Tropic Implicature

Exploring conversational implicatures in contemporary prose through the use of Grice's conversational theories can be an interesting and profitable exercise. Language tropes offer a rich source of implicatures to examine in the search for understanding of how an author achieves the desired effects of his or her writing. The under-meanings which lie in layers in good prose can yield up their buried secrets when carefully excavated with the help of applied pragmatics. I plan to explore the tropes employed by a contemporary Native American author, Louise Erdrich, in her short story, *Skunk Dreams*, by using Grice's theory to see how the tropes violate or adhere to his maxims.

In looking at the ambiguities created by tropes, it is important to note that the reader is the creator of the many meanings. If the reader is unsophisticated in deciphering metaphors, or other tropes, then they will miss the hidden depths of a prose piece. Conversely, if the reader is very sophisticated and close reader, then the possibilities of significance are limited only by the bounds imposed upon this reader by his or her own thoughts and inclinations (Chen 53-54). According to Grice, human communication (speech) is governed by a Cooperative Principle, in which both speaker, (or author, in the case of writing), and hearer, (or reader, in the case of reading), cooperate to obtain the maximum result with the least cost to both (Grice 52-54). In our study, a maximum result would be the greatest multiple impact that could be achieved through the reading and deciphering of a given trope. The least cost is harder to define. We may hypothesize that the author has edited her work to produce the greatest impact with the least cost to the reader. In examining the work closely, however, we discover that the pacing of the read is controlled by the placement of words and punctuation upon the page, and that sometimes the desired effect is not necessarily efficiency, but impact, and that the greatest impact may be achieved through the use of repetition, or omission, of specific language elements.

Louise Erdrich exhibits great skill in her writing, exploiting and manipulating an impressive arsenal of language subtleties. The tropes she employs are designed to entice and intrigue, teasing at times, stark at others, drawing word landscapes as varied as the regions of which she writes. In this essay, she transports us across time and space, sometimes meandering, sometimes racing, but always on a track rich with meaning. With each retracing of the journey, new thoughts are uncovered, like friendly garden implements lightly buried under autumn's drifts, resurrected by the passage of scuffling feet. The vocabulary itself is rich, but it is the precise placement of each word through the use of tropes which creates such stunning richness.

The title itself hints at this richness in her writing, for in the two words, *Skunk Dreams*, are multiple layers of a carefully crafted and elegantly designed essay. Embodied in the phrase is the trope of syllepsis, a pun, which is the "use of a word understood differently in relation to two or more other words, which it modifies or governs" (Corbett 448). The phrase could denote a skunk dreaming of its past encounters with food and animals, humans dreaming about skunk encounters, skunks dreaming about humans, skunks dreaming humans into existence, humans dreaming skunks into existence, or, ultimately, a human dreaming of being a skunk. The ambiguities are what give the title significance and provide entrance into the complexities of this story.

In applying Grice's maxims to the foregoing title, the right amount of information for quantity would seem to be violated because the terseness of the phrase provides a paucity of information. It is this lack which forces the reader to pursue his or her thoughts on what is actually meant. With each reading of the story, the title can take on added significance when juxtaposed with the complexities of Erdrich's scenarios. The ambiguities are a direct violation of the categories of "*Manner*" listed under Grice's "supermaxim" of "Be perspicuous" (53). "Avoid ambiguity," (53) says Grice, but this piece would lose much of its impact if ambiguity were eliminated. Indeed, all of the tropes we will be examining will be concerned with the "...*how* what is said is to be said,..." (53).

The story begins with the author's account of her encounter with a skunk on a night she chose to sleep outdoors on her high school's football field. In telling of the encounter, Erdrich employs synecdoche, a "figure of speech in which a part stands for the whole" (Corbett 445). This implicature would also seem to violate the maxim of quantity because the "part" is by definition not the "whole," and without the whole we are left with an insufficient quantity. Erdrich states, "A skunk trailed a plume of steam across the forty-yard line near moonrise" (110). "Forty-yard line" is substituted here as the part representing the whole of "football field." The choice of the "forty-yard line" phrase is more specific and has deeper connotations for those who understand the game. The forty-yard line is not quite halfway

down the field, not all the way there, certainly, and in that context gives a definite wrench to the passage, and to our understanding of the event. This is a not-quite-real experience, or more exactly, a surreal one, and the skunk's visitation has great import for the tie-in at the end of the essay.

In the next paragraph Erdrich details the closeness of her skunk encounter by employing an oxymoron. "At the back of my knees, on the quilting of my sleeping bag, it trod out a spot for itself and then, with a serene little groan, curled up and lay perfectly still" (110). The juxtaposition of "serene" with "groan" renders a delightful oxymoron, for the two words embody "the yoking of two terms that are ordinarily contradictory" (Corbett 456). This is a fresh, new phrase for contemplation. Picture a "serene" skunk, uncaring and self-confident in the presence of human comfort. It voices a "groan" of exquisite contentment, having found an apparently perfect resting place for the duration of a frost-filled night. By using an oxymoron, the author would seem to have violated the maxim of manner by making this passage contradictory, and forcing us to deal with the ambiguity. However, the device works because the reader can relate the exquisite pleasure of the skunk's happy settling to the groan of pain's ease.

To further detail the experience, Erdrich explains her wakeful actions with deliberate grace. "Carefully, making only the slightest of rustles, I drew the bag away from my face and took a deep breath of the night air, enriched with skunk, but clear and watery and cold" (110). The trope of polysendeton, the "deliberate use of many conjunctions" (Corbett 435), is employed with the use of "and" twice in the final phrase "but clear and watery and cold." The atmosphere's attributes are detailed as Erdrich experienced them, sequentially, and under the weighty presence of her napping visitor. The two "and's" give balance to the phrase and create a triumvirate of characteristics to contemplate. The sentence is graceful and evocative, defining with even greater clarity the perspective of the event by use of this scheme. Here again is a violation of the manner maxim, because one of the two "and's" could have been replaced with a comma and the sentence would thus have been more brief. However, the balance is more perfect and deliberate with their use.

The very next sentence employs two distinct tropes. Erdrich says, "It wasn't so bad, and the skunk didn't stir at all, so I watched the moon--caught that night in an envelope of silk, a mist--pass over my sleeping field of teenage guts and glory" (110). The "sleeping field" is a syllepsis-type pun because the field itself "sleeps" in the remnants of winter and the author "sleeps" on it this night. Syllepsis is the "use of a word understood differently in relation to two or more other words, which it modifies or governs" (Corbett 448). In this instance, we are faced with ambiguities which leave us with many meanings to explore. Again, the supermaxim of perspicuity has been violated by the obvious ambiguities. The "field of teenage guts and glory" is an example of the trope metonymy. In this sentence, the attributes of "guts and glory" represent the entire "football field." In the largest sense, we are seeing much more information, and in a more graphic form, than is necessary for communicating the location of the event. This being the case, the phrase would seem to violate Grice's admonition to be brief, or succinct (59). Brevity is not the paramount concern of Erdrich, however, because she wants the reader to experience an evocative moment.

The connection between Erdrich and the skunk as they lay sleeping on the frosty field is speculated upon at length. The author writes, "Perhaps that night the skunk and I dreamed each other's thoughts or are still dreaming them" (111). Erdrich invests the skunk with human characteristics here, a practice which is common to all people who identify with their pets, wildlife, or to living things in general. The trope of personification is effective here as a lead-in to her speculation on dreams as reality. Personification involves a mode of ambiguity, which has been noted as a violation of Grice's manner maxim, because the object or animal has characteristics of its own which are overridden by the over layering of human ones.

The trope of hyperbole in the next statement shifts the emphasis from the usual acrid-painful-inevitable scene of a skunk encounter to its effect upon human consciousness. Erdrich states, "And even I, who have been in the presence of a direct skunk hit, wouldn't classify their weapon as mere smell. It is more on the order of a reality-enhancing experience" (112). Erdrich's emphasis is well-placed. Experiencing the defensive armament of a skunk does connect one powerfully with reality, and the longevity of its odorous aftereffects forces that connectedness for an extended period. The experience cannot be hurried because the odor wears off only with time, and, like the necessary time spent in a hyperbaric chamber after deep-diving, the period spent slowly deodorizing lends itself to introspection. The hyperbole is an exaggerated overstatement of the situation, thus giving an excessive amount of information. According to Grice, too much information violates the quantity maxim which states, "Do not make your contribution more informative than is required" (53). He also notes, by way of modification, "(The second maxim is disputable: it might be said that to be over informative is not a transgression of the

Cooperative Principle but merely a waste of time" (53). In the prose of Erdrich, we are treated to too much information as a way of evoking our own memories of such encounters, or the revealed encounters of others. Perhaps to truly get there by visualization, you really have to have been there at a similar shocking skunk shot.

The dream Erdrich reveals in this sequence becomes the setting for a future encounter with ambivalent obsession. To accurately evoke the scene, she employs the omission scheme of ellipsis. In her dream, Erdrich envisions a scene in which, "The fencing was chain-link in places, chicken wire, sagging X wire, barbed wire on top, jerry-built with tipped out poles and uncertain corners nailed to log posts and growing trees. And yet it was quite impermeable and solid, as time-tested, broken-looking things so often are" (113). To have written the passage with all the modifiers and conjunctions would have weakened its effect. It is this precise juxtaposition of phrases which makes the structure startlingly dreamlike. We "see" the sturdy ugliness of the structure through her prose. If the omission of information is considered a violation of Grice's quantity maxim, then this passage would qualify. If, however, we interpret the maxim in light of Erdrich's effect, the violation is a superficial one at best because she has truly found a way to make the "...contribution as informative as is required (for the current purposes of the exchange) (53). The two considerations in Grice would seem to cancel each other, and therefore the scheme does not hold as a true violation.

Further detail of her dream is rendered vividly by again using the tropes of personification and the pun-type, antanaclasis, which is "repetition of a word in two different senses" (Corbett 447). Erdrich reveals her vision thus, "In my dream I walked up to the fence, looked within, and saw tawny, humpbacked elk move among the great trunks and slashing green arms" (113). The "great trunks and slashing green arms" personify the trees within the enclosure, portraying them as large and strangely-colored human figures. The pun of antanaclasis lends double meaning to "trunks" and gives the sentence added depth, for both trees and humans have trunks from which "arms" (limbs) depend. As a pun, the passage involves plenty of ambiguity to exploit, and ambiguity violates the supermaxim of "Be perspicuous" (53). The elks in her dream were seen by Erdrich as "Suave, imponderable, magnificently dumb, they lurched and floated through the dim-complexioned air" (113), a further implementation of layering meanings through the use of personification, not only of the elk, but of the air as well. The elk play a still more emphatic role in the dream, however, one of disturbing implications.

When in time Erdrich moves from open prairie to forested country, she becomes distrustful of the green magnificence and close horizons of her new habitat. Her use of the trope simile, "an explicit comparison between two things of unlike nature that yet have something in common" (Corbett 444), shows how the landscape looked and felt. She likens her outside views to interior spaces by stating, "Besides, the entire Northeast seemed like the inside of a house to me, the sky small and oddly lit, as if by an electric bulb" (114). We see through her eyes the close, dim surroundings, so different from the bigness and brightness of the prairie lands of her early home. Here is an effective use of contrasting elements to accurately portray the look and feel of place. By employing simile, the author gives us a closer look at what is being described, and shortens the distance a reader has to cover to gain understanding. In this passage, then, Erdrich facilitates communication, and the simile would seem to adhere to Grice's supermaxim to be perspicuous (53).

As a neophyte to the woods, Erdrich became an enthusiastic patron, and the trees became her close acquaintances. Especially inviting were the windy-day trees. Erdrich enthusiastically personifies her new friends by saying, "All around me, I watched the trees tossing, their heads bending. At times the movement seemed passionate, as though they were flung together in an eager embrace, caressing each other, branch to branch" (115). The personification changes as she becomes more deeply involved with her subjects; "On days of high wind they move so freely it must give them a cellular pleasure close to terror" (116). The trope of paradox is employed here to heighten our awareness of her understanding. Paradox is "an apparently contradictory statement that nevertheless contains a measure of truth" (Corbett 457). Here the paradox is rooted in the phrase "pleasure close to terror," which conjures memories of roller coasters ridden for the pleasure of being safely terrorized. Paradox inherently involves an ambiguity because, by definition, it involves contradiction. As with so many other tropes, the ambiguity factor makes it a manner violation. Erdrich is not concerned with the violation of manner here, but with the depiction of personified tree friends. Her technique draws us into the depths of that wood on a stormy day so as to appreciate the majesty and awe of the moment.

Erdrich is no mere voyeur of the passionate trees, however, but an enthusiastic participant. She actively engages the company of trees on windy days by, "Standing at the bottom, craning back, fingers clenched in grooves of bark, I held on as the crown of the tree roared and beat the air a hundred feet

above. The movement was frantic, the soft-needled branches long and supple. I thought of a woman tossing, anchored in passion: calm one instant, full-throated the next, hair vast and dark, shedding the piercing, fresh oil of broken needles" (116). She is connected to the trees by passion, and the trees take on feminine personalities with which she identifies and bonds. The personification trope of investing trees with human characteristics is an unusually effective one, particularly so because of her insertion of passionate elements. Erdrich's involvement with the woman-trees becomes a type of communion, refreshing, invigorating, nourishing, addicting in its attraction. All these elements can be felt in the passage above, and are skillful products of tropic manipulation. Layered meanings such as these are designed to be multiple ambiguities, but as ambiguities they violate the manner maxim of conversation, as has been noted previously.

A shift in focus occurs when Erdrich encounters the fence foreseen in her dream. It becomes an object of frustration, and ultimately of obsession. The animals and trees are near enough to observe, but not accessible enough to experience fully. Erdrich says of her relationship with the fence, "The obstacles that we overcome define us" (118). She is speaking metaphorically here, because people are not dead words, but living beings. As Chen notes, Grice believes metaphor is a violation of quality because of the surface falsity inherent within the prose (Chen 59). Thus, a mutuality of experience is necessary for author and reader to concatenate meanings and employ the Cooperative Principle (Chen 60). Thus, we acknowledge that Erdrich's deft observation is a true one, despite the seeming incongruity, because she realizes that the human qualities of perseverance and creativity are strengthened by meeting the challenges of adversity. In this thought, then, the fence as adversary becomes the agent of adversity, and as such is the author of Erdrich's continued "definition." Her initial coping mechanism with the frustration of exclusion is denial. She states, "After my first apprehension, I ignored the fence. I walked along it as if it simply did not exist, as if I really were part of that place which lay just beyond my reach" (118). Her use of the word "apprehension" is another clever insertion of a syllepsis pun, and particularly apt here because she has apprehended the fence by encountering it, and she is understandably apprehensive of it because it is electrified. Ambiguity plied upon ambiguity abounds in Erdrich's prose, and indeed seems to be the chief tool employed to assemble the special effects of her composition. Thus, Grice's manner maxims are ruthlessly violated to reach Erdrich's prose-goals. Perhaps the very nature of prose lends itself most readily to the multiple ways in which ambiguities may be created within the text to suit the author's purpose. In this case, the sophisticated close reader will encounter scant difficulty in detection and interpretation of the abundant ambiguities built in to the story. These two challenges are the ones which readers will have to overcome if they are to experience a text fully (Chen 53). Experience in the "real world" of wild animals and their surroundings, as well as a high-school education, would seem to be the requisite knowledge to spin a common thread binding reader to text. A healthy dose of passion would help as well.

The author's attitude toward the fence evolves from acceptance to rejection as her walks continue along the forbidden perimeter to the private preserve encased by the fence. Erdrich speaks of her determination to breach the barrier by saying, "From the moment I began to see the fence as permeable, it became something to overcome" (119). In labeling the fence as "permeable" she gives the fence qualities not normally associated with fences. Permeability is usually associated with porosity in relation to liquids. The possibility for confusion certainly exists in this passage because of the apparent paradoxical violation of Grice's manner maxim. Nevertheless, this is an appropriate distinction in language manipulation because the author does not so much want to tear the fence apart as to flow through it, hence, to "permeate" the obstacle. Erdrich draws an elegant metaphorical portrait of the fence, not so much as a solid obstacle, but as a filter, capable of keeping most humans and animals compartmentalized, but not a free-spirited skunk-woman such as herself.

Her first escapade with the porcine denizens of the quasi-wildwood is stunningly depicted. Erdrich relates, "In a half crouch, I looked straight into the face of a boar, massive as a boulder" (119). The simile leaves no doubt as to the immovability and sheer bulk of the boar. Erdrich continues, "Cornfed, razor-tusked, alert, sensitive ears pricked, it edged slightly backward into the convening shadows" (119). The simile "convening shadows" brings connotations of surreal assistance for the boar and his family, and draws our attention to the tension which exists in all such encounters between humanity and other members of the animal kingdom. The further description of the boar is carefully designed to portray the potential menace in succinct and frightening detail. "Two ice picks of light gleamed from its shrouded, tiny eyes, impossible to read," states Erdrich (119), employing pointed metaphor to bring the image into sharp focus. Quality is being violated on multiple counts because ice picks do not have light, eyes cannot be literally shrouded, and eyes cannot be read like a text.

Resuming the rocklike metaphor begun with the first boar description, Erdrich, lets us into the scene through her eyes as they open up to the wider picture, "Beyond the rock of its shoulder, I saw more: a sow and three cinnamon-brown farrows crossing a small field of glare snow, lit by dazzling sun" (119). The metaphor, "rock of its shoulder," imprints us with the immutability of this beast, set to meet all adversity until its family is safely away from peril. Despite the tenseness and danger, comic elements spring from the encounter. The young pigs catch her attention, and she personifies them with a metaphorical trope which emphasizes the oneness humans share with mammals regarding families. "The young skittered along, lumps of muscled fat on tiny hooves. They reminded me of snowsuited toddlers on new skates" (119).

In spite of her privileged status as visitor, Erdrich's ambiguous feelings regarding the preserve still haunt her thoughts. To indelibly burn these feelings into our consciousness, she employs two powerful tropes. She states bluntly, "Yet the dumb fervor of the place depresses me--the wilderness locked up and managed but not for its sake; the animals imported and cultivated to give pleasure through their deaths" (120). The oxymoronic phrase "dumb fervor" strikes at us because "fervor" is usually associated with noise and action, and "dumb" has the connotation of unwilling silence, and the more commonly crass one of stupidity. Captivity killings offer no sport, she implies; these beasts cannot speak for themselves, and their human foils are too stupid or uncaring to do so. How can there be pleasure given for the deaths of animals unable to flee or fight? This surely is a paradox, because we are confronted with an apparent contradiction containing truth.

In continuing the essay, Erdrich leads us back to the skunk trail with some observations on their immunity to hunting schemes. She personifies skunks with a carefree attitude, and characterizes them as beings "without concern" (120). Their weaponry renders them nuisances and little else. Personification of their ability to live life without concern might just as easily be attributed to a lack of brainpower as to a cognizance of their lack of desirability to human gastronomy or trophy seeking. Erdrich muses, "Not worth hunting, inedible except to old trappers like my uncle Ben Gourneau, who boiled his skunk with onions in three changes of water, skunks pass in and out of Corbin's Park without hindrance, without concern" (120). The personification theme is continued neatly here, with skunks passing, as does Erdrich herself, a counterfeit presence within the restricted enclave of exclusive and very private Corbin's Park. In Erdrich, though, the passing of her presence in and out contrasts sharply with the skunks. Hers is definitely a foreign presence, as contrasted with the skunks natural one, and she quite deliberately and mindfully inserts herself into the elite hunter's paradise, as contrasted with the skunks mindless passing.

"I wouldn't walk so much as putter, destinationless, in a serene belligerence--past hunters, past death overhead, past death all around," fantasizes Erdrich (120). The oxymoronic trope of serene belligerence really brings into sharp focus the author's picture of skunk attitude. Serene because of inherent immunity to harassment, belligerent because it can have its own way all the time, the apparent contradiction works nicely into the closing. "Past" is the key. The skunk, any skunk, walks past all things, and the things in its past cannot haunt or harm it, because no trauma to a skunk can be terribly severe. Who is to say? Again, the author invites exploration of these ideas through the offering of multiple meanings in ambiguity. Erdrich knows her skunks intimately, and perhaps she has the formula for a happy existence after all. "Serene belligerence" and the ability to walk "past" all threats "without concern" are the author's succinct blueprint for contentment. Thus, we leave Erdrich's essay with much to wonder. In each trope, we must make the choices and take the road or roads offered to arrive at our own responsive conclusions. It is our implementation of the Cooperative Principle which ultimately prizes out the nuggets which resonate within us to the vibrations of Erdrich's story, and these nuggets are the products of detected and interpreted metaphorical language. Rather than leaving this exploration with the violations neatly cataloged, it would be more productive to look at whether the author met her goals in engaging the reader. Chen speaks of speaker, or author, motives when he says:

> The third motivating principle, the Expressiveness Principle, is more closely related to the study of metaphor. Simply stated, it means a speaker chooses to violate a maxim because she wants to be expressive. Expressiveness thus used is composed of two aspects. First, it indicates that the speaker has strong emotions about what she is conveying. Second, the speaker wants to pass on her emotion and meaning to the hearer forcefully and effectively, leaving as much impact, psychological, aesthetic, or otherwise is possible on the hearer. As a result, the speaker uses language elaborate in structure and deviant from the norm, which might sacrifice clarity and easy understanding as specified by Grice's Cooperative

Principle. (53)

In Erdrich's prose we find ample evidence of the strong, elaborate, deviant language of one whose purpose is to "...pass on her emotion and meaning to the hearer..." (63). She successfully engages us in experiencing a deeper understanding of what it means to be in harmony with our inherent wildness.

Thus, in exploring the *how* of an author's process, the previous examples help to illustrate that pragmatic theories can offer the reader analyst understanding of the technical aspects of building meaning, and to provide yet another avenue of exploration into the making of meaning between those interested in a holistic approach to discourse. With practice, this type of analysis should yield further insights into how the technicalities of written communication can be utilized by the reader when rendering his or her own prose or poetry.

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