

A Pragmatic Analysis of Conversational Implicature in *Uglies* (2024)

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Abstract

This study investigates conversational implicature in the movie *Uglies* (2024) through a pragmatic analysis, focusing on generalized and particularized types. The analysis is based on Levinson's (1983) theory, which distinguishes between implicatures understood from general knowledge and those requiring specific contextual information. A qualitative research design was employed, utilizing the observation method combined with non-participatory technique. Data were collected by transcribing and closely analyzing the dialogue, focusing on identifying the intended meanings beyond the literal words. The analysis method followed the pragmatic identity method, which was applied to interpret the implied meanings in each identified instance. This research identified a total of 47 data points, categorized with 47% falling under generalized conversational implicature and 53% under particularized conversational implicature. The findings reveal that particularized implicatures are more prevalent in the movie, as the characters often engage in context-dependent dialogues to convey subtle meanings. The study highlights how conversational implicature serves as a tool for character development and thematic expression in the film. By analyzing selected data, this research provides insights into the use of language to imply meanings beyond literal expressions, contributing to a deeper understanding of conversational dynamics in movie dialogue.

Keywords: Implicature; Pragmatic; Movie

INTRODUCTION

Language is essential in human interaction, allowing individuals to share thoughts, feelings, and intentions. However, as Yule (1996) explains, communication often goes beyond the explicit meanings of words; speakers depend on shared knowledge, contextual clues, and indirect hints to imply meaning. Horn and Ward (2004) further emphasize that pragmatics involves understanding how speakers use language to convey more than what is explicitly stated, allowing for efficient communication by relying on listeners to infer unstated meanings. This concept is at the core of conversational implicature, enabling speakers to communicate more with fewer words while expecting listeners to grasp implied meanings based on context. Conversational implicature was first introduced by Grice (1975), who argued that much of what is communicated relies on implicature, where speakers convey information indirectly, expecting listeners to infer the meaning based on context. Grice's theory of implicature hinges on his Cooperative Principle and the associated maxims (quantity, quality, relation, and manner). As Levinson (1983) expanded, conversational implicature can be divided into **generalized implicature**, where the implied meaning is typically understood without specific context, and **particularized implicature**, which requires contextual knowledge for inference. These distinctions help explain how speakers convey subtle, indirect messages in communication.

A notable instance of conversational implicature occurred during the 2020 U.S. presidential debates. When asked if he would denounce white supremacy, President Donald Trump replied,

“*Proud Boys, stand back and stand by.*” This remark implied more than what was explicitly stated. While he did not give a direct answer to denounce them, the implicature derived from this statement (particularly “stand by”) suggested a possible expectation of further action in the future. Bach (1994) points out that conversational implicature arises when the speaker’s intended meaning goes beyond the literal meaning of the words, often requiring the listener to draw inferences based on contextual clues. This instance is an example of particularized implicature since the meaning is inferred through the specific political and social context in which it was said.

Films are rich sources of language data, as cinematic dialogues often mirror real-life conversations where implied meanings are crucial. As Cutting (2002) notes, in movies, characters often communicate indirectly, with much left unsaid. The audience must infer the intended meaning based on the context of the scene. Such conversations are ripe for the study of conversational implicature, as the use of indirect communication strategies, especially in genres like dystopia or drama, is common.

The 2024 film *Uglies*, adapted from Scott Westerfeld’s novel, is set in a dystopian society where societal norms force people into conforming to a standardized appearance. In such a controlled world, conversational implicature plays a significant role in the characters’ interactions, as much is left unsaid or implied in their resistance to these norms. According to Thomas (1995), implicature is often a tool used by characters to mask intentions, especially in settings where they are constrained by power or societal expectations. This makes the dialogues in *Uglies* an ideal source for analyzing how conversational implicature functions within restricted and rebellious contexts.

One instance of conversational implicature in *Uglies* occurs at around 1 hour and 17 minutes into the film, during a conversation between Tally and Shay. Tally says, “*It’s not like we have a choice,*” which, on the surface, appears to be a straightforward comment on their circumstances. However, through the context of the dystopian society they live in, the statement carries a deeper implicature. Tally is subtly expressing her frustration with the societal forces that are compelling them to conform, implying that their so-called “choice” is not voluntary at all. As Levinson (1983) explains, particularized conversational implicatures like these require the listener (or audience) to rely on the specific context to fully understand the meaning.

Harsa (2024) conducted a study that explored conversational implicature through the lens of Grice’s implicature theory (1975) and the cooperative principle. The research aimed to analyze how conversational maxims and implicatures are applied in a short story from *The Jakarta Post* newspaper. Using descriptive qualitative methods, the study found that the maxim of relevance was the most frequent, constituting 43% of the instances, followed by the maxims of quality (33%), manner (19%), and quantity (5%). Additionally, particularized implicatures accounted for 57.5% of the total instances, while generalized implicatures made up 42.5%. Harsa’s findings contribute to understanding how written discourse often relies on indirect communication, with particularized implicatures being more common due to the specific context required for inference.

Sembiring et al. (2024) focused on implicature analysis in the context of the Karonese language, aiming to explore how implicatures function in conversations recorded from Maba Belo Selambar on YouTube. The study applied Grice’s (1975) theory of implicature, as well as Jakobson’s (1960) language functions, to examine how implicit meanings are conveyed through cooperative communication. The research revealed that the metalinguistic function was the most dominant (15), followed by comparative (11), referential (6), phonic (2), and poetic functions (1). The researchers’ study provides valuable insight into how different language functions, particularly the metalinguistic, contribute to the way implicatures operate in structured social interactions within the Karonese culture.

Previous studies examined conversational implicatures using Grice's (1975) theory, highlighting how implicatures function in different contexts. While Harsa (2024) focused on written discourse in a short story, emphasizing the prevalence of particularized implicature, Sembiring et al. (2024) explored spoken interactions in the Karonese language, identifying the dominant role of metalinguistic functions. The primary difference lies in the type of data. Harsa's (2024) written text versus Sembiring et al.' (2024) recorded conversations and their additional theoretical approaches, such as Sembiring et al.' (2024) use of Jakobson's language functions. Despite these differences, both studies underscore the importance of context in understanding how implicatures are communicated.

Building on these findings, this study aims to analyze conversational implicature in the 2024 film *Uglies*. Using Levinson's (1983) distinction between generalized and particularized conversational implicature, this research explores how the characters in the film use indirect communication to convey meaning in a futuristic society that focuses on beauty and conformity. The study seeks to uncover how implicatures shape the narrative and character dynamics in *Uglies*, contributing to the broader understanding of how conversational implicatures in scripted dialogue. Pragmatics is concerned with how speakers use language in context to convey implied meanings. Bublitz and Norrick (2011) points out that pragmatics investigates how individuals comprehend meaning beyond literal expressions, taking into account the social, cultural, and situational context. This branch of linguistics is essential for studying conversational implicature, where the intended meaning often diverges from the spoken words. Through pragmatic analysis, researchers can uncover how speakers rely on context and shared knowledge to ensure that listeners infer the correct meaning, even when it is indirectly communicated.

Yule (1996) also highlights that pragmatics deals with how listeners infer meaning based on more than just words; it includes implied meanings, cultural norms, and the unstated assumptions that govern conversation. One key aspect of pragmatics is the phenomenon of implicature, where speakers hint at or suggest additional meaning that goes beyond the surface level of their statements.

In pragmatics, context plays a pivotal role in shaping meaning. As Levinson (1983) highlights, context allows listeners to interpret indirect communication effectively. Mey (2001) emphasizes that context is the framework within which language operates, controlling how speakers convey and listeners interpret meanings. It encompasses situational, social, and cultural factors that influence how utterances are understood, particularly when speakers rely on implicature to convey messages implicitly. Conversational implicature refers to the meaning that is implied in conversations rather than explicitly stated. Levinson (1983) expands on Grice's original theory, emphasizing that implicatures arise when speakers convey meaning indirectly, relying on shared knowledge and contextual cues. This phenomenon allows speakers to communicate efficiently, often leaving the listener to infer the intended message. By employing conversational implicature, speakers can navigate complex social dynamics, allowing for nuanced exchanges without the need for direct statements.

Generalized conversational implicature occurs when the implied meaning is understood without needing specific contextual information. According to Levinson (1983), these implicatures are derived from the general assumptions about how conversations typically unfold. For instance, if someone states, "Some students passed the exam," it can be inferred that not all students passed. The implication that some students failed is a generalized implicature that relies on common conversational norms rather than the specifics of the context. Levinson notes that such implicatures are often drawn from lexical or grammatical features that signal the implication.

An example of generalized conversational implicature can be found in the work of Hussain and Shah (2024), where it is stated, "Aunty Ifeoma did to my cousins, I realized then, setting higher and higher jumps for them." This quotation implies that Aunty Ifeoma consistently raised

expectations for her cousins, suggesting a progressive challenge. The generalized nature of this implicature does not depend on the specific circumstances surrounding Auntie Ifeoma and her cousins, but rather on the listener's understanding of the social dynamics of expectations and challenges in familial relationships.

In contrast, particularized conversational implicature relies heavily on specific contextual knowledge to convey meaning. Levinson (1983) asserts that these implicatures require the listener to understand the particular situation to infer the intended message accurately. For example, if a friend asks, "Are you coming to the party?" and the response is, "I have to work," the implicature is that the person is not coming to the party. The meaning is contingent upon the context of the conversation, including the listener's understanding of the speaker's obligations and social norms. This type of implicature highlights the importance of context in interpreting indirect communication, as the listener must draw on shared experiences and knowledge to grasp the intended message.

Another example of particularized conversational implicature can be seen in an article by Sudrajat et al. (2024), where it is noted that, "We find them, we take them as a team, and we bring them back. And above all else, we do not ever, ever, let them get into cars." This statement implies a specific concern for safety and teamwork in a particular context, likely related to the care of vulnerable individuals. The phrase "we do not ever, ever, let them get into cars" suggests an urgent and protective stance, indicating that the speaker assumes the listener understands the risks involved and the seriousness of the situation. Thus, the meaning relies on the shared context of the conversation, showcasing how particularized implicature operates in real-life interactions.

METHOD

This research adopts a qualitative approach to analyze conversational implicature, following a pragmatic perspective. As Creswell (2009) explains, qualitative research is ideal for exploring complex social phenomena, allowing researchers to delve into the meanings underlying human interactions. In this study, the focus is on identifying and interpreting conversational implicature within the dialogues of the movie *Uglies* (2024). Levinson's (1983) theory of conversational implicature, which distinguishes between generalized and particularized types, serves as the primary framework for this analysis. Additionally, this research seeks to understand how characters convey implicit meanings through indirect communication, emphasizing the role of context in shaping interpretation.

The data collection in this study follows Sudaryanto's (2015) observational method, with unobtrusive listening as the primary technique. This method allows for the extraction of linguistic data without engaging directly with the speakers. The dialogues were collected from the *Uglies* movie script, with particular attention given to conversational instances where implicature is employed. The collection process involved watching the movie, transcribing key dialogues, and identifying relevant exchanges where implicit meanings are conveyed. The data was categorized into segments based on the presence of conversational implicature, considering the context and relationships between the characters.

The data analysis also employed Sudaryanto's (2015) method, specifically referential identity method with the determining element technique. This approach focuses on identifying and classifying linguistic elements that convey conversational implicature. The analysis involved coding the collected dialogues based on Levinson's (1983) categories of generalized and particularized implicature. Each dialogue was analyzed in relation to the context, characters, and the broader themes of conformity and rebellion. The findings were then interpreted to highlight the patterns of implicit communication used by the characters, with particular

attention to how conversational implicature enhances the narrative and reflects deeper societal issues.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Results

In this study, a total of 47 instances of conversational implicature were found in the movie *Uglies*. These instances were categorized into two types: generalized conversational implicature and particularized conversational implicature. Out of the 47 data points, 22 were identified as generalized implicature, where the implied meaning could be understood without specific contextual information. The remaining 25 instances were classified as particularized implicature, which relied heavily on the context for interpretation. The analysis showed a higher occurrence of particularized implicature, reflecting the complex nature of the characters' struggles and the societal pressures depicted in the film. For further details on the analysis of these instances, see the table below.

Table 1. Distribution of Generalized and Particularized Conversational Implicature in *Uglies* Movie

Type of Conversational Implicature	Number of Instances	Percentage (%)
Generalized Conversational Implicature	22	47%
Particularized Conversational Implicature	25	53%
Total	47	100%

Discussion

The results of this study show that conversational implicature plays a crucial role in the movie *Uglies*, helping to express deeper meanings and themes. Using Levinson's (1983) theory, the analysis identified both generalized and particularized implicatures, with particularized implicatures appearing more frequently. This suggests that many of the implied meanings in the movie depend on specific situations and relationships between the characters, making the context important for understanding what is truly being communicated. The use of conversational implicature allows the film to explore issues like identity, conformity, and rebellion more effectively. The following section presents a detailed analysis of the selected data.

Generalized Conversational Implicature

Data 1

Tally is discussing her desire to become "Pretty" and the transformation process everyone undergoes on their 16th birthday. She reflects on how becoming "Pretty" will supposedly solve societal issues by making everyone look perfect and eliminating discrimination.

Tally : "We'll still be ourselves, just... We'll just be better." (00:03:44)

This is a generalized conversational implicature because Tally's statement implies that becoming "Pretty" will improve their current selves in some non-specific way. The term "better" doesn't explicitly clarify in what way the improvement will occur, whether in terms of physical appearance, social status, happiness, or some other quality. Since no specific contextual knowledge is needed to understand the implied meaning, the implicature is generalized. The audience can infer the meaning of "better" as an overall enhancement associated with the transformation without requiring additional shared background knowledge.

Data 2

Shay and Tally discuss Tally's experience at a Pretty party and how different it felt from their usual life. Shay inquires about Tally's friend Peris and whether he seemed the same after becoming "Pretty." Tally's response suggests that seeing an "ordinary" face, like hers, would be jarring after a month surrounded by perfectly "Pretty" faces. This reveals the underlying societal norm where the transformation creates a clear divide between Ugliers and Pretties, highlighting the stark contrast in appearances. The context reflects the societal pressure and expectations surrounding beauty, deeply influencing how people perceive themselves and others.

- Shay : "What about your friend? Was he the same, just Pretty?"
Tally : "**I mean... it's got to be kind of hard to see a face like this after a month of not, you know?**" (00:18:42)

This is a generalized conversational implicature because Tally's response implies that seeing an "ordinary" or "Ugly" face like hers would be jarring after getting used to seeing the perfectly "Pretty" faces in the Pretty world. The implicature suggests that there is a stark contrast between Ugliers and Pretties, but this interpretation does not depend on any specific context beyond the general concept of Ugliers vs. Pretties. It is understood that in their society, the transformation is meant to create a significant difference in appearance, thus making "ordinary" faces seem less attractive. The inference here can be made without additional background knowledge.

Data 3

Tally is struggling with the decision to undergo a transformation that will make her "Pretty" according to societal standards, as she fears it might strip away her true self. David tries to comfort her by suggesting that beauty is not just about appearance but also about one's character and mindset. The conversation below captures this reassurance.

- Tally : I've just done so many bad things. I just thought in all the wrong ways. It makes me feel like maybe I am just Ugly.
David : "**No. What you do, the way you think, makes you beautiful.**" (01:09:04)

This statement implies that true beauty comes from internal qualities rather than external appearance, challenging the notion that physical transformation is necessary to be valued. The implicature encourages Tally to appreciate her inner worth, regardless of societal beauty standards. It qualifies as a generalized conversational implicature because the idea that character defines beauty is a widely understood sentiment that extends beyond the immediate context.

Data 4

Tally is confronted with a difficult choice involving the surgery, which could potentially have life-saving benefits for others. However, ethical concerns arise when considering the use of non-consensual medical procedures. In this moment, Maddy firmly opposes the idea of conducting medical experiments on someone without their consent, emphasizing the moral dilemma at hand. The short exchange below demonstrates this stance.

- Maddy : "**Honey, we are not gonna perform medical experiments on an unwilling subject.**" (01:27:23)
Tally : "I'll do it."

The implicature reflects a widely accepted ethical principle that respects individual autonomy and consent, regardless of potential benefits. It emphasizes the importance of preserving a person's right to make decisions about their own body. This instance represents a generalized conversational implicature, appealing to a universal moral standard that extends beyond the specific scenario.

Data 5

Dr. Cable is trying to persuade Tally to accept the society's strict regulations, arguing that uncontrolled freedom leads to chaos. She presents the idea that the structure and control

imposed by their society are essential for maintaining order, framing independent thought as dangerous and destructive. This dialogue illustrates her stance.

Cable : **“Freethinking is a cancer, Tally. Leave people to choose for themselves, and they’ll destroy the world.”** (01:21:54)

Tally : “But I won’t be me.”

The implicature here is that without strict governance, society would inevitably descend into chaos, making control necessary to prevent disorder. It reflects a commonly held authoritarian belief that strong oversight is needed for the well-being of the population. This is an example of a generalized conversational implicature, as it relies on a broadly accepted view about the potential dangers of too much freedom.

Data 6

In *Uglies*, society pressures individuals to undergo a surgery that makes them “Pretty,” a transformation that promises happiness, conformity, and peace. Tally, the protagonist, initially looks forward to the surgery but later realizes the deeper implications, loss of identity and free will. The struggle between freedom of choice and societal pressure is a central theme in the film. In this instance, Dr. Cable, one of the antagonists, presents a manipulative argument that subtly forces Tally to consider the surgery.

Cable : **“You have a choice to make. I suggest you choose surgery.”** (01:21:28)

Tally : “All right. I’m going.”

In this scene, Cable offers Tally a choice, but the way it’s framed is deceptive. While Cable appears to provide Tally with the freedom to choose, the imperative “I suggest you choose surgery” leaves little room for actual autonomy. Cable is clearly pushing Tally toward a predetermined decision under the guise of giving her freedom. The “choice” is not truly a choice, as the societal expectation is overwhelming, and the consequences of rejecting the surgery would be severe. This is an instance of generalized conversational implicature because it conveys a widely understood social manipulation technique without requiring a specific context. The audience can infer that the “choice” is illusory based on Cable’s tone and the implicit consequences, a tactic commonly used in authoritarian settings.

Particularized Conversational Implicature

Data 1

While discussing the transformation, Peris expresses concern about whether he will still recognize himself afterward. Tally jokingly reassures him, bringing up a physical characteristic from his past.

Peris : “Yes, I mean, but what if I don’t recognize myself?”

Tally : **“Oh, come on. No matter how beautiful they make you the ghost of that giant nose will haunt you forever.”** (00:03:26)

This is a particularized conversational implicature because it relies on shared background knowledge between Tally and Peris. The remark about the “giant nose” suggests that, despite the physical changes from the transformation, a trace of his former self will remain in some symbolic way. The reference to the “giant nose” requires the listener to be aware of Peris’s specific physical feature and their inside joke, making it a particularized implicature. The humor and reassurance in Tally’s comment hinge on the context of their friendship and shared history, making it necessary for the listener to understand these details to grasp the full meaning.

Data 2

In the scene where Tally and Shay discuss their adventurous experiences, Tally talks about jumping off a building with a bungee jacket, which had led to her being chased. Shay, impressed, remarks that Tally is “cooler than she looks,” to which Tally responds by acknowledging Shay’s daring nature as well. They share laughs and banter, which solidifies their connection. As they walk and talk, Shay asks Tally about her experience at the Pretty party,

expressing curiosity about the lifestyle and the changes Tally witnessed, revealing Shay's deeper desire to understand the Pretty world and her struggle with feeling left behind.

Tally : "What were you doing by the river anyway?"

Shay : "**Uh... Just... tricks.**" (00:17:44)

This is a particularized conversational implicature because Shay's response involves implicature that requires contextual knowledge of her rebellious and adventurous nature. The word "tricks" is used vaguely, and the audience needs to understand that Shay is likely downplaying what she was actually doing, possibly dangerous or forbidden stunts, given the context of their world where certain activities are restricted. To fully grasp the implicature, the listener needs to be aware of Shay's character traits, her tendency to engage in risky behavior, and the societal rules that they often break. Hence, the implicature relies on particular background knowledge rather than being a general inference.

Data 3

Tally is recruited by Dr. Cable to infiltrate a group called "The Smoke," which is believed to be planning an attack on their city. Dr. Cable manipulates Tally by claiming that her friend Shay is now under the influence of a dangerous leader named David. Tally reluctantly agrees to help but later encounters David, who explains that the tracker used to find her was standard procedure for newcomers. This context presents a situation filled with suspicion, manipulation, and conflicting information, setting the stage for Tally's internal conflict about whom to trust.

David : "I'm David. I need your pack. You're lucky we found you. Oh. Tracker."

Tally : "I had no idea that was there. I promise."

David : "**They always put trackers on boards. That's how I found you..**" (00:43:23)

This is a particularized conversational implicature because David's response requires specific contextual knowledge for the implied meaning to be understood. When he says, "They always put trackers on boards," he's indirectly suggesting that Tally's story is plausible and that she might not be lying about being unaware of the tracker. However, his insistence on searching her and checking for other devices implies a lack of complete trust. The implicature hinges on the particular situation, where knowing about standard practices and Tally's previous encounter with Dr. Cable adds layers of meaning to David's cautious approach.

Data 4

After discovering more about the surgery and its hidden dangers, Tally struggles with her guilt over her involvement with The Smoke, a rebellious group. She confesses her role to David, trying to explain her conflicting feelings and why she did what she did.

Tally : "**Listen. I tried to destroy the pendant. I didn't know that it would call them. I didn't know! I'm sorry.**" (01:15:07)

David : "Croy was right. You... You lied. Every word was a lie, Tally."

Tally's explanation reveals her unintentional role in bringing the authorities to The Smoke. The implicature is that her actions, although not deliberately malicious, had disastrous consequences. David's response, accusing her of lying, reflects the breach of trust between them. The implicature here depends on understanding the stakes and the emotional tension between the characters. This is a particularized conversational implicature because it requires the specific context of Tally's conflicting loyalties and the role of the pendant.

Data 5

Shay recounts her experience resisting the surgery, emphasizing her defiant attitude and reluctance to conform to society's standards. Her description of the event illustrates her rebellious nature, as she recounts fighting back against the medical staff who attempted to impose the transformation on her.

Shay : **“You should have seen me kicking and screaming. I nearly scratched out a nurse’s eye.”** (01:20:45)

Tally : “I wish I could have been there.”

Shay’s statement about “kicking and screaming” and nearly injuring a nurse reflects her fierce resistance to the conformity enforced by the surgery. The implicature goes beyond the literal account, highlighting her strong-willed nature and refusal to submit. Understanding the deeper meaning requires knowledge of the societal pressures and the significance of the transformation, making this a particularized conversational implicature tied to the specific context of Shay’s character evolution.

Data 6

As the conflict escalates, Tally is determined to take action to save her friends, despite the risks involved. She expresses her willingness to undergo surgery, believing it will enable her to save Shay and potentially others who are trapped by societal norms.

Tally : **“I’ll be your test subject. They’ll turn me and, and then you’ll turn me back.”** (01:27:37)

David : “Tally, no.”

Tally’s declaration to become a test subject signifies her deep commitment to her friends and her willingness to sacrifice her well-being for their sake. The implicature here is that Tally believes her actions can lead to a greater good, indicating a shift from self-preservation to self-sacrifice. The urgency in her voice reveals her determination to fight against the oppressive system. This instance represents particularized conversational implicature as it is rooted in the specific context of their struggle against the societal pressure to conform, highlighting Tally’s character development.

CONCLUSION

This study explored conversational implicature in the 2024 film *Uglies*, focusing on how characters communicate indirect meanings through both generalized and particularized implicature. Using Levinson’s (1983) theory, the analysis revealed that generalized implicatures were often used to convey universal truths about societal pressure and conformity, while particularized implicatures were more context-dependent, reflecting the characters’ personal struggles with identity and rebellion. The findings highlight the critical role of context in interpreting implied meanings, especially in a narrative that examines the tension between individual agency and societal control. In conclusion, the use of conversational implicature in *Uglies* not only enhances the depth of the characters’ interactions but also underscores broader themes of resistance and conformity. By analyzing these dialogues through a pragmatic lens, this study contributes to a deeper understanding of how language and indirect communication can be used to critique societal norms and explore complex human emotions.

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