressed by refining the criteria for each type of implicature, prioritizing contextual dependency as the distinguishing factor for particularized implicatures. For example, responses requiring geopolitical knowledge were categorized as particularized implicatures.

4. Results

This section presents a qualitative analysis of the types and functions of conversational implicatures arising from deviations in Grice's conversational maxims in MBS's interview. The analysis focuses on how these implicatures contribute to his strategic intent to enhance Saudi Arabia's political image on the international stage. The results are divided into two sections based on the instances reflecting the types of implicatures: generalized and particularized. The analysis examines how the Saudi crown prince uses implicatures to strategically enhance Saudi Arabia's global image, project diplomatic strength, and shape perceptions of the country's future both domestically and internationally.

4.1 Particularized Conversational Implicature (PCI)

Particularized Conversational Implicatures (PCI) heavily depend on the conversation's specific context. This type of implicature cannot be easily inferred from the statement alone; instead, it requires a deeper understanding of the surrounding situation, background knowledge, and the interlocutors' intentions specific to the interaction at hand. Therefore, the intended message of MBS's responses can only be fully understood when the audience is familiar with the specific historical and political context rather than relying on general knowledge, as in the following excerpts.

Excerpt (1)

Host: Mentioned in this deal is Israel. What would it take for you to agree to normalize relations with Israel?

MBS: There is an effort from President Biden's administration to get to that point. For us, the Palestinian issue is fundamental. We need to solve that, and we have good negotiations ongoing. We hope it will reach a place that improves the lives of Palestinians and gets Israel back as a player in the Middle East.

In response to normalizing relations with Israel, MBS strategically flouts the maxim quantity and avoids revealing specifics about the Saudi-Israel negotiations. By stating only that there are "good negotiations ongoing," he provides less information than the question demands, leaving his audience to infer that the Palestinian issue is a crucial factor for Saudi Arabia. This indirectness creates a PCI, where the whole meaning relies on contextual knowledge of Middle East geopolitics, particularly Saudi Arabia's longstanding support for Palestine. MBS's use of PCI aligns with the cooperative principle, as it assumes the audience's familiarity with geopolitical dynamics and their ability to interpret that normalization hinges on resolving the Palestinian issue.

His statement that "we need to solve that" implies that resolving the Palestinian issue is a prerequisite for normalization with Israel, which may not be inferred without a contextual understanding of Middle East geopolitics. This implicature is particularized to the context of Middle East politics, especially regarding Saudi Arabia's stance on Palestine and Israel. MBS employs implicature to carefully craft his diplomatic message where explicit statements might provoke controversy, leaving room for interpretation and flexibility. This approach is beneficial when discussing topics that may stir criticism from various factions, both domestically and internationally.

Excerpt (2)

Host: What about concessions Israel would have to make for Palestinians?

MBS: That is part of the negotiation, and I do not want to disrupt the talks. We hope for a good life for the Palestinians.

By flouting the maxim of quantity, MBS strategically offers less information than might be expected in response to a direct question about Israeli concessions for Palestinians, allowing him to create a calculated implicature that balances multiple audiences and maintains flexibility in his position. The implicature here heavily relies on the context of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict and Saudi Arabia's diplomatic balancing act. MBS's refusal to provide specifics implies that Israeli concessions are being discussed, but he prefers not to reveal them publicly, likely to avoid scrutiny or controversy. The audience can infer that these concessions are crucial in the negotiations, even though MBS does not explicitly state this. This approach enables him to manage relations with various stakeholders without committing to a position that could provoke controversy, whether in the Arab world, which primarily supports Palestinian rights, or with Western powers like the U.S., a close ally of Israel.

MBS uses implicature to serve several strategic functions. First, it reflects diplomatic neutrality, allowing him to avoid taking a clear stance on Israeli concessions for Palestinians, which helps prevent potential controversy both internationally and domestically. Second,

his statement, "I do not want to disrupt the talks," preserves the integrity of the ongoing negotiations by implying that public discussions could undermine the process. Lastly, he frames the issue from a humanitarian perspective, expressing hopes for a "good life for the Palestinians," which shifts the focus away from politically sensitive specifics while maintaining a non-controversial stance.

Excerpt (3)

Host: You have mentioned Yemen and the importance of a stable region for Saudi Arabia to achieve its goals. Do you think the talks with the Houthis could lead to peace soon?

MBS: Yes, definitely. Our goal from the start has been to give the Yemeni people a better life. For Saudi Arabia to progress and achieve its ambitious goals, the entire region must be stable. That means no problems in Yemen, Iraq, or elsewhere in the region. We are working with the GCC, Egypt, and global players like the U.S. to achieve peace.

When addressing the possibility of peace in Yemen, MBS offers a very general response. His vague affirmation, "Yes, definitely," deflects from providing specific details about the progress of peace talks with the Houthis, allowing him to present a positive outlook without making controversial admissions or revealing potential negotiation challenges. He further flouts the maxim of relation by expanding the discussion beyond Yemen to include the broader Middle East. This example reflects Grice's theory of implicature, as flouting the maxim of relation encourages the audience to infer connections beyond what is explicitly stated. By broadening the focus to regional stability, MBS creates a particularized implicature that aligns Yemen's peace with Saudi Arabia's broader geopolitical ambitions. By mentioning other countries like Iraq, MBS subtly implies that peace in Yemen is one aspect of Saudi Arabia's broader regional goals. The audience is left to infer that while peace in Yemen is crucial, it is not the only concern in Saudi Arabia's broader regional strategy. This demonstrates how implicature is a strategic tool to manage expectations and avoid contentious details while emphasizing broader goals.

Excerpt (4)

Host: Recently, we marked the anniversary of the 9/11 attacks. What do you say to the families who believe there is intelligence linking Saudi Arabia to the hijackers?

MBS: I am very sorry for the loss of any family. There were 15 Saudis involved, but Osama bin Laden's plan was to create a rift between Saudi Arabia and the U.S. Bin Laden was our enemy, just as he was America's enemy. We are doing everything to fight extremism.

When addressing a challenging question, MBS provides less information than might be expected, flouting the maxim of quantity when asked about intelligence linking Saudi Arabia to the 9/11 hijackers. He avoids addressing the specifics of the intelligence or offering any details that could clarify Saudi Arabia's role or disprove the allegations. Instead, he gives a general statement of regret for the loss of life—an empathetic but vague response. He also flouts the maxim of relation by shifting the focus from the specific issue of Saudi Arabia's potential involvement to a broader narrative about Bin Laden's objective of creating a rift between the U.S. and Saudi Arabia. This implicature serves to deflect responsibility for the 9/11 attacks by focusing on Bin Laden's intentions and distancing Saudi Arabia from blame. This example aligns with Grice's theory of maxim flouting to communicate indirectly, allowing MBS to avoid making direct admissions or denials that could provoke further controversy. Additionally, he reaffirms the U.S.-Saudi alliance by emphasizing their shared fight against terrorism, framing Saudi Arabia as a partner in global anti-terrorism efforts. By avoiding direct engagement with the details of the intelligence, MBS sidesteps potential controversy while downplaying the allegations.

Excerpt (5)

Host: Why did you normalize relations with Iran before Israel, considering the past attacks?

MBS: We've had conflict with Iran since 1979; we don't want that to be the norm, but if there is an opportunity to shift to prosperity and peace, why not? We started negotiations through Iraq, and China came in to help solve the obstacles. Both sides are taking it seriously.

When the host touches on a highly specific geopolitical context, MBS does not directly answer why Saudi Arabia chose to normalize relations with Iran before Israel, which is the core of the host's question. Instead, he shifts the conversation to the broader context of the Saudi-Iranian conflict and the general pursuit of peace and prosperity, flouting the maxim of relation. The implicature in MBS's response highlights Saudi Arabia's diplomatic flexibility, suggesting that the decision to normalize relations with Iran was based on pragmatic timing rather than prioritization over Israel. This example reflects Grice's theory of implicature, where flouting the maxim of relation generates additional meaning that is inferred by the audience. This strategy demonstrates how implicature serves as a diplomatic tool to deflect potential criticism and maintain neutrality in sensitive geopolitical discussions. By referencing the longstanding conflict with Iran since 1979, MBS constructs a calculated implicature that avoids prioritizing one relationship over another and implies that Saudi Arabia is willing to seize opportunities for peace and prosperity as they arise. Additionally, by focusing on the general principle of peace rather than directly addressing the Iran-Israel comparison, he avoids engaging in potentially controversial discussions about geopolitical priorities, thereby sidestepping criticism from Israel or U.S. interests.

Excerpt (6)

Host: It's been five years since the murder of journalist Jamal Khashoggi. U.S. intelligence linked you to ordering the attack. What do you say to those who still have concerns?

MBS: We took all the legal measures, just as any country would when mistakes are made. We reformed our security system to ensure this does not happen again, and we have not seen anything like this in the past five years. It was a painful mistake, but we have done everything to ensure it will not happen again.

The host raised the sensitive topic of Jamal Khashoggi's murder, referencing U.S. intelligence reports that had linked MBS to the incident. MBS flouts the maxims of quantity and relation by not providing enough information about his specific role or offering a direct denial of the allegation, which was the key issue posed by the host, according to U.S. intelligence. The implicature, therefore, serves to avoid direct responsibility for the murder by deflecting from the question of his alleged involvement. Instead, MBS shifts the conversation to how Saudi Arabia has acted responsibly following the murder, using phrases such as "we took all the legal measures" and "we haven't seen anything like this in the past five years." This example demonstrates Grice's theory of implicature, where flouting conversational maxims generates indirect meaning. This strategy creates an implicature that emphasizes Saudi Arabia's accountability and forward-looking reforms, subtly suggesting that the matter is now resolved, even though the direct question about his involvement remains unanswered.

Excerpt (7)

Host: President Biden once called Saudi Arabia a "pariah nation," but the relationship has evolved. How would you describe it now?

MBS: The only thing that does not change in politics is that things change. Today, we have a great relationship with President Biden. We are working together on various projects, including peace in the region, economic growth, and technology partnerships.

When addressing Biden's earlier comment about Saudi Arabia being a "pariah nation", MBS flouts the maxim of relation by not directly addressing the remark and the negative connotations associated with that label. This example aligns with Grice's theory of implicature, where flouting relation generates indirect meaning that the audience must infer. By redirecting the conversation to focus on the broader theme of change in politics, MBS creates an implicature that downplays past tensions and steers the conversation toward a positive narrative of cooperation and shared goals. The implicature in MBS's response functions as a diplomatic deflection, allowing him to reframe narratives and avoid direct confrontation with President Biden's earlier criticism of Saudi Arabia. It reframes the past and downplays the significance of Biden's remark by highlighting progress and partnership in areas such as peace efforts, economic growth, and technology collaborations.

4.2 Generalised Conversational Implicature (PCI)

Generalized Conversational Implicatures (GCIs) typically arise in most conversational contexts without requiring specific contextual knowledge. The listener can easily infer these implicatures based on general knowledge or default assumptions in language use. These implicatures arise from MBS's responses in a way that could be interpreted similarly in many different contexts, as in the following excerpts.

Excerpt (8)

Host: On the U.S. side, would there be a defense pact like NATO's Article 5?

MBS: We have already had a form of that in the past 80 years. Saudi Arabia is the biggest buyer of American arms, more prominent than the subsequent five buyers combined. This document would strengthen U.S. and Saudi military interests and help prevent Saudi Arabia from shifting to other arms suppliers.

When the host inquired about a defense pact with the U.S., MBS provided historical context about arms purchases instead of directly answering whether there would be a defense pact similar to NATO's Article 5, flouting the maxim of quantity. He offered information that emphasized the longstanding U.S.-Saudi military relationship, avoiding a direct confirmation or denial regarding the existence of a formal defense pact. This approach allowed him to convey confidence in the stability of the relationship without directly addressing or committing to any new defense agreements. This example illustrates Grice's concept of generalized conversational implicature (GCI), where the indirect meaning arises naturally without requiring specific contextual knowledge. By emphasizing the established military relationship, MBS generates a GCI, suggesting that a formal defense pact may be unnecessary due to the strength of existing ties. The ambiguity leaves room for interpretation, satisfying multiple audiences without making explicit admissions that could draw criticism. The implied meaning—suggesting that a formal defense pact may not be necessary due to the firm, pre-existing military ties between the U.S. and Saudi Arabia—is a generalized conversational implicature.

Excerpt (9)

Host: Saudi Arabia has been investing heavily in sports. What do you say to people who call it "sports washing"?

MBS: If "sports washing" increases our GDP by 1%, then we'll continue doing it. We are developing sports for economic growth, tourism, and entertainment.

MBS uses irony to address the criticism of "sports washing." Instead of directly engaging with the ethical concerns implied by the term, he reinterprets it positively by stating, "If 'sports washing' increases our GDP by 1%, then we will continue doing it." He flouts the maxim of manner by using irony, turning a critical term into a positive aspect that highlights economic benefits without elaborating on the potential use of sports investments to improve Saudi Arabia's international image. This example aligns with Grice's theory of

conversational implicature, where flouting manner generates additional meaning. By using irony, MBS creates an implicature that reframes the term “sports washing” as a productive strategy for economic growth. This demonstrates how implicatures can be used to deflect criticism while redirecting the audience’s attention to pragmatic benefits. The implicature in MBS’s response deflects ethical concerns surrounding accusations of “sports washing.” By reframing the issue in terms of economic growth, tourism, and entertainment, he suggests that the financial advantages of sports investments outweigh any negative perceptions. This communicates that Saudi Arabia’s actions are driven by pragmatic economic interests rather than efforts to improve its global image.

5. Discussion

The findings highlight the strategic use of both generalized conversational implicatures (GCIs) and particularized conversational implicatures (PCIs) to manipulate indirect meanings, navigate sensitive topics, and avoid direct confrontations. Most implicatures were classified as PCI because they depend on specific, context-driven situations essential to interpreting the underlying message. Without knowledge of the specific controversies or historical events, the implicatures in these responses would not be fully understood. In political discourse, especially during high-stakes interviews, the meaning often relies on unique historical, geopolitical, or cultural contexts. As Van Dijk (2006) and Ayasreh and Razali (2018) suggest, political figures often rely on PCIs to navigate sensitive topics that require contextual knowledge to grasp the implied meanings. On the other hand, fewer implicatures were classified as GCIs because they are typically context-independent and rely on shared understood meanings. This aligns with Franke et al. (2020), who state that GCIs are more common in general statements that do not rely on the nuances of a particular political or social situation. Thus, the nature of political discourse, focusing on specific events and relationships, tends to produce more PCIs than GCIs.

MBS frequently flouts the maxim of quantity, mainly by providing less information than expected regarding controversial issues like normalization talks with Israel, the Yemeni peace process, and his alleged involvement in the murder of Jamal Khashoggi. These instances illustrate the strategic use of conversational implicatures to maintain diplomatic flexibility, avoid direct admissions, and sidestep potentially controversial topics. MBS’s use of implicature serves to distance himself from responsibility while emphasizing broader themes, such as regional stability or Saudi Arabia’s future reforms. This aligns with Franke et al. (2020), who argue that political discourse often employs ambiguity to allow politicians to avoid direct commitments while still guiding the audience toward a specific interpretation. These findings have broader implications for understanding political communication as a global phenomenon. Using conversational implicatures to balance transparency and ambiguity is a universal strategy political figures employ in diverse contexts. For example, leaders often rely on similar linguistic strategies in high-profile negotiations or discussions to address contentious issues without alienating key stakeholders (Elder & Berlin, 2020; Moeschler, 2023). This highlights the universal relevance of conversational implicatures in managing public narratives and maintaining diplomatic relations and the adaptability of implicatures in engaging multiple audiences—domestic and international—through carefully crafted statements.

Moreover, MBS’s responses often flout the maxim of relation, where he deflects from specific accusations or questions by shifting the focus to broader political goals or achievements, such as peace efforts or economic growth. This tactic allows him to reframe controversial topics and emphasize Saudi Arabia’s evolving role on the global stage, which mirrors Van Dijk’s (2006) socio-cognitive approach that implicatures help political figures adapt to varying social contexts and perceptions. By invoking shared goals and emphasizing Saudi Arabia’s partnership with the U.S. or other global players, MBS constructs a narrative that appeals to multiple audiences, thus avoiding direct confrontation with sensitive issues. This supports findings from Abbas and Mahdi (2024) and Levinson (1983), who argue that conversational implicatures in political communication often serve to soften face-threatening acts and maintain politeness, especially when addressing contentious topics. Through indirect communication, MBS effectively navigates sensitive international relations while maintaining plausible deniability. These findings also underline the interplay between language and power in political discourse. By strategically employing implicatures, MBS avoids direct criticism and reinforces his authority and control over the narrative. This reflects a broader trend in which leaders use language to assert dominance while appearing cooperative and diplomatic, further emphasizing the pragmatic and political dimensions of implicature in high-stakes communication (Berkovich & Benoliel, 2024). This insight can be extended to analyze the communication styles of other influential figures in different geopolitical contexts, where indirectness is similarly used to manage public perception during crises or negotiations.

The current study has notable limitations, which suggest potential avenues for future research. First, the findings rely on a single interview, raising concerns about the generalizability of the results across different contexts, platforms, or media where MBS may employ different communication strategies. Second, while this study focuses on conversational implicatures, it does not consider non-verbal cues or broader geopolitical contexts that may influence how the audience interprets the interviewee’s responses. Third, the qualitative nature of the analysis introduces subjectivity, which could affect the consistency of interpretations. Future research could explore a broader range of interviews, consider non-verbal communication, and apply quantitative methods to enhance the reliability of findings. Additionally, exploring cross-cultural interpretations of conversational implicatures could provide valuable insights into how linguistic strategies are understood in diverse sociopolitical contexts. For instance, how audiences in Western and Middle Eastern countries interpret MBS’s responses may differ based on cultural norms, media framing, and prior knowledge. This opens up opportunities for comparative research that could deepen our understanding of the role of context in shaping public perception.

6. Conclusion

In conclusion, this study has highlighted the strategic use of conversational implicatures used by MBS in political discourse, mainly

through flouting Grice's maxims to manage sensitive topics and maintain diplomatic flexibility. The analysis reveals that MBS frequently employs PCI to navigate context-specific issues, such as international relations and controversies while using GCIs in more universally understood contexts like economic and military partnerships. MBS skillfully avoids explicit commitments by deflecting from direct answers and reframing discussions, allowing him to address multiple audiences without incurring direct criticism. These findings underscore the importance of implicature in political communication, particularly in shaping public perception and managing sensitive diplomatic matters. This study contributes to the growing literature on pragmatics and political communication by demonstrating how implicatures function as communicative and strategic tools. By linking Grice's theoretical framework to real-world political discourse, the research offers a methodological approach that can be applied to analyze other political figures and settings, thereby advancing the field of political pragmatics. By navigating complex topics with precision and subtlety, MBS exemplifies how modern leaders craft their narratives to meet the demands of an increasingly globalized audience, where every word and omission carries significant weight. The study highlights the interplay between language, power, and strategy, offering insights relevant not only to linguistics and pragmatics but also to political science, media studies, and international relations.

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Authors' contributions

All authors made substantial contributions to the conception and design of the work. The research topic was initiated and conceptualized by the second author, who also supervised the research process. The first author conducted the literature review and participated in data collection. All authors collaborated in reviewing and analyzing the data, interpreting the results, and approving the final version of the manuscript. The second author drafted the work, revised it critically for important intellectual content, and prepared the final approved version of the manuscript. Both authors remain accountable for all aspects of the work and its integrity.

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