

## "The Use of Manipulative Language by Esther in the Film Orphan by David Leslie Jhonson"

Satria Raditiyanto<sup>1</sup>, Sinta Dewi Rahmawati<sup>2</sup>,  
Purwadi<sup>3</sup>, Encep Rustandi<sup>4</sup>

<sup>1</sup>Sastra Inggris Universitas Kebangsaan Republik Indonesia | [satriaraditiyanto@fasos.ukri.ac.id](mailto:satriaraditiyanto@fasos.ukri.ac.id)

<sup>2</sup>Sastra Inggris Universitas Kebangsaan Republik Indonesia | [sintadwr15@gmail.com](mailto:sintadwr15@gmail.com)

<sup>3</sup>Sistem Informasi Universitas Kebangsaan Republik Indonesia | [purw4@fiksi.ukri.ac.id](mailto:purw4@fiksi.ukri.ac.id)

<sup>4</sup>Sastra Inggris Universitas Kebangsaan Republik Indonesia | [enceprustandi@ukri.ac.id](mailto:enceprustandi@ukri.ac.id)

### Abstract

This research examines the use of manipulative language in the film Orphan by David Leslie Jhonson a story by Alex Mace (2009), focusing on the character Esther who, despite her innocent appearance, uses sophisticated linguistic strategies to influence, deceive, and control others to achieve her hidden goals, by employing emotional framing, exploiting sympathy, and combining lies with incomplete thrust, Esther successfully manipulates how people around her perceive Esther. This research will analyse these manipulation tactics from psychological and linguistic perspectives, emphasizing the power and control dynamics demonstrated through Esther's character in this Orphan film. Additionally, this research compares the manipulative language in the film with its real-world applications in interpersonal relationships involving varying degrees of power. The research focuses on Esther's conversation with other characters to show how she uses language to manipulate, which heightens narrative tension, influences audience perception, and reflects human behaviour.

*Keywords: Manipulative Language, Linguistic Manipulation, Orphan Film by David Leslie Jhonson (2009), Power and Control, Emotional Framing.*

### 1. Introduction

Film is not just entertainment, but also a medium for exploring human psychology through its character. In cinematic analysis, the approach to characters is key to understanding the internal and external conflicts that shape them. One interesting example is the film *Orphan* written by David Leslie Jhonson (2009), directed by Jaume Collet-Serra, and based on a story by Alex Mace. The film tells the story of Esther, an orphan adopted by a grieving couple. While she initially appears sweet, Esther's behavior gradually becomes threatening, revealing layers of complexity in her character.

This research focuses on Esther's use of manipulative language, examining how her words control those around her. By analyzing the techniques Esther uses such as influencing others emotion, telling limited truths, and speaking in a persuasive manner this study looks at how her speaking supports the story and character development in the film.

## 2. Theories and Methods

### Methodology

This research focuses on Esther's use of manipulative language, examining how her words control those around her. By analyzing the techniques Esther uses such as influencing others emotion, telling limited truths, and speaking in a persuasive manner this study looks at how her speaking supports the story and character development in the film. Data were collected by repeatedly watching the film and taking notes on Esther's character dialogues.

### Theories

In this research, the researcher will also use Grice's theory of communication intent. This theory, known as the Maxim of Cooperation, Quantity, Quality, and Manner. The researcher will analyze how Esther intentionally violates or manipulates these principles to influence the perceptions and actions of others. For example, Esther may provide incomplete information or ignore relevance in her utterances to create her confusion or gain an emotional advantage.

Grice's theory can be used to analyze how Esther violates or manipulates these principles in her interactions with other characters, for instance, Esther may deliberately give incomplete information (Violating the quantity maxim), lie about certain facts (violating the quality maxim), divert other's attention with irrelevant information (violating the relation maxim), and speak confusingly (violating the manner maxi).

## 3. Results and Discussion

### Maxim of Quantity

The Quantity maxim requires the speaker to provide enough information, no more or less than necessary. In some scenes of the movie, Esther provides very limited information or on the contrary, too much irrelevant information. Here are examples of some of her dialogue are as follows:

(example 1)

*Kate: "Esther, why did you do that to the girl at school?" (00:43:59)*

*Esther: "I didn't do anything. I just told her to stay away from me." (00:44:16)*

In the dialog, Esther only gives very limited information which makes Kate confused and does not understand clearly what the situation is. The purpose is to avoid revealing the truth.

(example 2)

*Esther: "Well, you know, I've been here for almost a year now, and I really like it here. I've been going to school, I've made some friends, and I've been doing all my homework, and I just to make sure you know that I'm a good girl and I'm trying my best. I promise, I'm really trying hard to fit in and be a good daughter." (01:09:20)*

Here Esther gives a lengthy of her life seemingly trying to convince others that she is a good daughter. By providing too much unsolicited information, Esther distracts from the core of the problem and makes others seem like she is doing everything well, when it could be manipulation to cover up true behavior.

(example 4)

*Esther: "I've been trying to do everything right. I always make my bed, I clean my room, I'm polite, I listen to the teachers, I don't talk back, I even try to help around the house... and still, nobody understands me. I'm just trying so hard to fit in here, but nothing seems to work." (01:13:03)*

Here Esther gives too much information about things that may not actually be that important in the context of the conversation. By giving long explanations about everything she does, she is trying to make others feel sorry for her or impressed by her efforts, even though her aim may be to cover up or distract from the more important or suspicious actions she is doing.

### **Maxim Quality**

The maxim quality I Grice's theory requires speakers to say the right thing and avoid giving information that is false or for which there is insufficient evidence. Violation of this maxim occurs when the speaker lies and provides information without sufficient evidence. Here are some examples of Esther's dialogs that show violations of the maxim of quality:

(example 1)

*Kate: "Did you hurt Max?" (00:57:54)*

*Esther: "Of course not! I would never hurt Max. She's my little sister, and I love her." (00:58:33)*

In this dialogue, Esther does not admit that she hurt Max despite strong indications that she was involved. Her statement violates the maxim of quality because she is lying to avoid responsibility. Esther is trying to create an innocent and compassionate self image.

(example 2)

*Kate: "What happened to your dress? There's paint on it." (01:00:21)*

*Esther: "I was painting a picture for you, and I guess I didn't notice it got on my dress. I'm sorry." (01:00:33)*

Esther made up a false excuse to explain away the stain on her dress. In fact, the stain came from something very suspicious. By giving a plausible-sounding answer, she violates the maxim of quality by giving false information to cover up what she has done.

(example 3)

*Esther: "I heard that the other kids at school don't like me because they think I'm different. But I don't understand why. I've never done anything to them" (00:34:46)*

Esther states that she has never done anything to the other children at school, although in some scenes she is seen doing intimidating actions. This statement violates the maxim of quality because she makes a claim without sufficient evidence to back it up. Her goals to manipulate others into siding with her.

(example 4)

*Esther: "I just want to make you proud. I've been trying so hard to be good daughter" (01:09:20)*

Esther says this to her parents to build an image of herself as an obedient and good daughter, whereas her behaviour throughout the movie is in direct contradiction to this

statement. She violates the maxim quality by giving untrue information to manipulate her parent's emotions.

(example 5)

*Esther: "I'm just a little girl who wants to be loved" (00:16:03)*

This statement violates the maxim of quality because Esther's true identity is not a little girl. As an adult in disguise, she uses this lie to hide her true identity and exploit those around her.

### **Maxim of Relevance**

The maxim of relevance in Grice's theory requires speakers to provide information that is relevant to the context or topic of the conversation. Violation of this maxim occurs when the speaker diverts the conversation to another topic, provides information that is irrelevant to the question or situation, and avoids answering directly with an appropriate answer.

In the film *Orphan* by David Leslie Johnson (2009), Esther often violates the maxim of relevance to manipulate others. She behaves like diverting attention, touching the interlocutor's or emotions, or giving ambiguous answers to avoid discussions that could harm her. Here are some of Esther's dialog that violate the maxim of relevance:

(example 1)

*Kate: "Why did you lock Daniel in the treehouse?" (01:27:42)*

*Esther: "He doesn't even like me. He's always mean to me, and I just want him to stop." (01:27:57)*

This answer is irrelevant because Esther diverts her attention to how Daniel treats her, and his makes Esther look like she is the victim.

(example 2)

*Kate: "Why did you take Max to the pond without telling me?" (00:59:33)*

*Esther: "Max was so sad, and I thought it would cheer her up. I just wanted to help her feel better" (00:01:10)*

Esther avoids answering the real reason why she brought Max without permission by touching on Kate's emotions. This is a violation of relevance because she does not give an answer that is in line with reality.

(example 3)

*Kate: "What happened to your dress? Why is it torn?" (01:01:41)*

*Esther: "Oh. I was playing outside and saw a butterfly. I tried to catch it, and I must've torn it then." (01:02:04)*

Esther gave a long story but did not answer clearly what exactly happened to her clothes. She violates the maxim of relevance by giving irrelevant details.

(example 4)

*Kate: "Why is Max hearing aid missing?" (01:33:50)*

*Esther: "I can help you look for it. Maybe she left it somewhere when she was playing." (01:34:00)*

Esther didn't tell Kate what happened to Max's hearing device, and she also distracted the question by helping to find Max's hearing device without giving a relevant answer.

### **Maxim of Manner**

The manner maxim in Grice's theory refers to clarity in conveying information. This maxim requires the speaker to avoid ambiguity, avoid using unnecessary words, and convey information in an understandable manner.

Violations of manner maxims often occur when someone deliberately speaks unclearly, uses convoluted sentences, or hides their true intentions to manipulate listeners. Esther in orphan (2009) often violates the maxim of manners to confuse her interlocutors or hide her evil intentions. The following are some examples:

(example 1)

*Kate: "Why is there paint all over the floor?" (01:01:40)*

*Esther: "I think I must have accidentally knocked something over while I was cleaning. It's such a mess, isn't it?" (01:01:51)*

Esther gave an ambiguous answer. She didn't explain specifically how the paint was spilled, but she discussed the mess in general. This violates the maxim of method because the answer is unclear and seems to go in circles.

(example 2)

*Doctor: "How did you hurt your arm, Esther?" (01:12:25)*

*Esther: "Oh, it was just an accident. I was playing, and I must have bumped into something." (01:12:38)*

Esther gave a general answer that did not explain the details of how she hurt her hand. This answer violates the maxim of manners because it lacks clarity and specificity.

(example 3)

*John: "What happened to the flowers in the garden?" (01:12:48)*

*Esther: "Oh, I saw some weeds growing, so I tried to pull them out, but then I accidentally stepped on some flowers. I didn't mean to ruin anything." (01:13:22)*

Esther provided additional details that were not relevant to the question. Her answer becomes unfocused and too long, violating the maxim of manners.

(example 4)

*Girl: "Did you hear someone screaming last night?" (00: 33:10)*

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*Esther: "I think was the TV, I heard some noise, but I didn't pay much attention." (00:33:56)*

Esther gave an answer that did not match the facts by blaming another source (TV). This answer violates the maxim of manner because it is indirect and covers up the real information.

(example 5)

*Girl: "Why are you wearing those ribbons all the time?" (00:34:07)*

*Esther: "I just like them. They make me feel special" (00:35:10)*

Esther gave an answer that didn't explain the real reason she always wore ribbons. She deliberately spoke ambiguously to hide the truth, violating the maxim of manner.

(example 6)

*John: "Why do you think Kate is so hard on you?" (01:34:55)*

*Esther: "Maybe she doesn't want me to be part of the family. I don't know what I did wrong. I just want you to love me, Daddy" (01:35:46)*

Esther gave an emotional answer that did not explain the real question. She uses feelings to manipulate John into taking her side, violating the maxim of manner.

#### **4. Conclusions**

Esther's character in the Film Orphan written by David Leslie Jhonson, a story by Alex Mace (2009) consistently uses manipulative language to achieve her hidden goals, utilizing violations of Grice's four maxims: quantity, quality, relevance, and manner. She provides too little or too much information, often hiding the truth by lying or providing information that cannot be proven. In addition, Esther distracts with irrelevant answers and speaks in ambiguous ways to obscure original intentions and create confusion. This use of manipulative language reinforces Esther's role as an antagonist, increases narrative tension and gives a deeper dimension to her characterization. This research shows that language manipulation is not just a tool for fictional characters, but also provides insight into how this technique can be applied in everyday life and interpersonal communication, illustrating the dynamics of power and control in human relationships.

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