

CONVERSATIONAL IMPLICATURE IN PRISON BREAK E102

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Abstract

Implicature plays a significant role in both literature and everyday communication, as it allows speakers to convey meanings that are not explicitly stated. This study aims to identify and analyze the types of conversational implicatures found and its hidden meaning in dialogues from the television series *Prison Break*. The purpose of this research is to explore how implicature functions not only as a linguistic phenomenon but also as a narrative device that reflects character dynamics and emotional depth within a high-stakes prison environment. The novelty of this study lies in its focus on implicature in a serialized crime drama, where indirect communication serves as a strategic tool for survival, manipulation, and resistance. This area has received limited attention in previous studies. Using a descriptive qualitative method, the study collects and examines selected dialogues based on Grice's theory of implicature. The findings show that particularized implicatures are dominant, making up 80% of the data. This result highlights how heavily characters use context-dependent communication to express hidden intentions, avoid direct confrontation, and navigate complex relationships. The use of implicature in *Prison Break* is shown to be essential not only for character development but also for building tension and advancing the storyline, reinforcing its role as a powerful narrative technique.

Keywords: Conversational Implicature, Prison Break Series

INTRODUCTION

Conversational implicature is a concept introduced by Grice in 1975. It explores the underlying meanings or signals behind utterances that are not explicitly stated (Grice, 1975). This concept highlights that communication often involves more than just the literal meanings of words, requiring both the speaker and the listener to collaborate effectively. In this collaborative process, both parties aim to understand each other's intentions and avoid misunderstandings. When the rules of effective communication are violated, misunderstandings can occur, leading to the emergence of conversational implicature.

Context plays a vital role in conversational implicature by providing the framework within which utterances are interpreted (Musa, 2022). Speakers rely on context to convey messages indirectly instead of explicitly stating them. Context determines whether an utterance generates particularized or generalized implicatures in conversational implicature. Particularized implicatures arise in specific contexts where additional background knowledge is needed for interpretation.

Conversational implicature plays a significant role in literature and everyday interactions, making it an intriguing topic for discussion (Liliyan et al., 2023). In daily life, implicatures allow speakers to communicate efficiently while maintaining social

harmony. They enable individuals to indirectly convey sensitive or controversial messages, minimizing potential conflicts or discomfort (Musa et al., 2022). Implicatures also enhance verbal efficiency by allowing complex ideas to be expressed succinctly. Figures of speech, such as irony or understatement, often rely on implicature (Dwiwulandari & Dewanti, 2020). By examining hidden meanings within utterances and understanding their contextual underpinnings, we gain valuable insights into both everyday interactions and narrative structures in literature and media.

Numerous studies have explored conversational implicature, including literature and film analysis, across various contexts. Prastyaningsih and Harida (2021) examine the application of the Cooperative Principle in conversations, focusing on its four maxims: quantity, quality, relevance, and manner. It aims to identify the maxims violated by characters in the movie *New Moon* and to describe the implied meanings behind these violations. Using qualitative descriptive analysis, the research reveals thirty-one instances of maxim violations. The findings indicate that characters in the film intentionally flout these maxims for various reasons, highlighting that the true meaning of their statements extends beyond mere sentence structure and relies heavily on contextual understanding. Khairunas et al. (2020) analyze conversational implicature and maxim violations in the movie *Beauty and the Beast* using a descriptive qualitative method based on P.H. Grice's theory. The study identifies two types of conversational implicature: generalized and particularized, with generalized implicature being the most common. These findings highlight how implicatures and maxim violations contribute to character interactions and narrative development in the film. Firdaus and Satria (2025) analyze conversational implicature in the film *Uglies* (2024) through Levinson's (1983) pragmatic theory, focusing on generalized and particularized types. Using a qualitative descriptive approach, 47 instances of implicature were identified, with 53% categorized as particularized and 47% as generalized. The findings reveal that characters often rely on context-dependent dialogues to convey subtle meanings, highlighting the tension between societal conformity and individual agency.

This study shares similarities with previous research in its methodology and focus on conversational implicature. Previous researchers have focused on more general forms of implicature in movie communication, often examining how characters convey meaning through indirect expressions in various contexts. However, there has been a noticeable lack of studies that specifically investigate the types of implicatures that arise in high-pressure and conflict-laden situations, such as those depicted in films about prisoners. This study addresses this gap by focusing on the conversational implicatures in prison-themed films, thereby contributing to a more comprehensive understanding of how language operates under pressure. By investigating these unique contexts, we can gain a clearer perspective on the role of implicature in shaping character interactions and narrative developments within this genre.

This study aims to examine the types of conversational implicatures and their hidden meanings within the Netflix series *Prison Break*, focusing on dialogues between the main character and other inmates. The high-stakes environment depicted in the series provides rich material for analyzing how characters use indirect expressions to navigate complex social dynamics. *Prison Break* is particularly suitable for this analysis due to its intense psychological tension, layered character interactions, and realistic portrayal of prison life, where language often functions as a strategic tool for survival, manipulation,

and resistance. The series is also known for its complex and suspense-driven narrative, making it a fertile ground for uncovering subtle and context-dependent pragmatic features such as implicature. Additionally, its global popularity and strong fan base highlight its cultural relevance, supporting the significance of analyzing its linguistic and narrative strategies. By applying Grice's framework to these conversations, this research aims to identify the types of implicature and the hidden meanings embedded within the characters' utterances. This analysis sheds light on character motivations and illustrates broader principles of pragmatic inference in real-life communication. By employing a descriptive qualitative approach, this study seeks to contribute to a richer appreciation of language use in cinematic narratives, particularly in contexts with high tension and emotional stakes.

METHOD

The methodology employed in this study was a descriptive qualitative method, which is well-suited for analysing pragmatic features such as implicature in natural, context-rich dialogue. This approach allows for detailed interpretation of how indirect communication reflects character intentions and narrative dynamics, as recommended by Moleong (2012). The study adopts Grice's theory of conversational implicature (1975) as its main theoretical framework, focusing on the implied meanings within character interactions in the television series *Prison Break*. This is supported by related insights from pragmatics scholars such as Levinson (1983), who emphasised the importance of context in understanding meaning, and Yule (1996), who explored the function of indirectness in spoken interaction.

The object of this research is *Prison Break* Season 1 Episode 2, with a particular focus on Michael Scofield's dialogues with other inmates. The episode was selected for its emotionally intense and high-stakes prison setting, which encourages indirect communication and strategic use of implicature. Data were collected using documentation and note-taking methods. The researcher watched the episode thoroughly, identified key dialogues, and recorded relevant details including speaker names, timestamps, and full lines. These dialogues were then categorized based on Grice's distinction between generalized and particularized implicature.

The data analysis involved classifying each implicature, interpreting its meaning within the narrative context, and analyzing its function in the prison environment. This process highlighted how implicature is used by characters to negotiate power, conceal intentions, or express resistance. To enhance validity and reliability, the study employed triangulation. This included data source triangulation by analyzing recurring implicature patterns across the episode, and theory triangulation by drawing from multiple theoretical perspectives. These methodological steps ensured a more nuanced and credible analysis of implicature in the selected media content.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

This section presents the analysis of conversational implicatures found in selected dialogues from the *Prison Break* series. The aim is to identify the types of implicature, particularized and generalized, and interpret the hidden meanings embedded in the characters' utterances. Each data set is drawn from critical moments involving the main

character, Michael Scofield, and other inmates, where indirect language becomes a powerful tool for survival, manipulation, and expression of psychological depth.

The data are presented in bold for clarity and analyzed directly afterward. Through these interactions, the analysis reveals how implicature functions not only as a communicative strategy but also as a means of character development. In the tense, hierarchical, and emotionally charged prison setting, characters often choose indirectness to protect themselves, assert power, or express feelings they cannot state openly.

Table 1 Types of Implicature in Prison Break E012

Implicature Type	Frequency	Percentage
Particularized	4	80%
Generalized	1	20%
Total	5	100%

The dominance of particularized implicature (80%), as shown in Table 1, suggests that most of the characters' meanings are heavily context-bound. These implicatures require shared knowledge and situational awareness to be understood, reinforcing the layered and strategic nature of dialogue in the series. The remaining 20% of generalized implicature still carries meaning but does so with less reliance on immediate context, usually to maintain deniability or avoid suspicion. This communicative style is not only a narrative device but a tool for revealing character traits—such as Michael's calculated calmness, Charles's quiet despair, T-Bag's manipulative dominance, and John's strategic demands.

Each piece of dialogue is followed by a concise analysis that uncovers the type of implicature and its narrative function, with emphasis on how these pragmatic features contribute to the characters' tension, strategy, and complexity. By relying on conversational implicature rather than direct exposition, the show allows deeper engagement with character psychology. These findings demonstrate that implicature does more than create intrigue; it builds emotional depth, tension, and realism in character interactions and development.

DATA 1

Michael : “You ever think about Boston?”

Charles : “Sure.”

Michael : “Think you’ll ever see it again?”

Charles : “I am a 60-year-old man with 60 years left in my pocket.”

This is a clear case of particularized implicature. When Michael asks Charles if he has ever considered visiting Boston again since his imprisonment, Charles does not provide a straightforward answer. Instead, he responds indirectly, “*I am a 60-year-old man with 60 years left on my pocket,*” which implies the impossibility of such a visit. His words suggest that due to his old age and life sentence, he feels that seeing Boston again is not feasible. This nuanced communication is crucial as it reflects Charles' internal struggles and resignation regarding his circumstances.

Charles' indirect response highlights how conversational implicature operates within high-stakes environments like prisons. Implicature allows characters to express complex emotions and desires without explicitly stating them, thus maintaining safety in their interactions. In this case, while Charles does not say outright that he wishes to visit Boston, his words convey a profound longing and hopelessness that resonates deeply with Michael, who understands the weight of those implications. The implicature allows the viewer to sense Charles' inner turmoil without the need for an explicit emotional outburst, illustrating the power of restrained communication in character portrayal.

DATA 2

Michael : “What’s it take to shake down another inmate, get something he’s taken from you?”

John : “It would take Fibonacci.”

Michael : “Well, I’ll give you Fibonacci. I promise you that. When the time is right.”

This dialogue contains particularized implicature, where John's condition implicitly communicates that his help is conditional. In John's utterance reveals that he will only assist Michael if he first fulfills a prior obligation, providing information about Fibonacci, the individual responsible for John's imprisonment. Instead of saying "yes" or "no" directly, John opts for a more pointed approach, emphasizing his demands without unnecessary elaboration. This method aligns with John's character as a straightforward mobster who values clarity in communication.

Michael's understanding of John's background enables him to decode this implicature effectively. He recognizes that John's insistence on fulfilling conditions before offering help reflects both John's pragmatic approach to alliances and his need for retribution against Fibonacci. The interaction underscores how conversational implicature functions within the narrative framework of *Prison Break*, illustrating how characters navigate complex relationships and power dynamics through indirect communication. This instance also highlights the broader implications of conversational implicature in high-stakes environments like prisons.

DATA 3

Bellick : “Allen Schweitzer. That name means anything to you?”

Michael : “Should it?”

Bellick : “I don’t know. You tell me.”

Michael : “Never heard of the guy.”

Bellick : “Are you sure?”

Michael : “Positive.”

The implicature present in Michael's utterance can be classified as generalized implicature. Bellick's inquiry and Michael's evasive answer create a situation where Bellick infers that Michael is feigning ignorance. The context surrounding their dialogue allows Bellick to interpret Michael's response accurately, even though it is misleading. Michael directly states that he does not recognize the name, the implication is clear: he is aware of its importance and understands its connection to his escape plan. The audience and Bellick can grasp this underlying message through the nuances of their interaction.

This implicature illustrates Michael's ability to maintain a composed facade while actively manipulating those around him. His refusal to admit anything, even under suspicion, reflects his tactical nature and control over speech. At the same time, Bellick's persistence portrays him as suspicious and aggressive, reinforcing the antagonistic dynamic between the two characters.

DATA 4

T-Bag : "Next count."

Michael : "Tonight?"

T-Bag : "Problem with that? 'Cause we're going straight at them. You better catch it square, Fish. We're undermanned in a big way."

The type of implicature present in this dialogue can be classified as particularized implicature. T-Bag does not explicitly confirm that the attack will commence that night, his suggestion for Michael to prepare himself carries an implicit meaning that implies imminent danger. Michael's realization that the attack is indeed forthcoming hinges on his comprehension of the broader context in which they find themselves. Tension between racial factions has been building, and T-Bag's cryptic warning signals to Michael to brace himself for what is about to unfold. If Michael were unaware of the underlying tensions or previous warnings about potential violence, he might misinterpret T-Bag's intentions and fail to grasp the urgency of his message.

T-Bag's use of implication rather than direct speech supports his portrayal as manipulative and calculated. He uses ambiguity to assert dominance and create tension. For Michael, decoding this implicature shows his increasing awareness of prison politics and survival tactics. These exchanges help build T-Bag as a dangerous but strategic presence, while revealing Michael's evolving adaptability in a volatile environment.

DATA 5

Lincoln : "What the hell's a PUGNAC?"

Michael : "It lowers my insulin levels to the point that I'm hyperglycemic. As long as the good doctor thinks I'm a diabetic, I'll have plenty of time in there to do what I need to do."

This dialogue reflects particularized implicature, since the meaning relies on shared context. Instead of saying what PUGNAC is directly, Michael explains its effects in a way that signals a hidden purpose. Lincoln would struggle to decode Michael's explanation without prior awareness of the intricacies of the escape plan. Michael's mention of PUGNAC's role in destabilizing guard routines assumes Lincoln's familiarity with their broader scheme to exploit medical protocols. This aligns with Grice's assertion that particularized implicatures rely on situational context rather than generalized linguistic conventions (Cutting, 2005). If Lincoln lacked this background, he might have misinterpreted Michael's explanation as irrelevant or overly technical rather than recognizing its strategic significance.

Michael's long-winded explanation reveals his tendency to protect the full truth. His indirectness reflects a cautious, calculated side and emphasizes his role as the architect behind the escape plan. For Lincoln, his confusion and questioning serve to

highlight his position as an outsider to Michael's complex scheme, strengthening the narrative contrast between the brothers.

CONCLUSION

The analysis of conversational implicature in *Prison Break* reveals how indirect communication serves as a critical tool for characters to navigate high-stakes and emotionally charged environments. Among the five selected dialogues, particularized implicature dominates (80%), indicating that meaning is heavily dependent on situational and background knowledge. This prevalence highlights the strategic use of implicature in a prison setting, where characters often rely on indirect speech to conceal intentions, assert control, or protect themselves. Through this analysis, it becomes evident that implicature is not only a linguistic phenomenon but also a powerful narrative device. Characters use indirect language to express longing, build alliances, mask truth, or manipulate situations—demonstrated in Charles's subtle hopelessness, John's conditional negotiations, and T-Bag's cryptic threats, which reflect deeper psychological states and interpersonal tensions.

The findings also reveal that implicature significantly contributes to character development. Michael Scofield's consistent ability to decode hidden meanings showcases his intelligence and strategic mindset. Meanwhile, characters like T-Bag and John Abruzzi use implicature to maintain dominance or test loyalty, adding layers to their personalities. Even Lincoln's confusion in implicature-laden exchanges with Michael underscores his outsider role in the escape plan. By applying Grice's theory, the study illustrates that understanding implicature requires attention to both linguistic cues and narrative context. Indirect communication, far from being random, is context-driven, emotionally revealing, and pragmatically essential in high-pressure settings like prison. Thus, implicature shapes not only the content of dialogue but also the portrayal of relationships, power dynamics, and internal conflicts. This study contributes to pragmatics by emphasizing how indirect language becomes a nuanced strategy for survival, manipulation, and emotional expression in narratives defined by tension and psychological complexity.

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