

Maxims Violation as the Construction of Humor in William Shakespeare's the Comedy of Errors

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ABSTRACT

This study aims to analyze maxim violations in William Shakespeare's *The Comedy of Errors* as a linguistic construction of humor in the characters' dialogues. The analysis is based on H. P. Grice's (1975) Cooperative Principle and its conversational maxims, which include the maxims of quantity, quality, relation, and manner. This research employs a qualitative descriptive method, with the primary data taken from the digital script of the play published by the Folger Shakespeare Library. The findings reveal a total of 50 maxim violations throughout the drama. The maxim of relation constitutes the highest frequency with 16 occurrences (32%), followed by the maxim of manner with 13 occurrences (26%), the maxim of quantity with 11 occurrences (22%), and the maxim of quality with 10 occurrences (20%). The dominance of relation violations indicates that humor in the play is predominantly constructed through responses that are irrelevant to the context, resulting in misunderstandings among the characters. These misunderstandings serve as a major comedic element and reinforce the theme of mistaken identity. Overall, the study concludes that Shakespeare intentionally employs maxim violations as a linguistic strategy to enhance humor and dramatic irony in *The Comedy of Errors*.

INTRODUCTION

Literature is a kind of writing that expresses and communicates thoughts, feelings and attitudes toward life (Rees, 1973). Literary work is a product of the thought of writers to convey their ideas to writers through oral and written language (Amalia & Juanda, 2021). Literary works can be in the form of poetry or in the form of prose. Literature refers to the study of texts from around the world, written and the role of literature is as a basic component and source of authentic text of the language curriculum is similarly stated by Similarly, Dewi et al. (2025). Literary works often reflect the experiences happen in real life situation. The evidence is seen by the themes that are commonly derived from human life such as sosial matters, culture, everyday life situation, love, broken heart, friendship, and other situations. Based on what have been stated by experts above, literary work is served as a medium to express emotions, thoughts, and ideas through written or spoken words. It is shown in the form of fictional work such as stories and novels, also be presented through performances such as drama play

The word "drama" is derived from the Greek which is δράμα (drama), means action, deed or play. According to Ferdinand Brunetierre, drama is one a kind of literary work performed through movement or action that evoke or hook the audience by its plot. While Tarbiyah et al. (2024) mentioned that according to Longley (2019), in literature, drama is the stage performance of written dialogue to depict events, either fictional or non-fictional. Also mentioned that as reported by Betti (2015) every tragedy contains six components in order to be considered good which are (1) plot, (2) character and (3) thought, which explains the tragedy's goals aim to accomplish, (4) spectacle, which demonstrate how it attends to accomplish the goals, and (5) dictation, and (6) music which tells the means must be used. Drama is delivered through the plot played by the actions of the actors with certain expressions, the dialogues and other crucial elements in drama play. In literature, drama holds the unique power of live performance which allowing the audience to come along in feeling the emotions and thoughts conveyed by the drama play. In this way, drama becomes more than just written text, it becomes a living art that communicates human emotions and ideas through performance.

Longley (2019) mentioned that drama could be either fictional or non-fictional. One of the examples of fictional drama is *The Comedy of Errors* by William Shakespeare. The comedy of errors is a drama play with comedy genre that tells about misadventures of two sets of identical twins. Many years earlier, the Syracusan merchant Egeon had twin sons, both named Antipholus. At their birth, he bought another pair of newborn twins, both named Dromio, as their servants. In a shipwreck, Egeon lost his wife, one of his sons, and one of the Dromios. Egeon's remaining son, Antipholus of Syracuse, and his servant, Dromio of Syracuse, come to Ephesus, without them knowing that their lost twins now live. The visitors are confused, angered, or intrigued when local residents seem to know them. Similarly, Antipholus and Dromio of Ephesus run into puzzling reactions from the people they know, the ones who have been dealing, unwittingly, with the Syracusans. Antipholus of Ephesus's wife bars

him from his house; he is jailed after a jeweler claims he owes money on a gold chain he never received. When the four twins come together, all is finally resolved. In one last twist, their parents reunite as well. Through these comedic elements, such as human mistakes, the play successfully creates a joyful atmosphere that allows the audience to enjoy the conflicts without tension.

In William Shakespeare's *The Comedy of Errors* with the "wrong-mention" names occurred, it shows that the mistakes of communication are not only affecting in confusion, but also creating the sense of comedy which encourage audience to laugh. Aristotle in *Poetics* described comedy as an imitation of human errors that appear laughable rather than harmful. This is seen in the play, where the characters' serious reactions to the absurd situations create a humorous contrast. Frye (1957) explained that comedy usually begins with disorder and ends in unity, which matches the movement of this drama from chaos to reunion. Morreall (2009) also stated that humor often comes from incongruity, when something unexpected or illogical happens. This appears throughout the play as each character meets the wrong twin and misinterprets their words or actions. By showing human mistakes in a harmless and amusing way, Shakespeare turns confusion into laughter and leaves the audience entertained. Through these comedic elements, the play creates a joyful atmosphere that allows the audience to enjoy the conflicts without tension.

Furthermore, Herawati (2013) mentioned that in order to communicate successfully, human beings are supposed to obey to a certain mode of interaction. For this reason, the linguist, Herbert Paul Grice, developed a mode of interaction for successful communication called the Cooperative Principle (CP) and its maxims based on ordinary language philosophy. The CP has been mentioned in many pragmatics works such as Yule (1996) and Grundy (2000) for its influence on the field of pragmatics. Next, Hossain (2021) mentioned that Grice makes a distinction between saying and meaning in his theory. He argues that speakers can create implicit meanings and their audiences can infer these intended meanings from their conversations. When it patently violates this assumption, we understand that meaning. Therefore, violation of relevance does not mean a lack of cooperation. The maxims that Grice's (1975) divided into 4, which are (1) Quantity: make your contribution as informative as is required, do not make your contribution more informative than is required. (2) Quality: do not say what you believe to be false and do not say that for which you lack adequate evidence. (3) Relation: be relevant. (4) Manner: avoid obscurity of expression and avoid ambiguity, also be orderly.

The example of Maxims violation:

Conversation in the series "Mind Your Language" season 1 episode 2 at minute [00:19:21 - 00:19:35]

Mr. Brown: "Anna Schmidt?"

Anna Schmidt: "Ja, present"

Mr. Brown: "Su Lee Chung?"

Su Lee Chung: "Present"

Mr. Brown: "Ali Nadim?"

Ali Nadim: "Gift"

Mr. Brown: "Gift?" (In confuse expression)

In the episode, the conversation above occurred in an international classroom, when Mr. Brown as a teacher was going to start the class by checking the student's attendance. Mr. Brown asked the students to answer him by saying "present" which confirms that they come to the class that day. It was all going well when he called the students until it came Ali Nadim's turn because when he was called, Ali answer "Gift" that made Mr. Brown confused. In the view of Maxims, Ali Nadim in this case is violating the maxim of relevance because of the answer "Gift". Ali Nadim's answer was irrelevant to the situation even though the word "gift" is a synonym of "present", but the context of the word "gift" in this conversation is not relevant.

Grice's Theory of Maxims is commonly used in analyzing the use of maxims in conversation as a way to give contribution to pragmatics, such as a previous research done by Hossain (2021) that briefly discuss about the importance of applying the cooperative principle by Grice. Other than that Grice's theory is also used to analyze the violation or flouting of the theory made by a comedian or in series dialogues, for instance in a previous research done by Feng-shuang (2021) that used American TV series called *Two Broke Girls* and showed that breaking the rules of normal conversation creates humor and shows how hidden meanings work in English jokes. As the use of animation movie is done by Arbain, et al. (2023) and found out that that the characters in the movie often break language rules to get what is wanted and control the conversation. Other than that, Abdullah, et al. (2025) examine the violation of maxims in some selected episodes of a series *Mind Your Language Season 1* and the result showed that the characters of the series broke all of Grice's rules for conversation. Lastly, Hang & Ha (2025) done the analysis on a person, a comedian named Jimmy O. Yang and gave findings in which the comedian broke multiple maxims principle, particularly combinations of Quality and Quantity or Quality and Relation as a way to construct humor, also conveying that mixed violations help enhance the impact of comedy.

The signs of Maxims violation in the drama throughout the plot, the researchers are interested in conducting a study entitled "Maxims Violation as the Construction of Humor in William Shakespeare's *The Comedy of Errors*". This study explores the violations of Maxims in a drama play entitled "The Comedy of Errors" by William Shakespeare, specifically identifies the types of maxims that its character possessed. The difference between this study and the previous studies is that the previous studies used the theory to analyze the flouting of digital drama series and, while this study explores the violation of Grice's Maxims theory that creates humor in a drama.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Maxim is one of the most important aspects in human communication and pragmatic studies. Maxims are not only used to make speech structured, but also help explain meaning through cooperation in conversation. According to Grice (1975) in *Logic and Conversation*, communication is guided by the Cooperative Principle, which means that speakers and listeners are expected to contribute

appropriately to the context of dialogue. Based on this principle, Grice introduced four maxims: **Quantity, Quality, Relation, and Manner**. These maxims serve as guidelines so that speakers give the right amount of information, tell the truth, remain relevant, and express themselves clearly.

This idea is supported by Herawati (2020), who emphasizes that the cooperative principle and maxims are central to communication, but their use can vary across cultures. In her study of one hundred Indonesian television talk shows, she found that Quality and Relation were generally observed, but Quantity and Manner were often violated. Interestingly, these violations did not always create communication failure, but rather reflected cultural values such as politeness, indirectness, and the importance of harmony. This shows that maxims are not only technical rules, but also a way to understand cultural and social meaning. In literary works, especially drama, maxim violations are often used as a tool to create humor. Shakespeare's *Much Ado About Nothing* is full of dialogues where characters flout maxims. Instead of making the dialogue confusing, these violations create comedy because the audience understands the mistake while the characters do not. According to Grice's theory, there are four main maxims, each of which can be observed or violated in different ways.

Maxim of Quantity

According to Hadi (2013) in a journal "A Critical Appraisal of Grice's Cooperative Principle", the maxim of quantity emphasizes that speakers should provide information that is sufficient and appropriate to the situation. It means giving neither too much nor too little information in order to maintain clarity and relevance in conversation. When this maxim is not observed, it often leads to confusion or even humorous misunderstandings caused by the speaker's failure to balance the amount of information shared. Below is the example of how maxim of quantity is violated.

Title: *Much Ado About Nothing* - Act 1, Scene 1, p. 12

Dialogue:

Beatrice: I pray you, is Signior Mountanto returned from the wars or no?

Messenger: **I know none of that name, lady: there was none such in the army of any sort.**

Leonato: Beatrice, he speaks truth. Benedick was indeed with the prince.

Hero: My cousin means Signior Benedick, uncle.

This dialogue happens when Beatrice teasingly asks about Benedick's return from the war by calling him "Signior Mountanto." The Messenger, not catching the joke, responds too seriously and gives an unnecessarily long answer. His over-detailed explanation causes confusion and makes the conversation sound funnier as Leonato and Hero have to clarify what Beatrice actually means. This dialogue violates the Maxim of Quantity proposed by Grice, which states that speakers should provide the right amount of information. The line "**there was none such in the army of any sort**" shows the Messenger's failure to do so, as he adds more detail than necessary. This excessive information creates humor through misunderstanding and highlights the literal-mindedness of the Messenger compared to Beatrice's witty playfulness.

Maxim of Quality

According to Hadi (2013) in a journal "A Critical Appraisal of Grice's Cooperative Principle," the maxim of quality focuses on truthfulness and accuracy. It requires speakers to say only what they believe to be true and to avoid statements that lack evidence or sincerity. When this maxim is violated, the result may include irony, exaggeration, or deliberate falsehood used not to deceive, but to achieve humor, sarcasm, or dramatic effect in communication. Below is the example of how maxim of quantity is violated.

Title: Much Ado About Nothing – Act 2, Scene 1, p. 45

Dialogue:

Beatrice: **He is the prince's jester, a very dull fool.**

Benedick: Lady Beatrice, I would I could find in my heart that I had not such a heart!

Leonato: You must not, sir, mistake my niece. There is a kind of merry war betwixt Signior Benedick and her.

Don Pedro: She speaks all mirth and no malice, I think.

This dialogue happens during the masquerade ball, where Beatrice mocks Benedick in front of others. Her tone is sarcastic and teasing, meant to entertain rather than to convey truth. The surrounding characters, including Don Pedro and Leonato, recognize her playfulness and treat it as harmless banter, while Benedick feels offended by her sharp words. This scene violates the Maxim of Quality, which requires speakers to say only what they believe to be true. The phrase "**the prince's jester, a very dull fool**" demonstrates Beatrice's intentional untruth, spoken not to deceive but to mock. Pragmatically, this deliberate falsehood produces irony and humor, showing how Shakespeare uses exaggeration to reveal Beatrice's intelligence and playful hostility toward Benedick.

Maxim of Relation

According to Hadi (2013) in a journal "A Critical Appraisal of Grice's Cooperative Principle," the maxim of relation highlights the importance of relevance in communication. It requires speakers to make their contributions directly related to the topic or purpose of the conversation. When this maxim is not maintained, it may create a sense of misdirection or humor, as speakers intentionally shift the topic or respond irrelevantly to achieve certain pragmatic effects such as avoidance or playfulness. Below is the example of how maxim of quantity is violated.

Title: Much Ado About Nothing – Act 5, Scene 2, p. 108

Dialogue:

Benedick: By this hand, I love thee.

Beatrice: **Use it for my love some other way than swearing by it.**

Ursula: O, you are a merry couple, indeed!

Don Pedro: Your wit, lady, passes measure.

This scene occurs near the end of the play when Benedick finally confesses his love to Beatrice. Instead of answering his emotional declaration directly, Beatrice diverts it into a witty remark that lightens the serious moment. Her humor keeps the tone playful, reflecting her reluctance to express affection openly. This scene violates the Maxim of Relation, which requires responses to

be relevant to the previous statement. The line **“Use it for my love some other way than swearing by it”** shifts the topic from love to wordplay, creating humor through irrelevance. Beatrice’s avoidance of direct emotional response demonstrates her tendency to protect herself with wit, maintaining her independence even in a moment of romance.

Maxim of Manner

According to Hadi (2013) in a journal “A Critical Appraisal of Grice’s Cooperative Principle,” the maxim of manner concerns the clarity of expression. It encourages speakers to be brief, orderly, and avoid ambiguity or obscurity in their speech. Violation of this maxim often appears when speakers use vague, confusing, or exaggerated language that obscures meaning, which may lead to humorous or dramatic interpretations depending on the context. Below is the example of how maxim of quantity is violated.

Title: Much Ado About Nothing – Act 2, Scene 3, p. 60

Dialogue:

Don Pedro: She doth indeed; my daughter says so: and the ecstasy hath so much overborne her...

Claudio: I cannot believe she loves him so passionately.

Benedick: **Love me? Why, it must be requited.**

Leonato: See, how he takes the bait already!

This scene takes place during the “gulling scene,” when Benedick overhears his friends pretending that Beatrice loves him. Overcome by excitement and pride, he dramatically reacts to the false information, speaking to himself in an exaggerated and theatrical way. His friends secretly watch, amused at how easily he has been deceived. This moment violates the Maxim of Manner, which emphasizes clarity and avoidance of ambiguity. The phrase **“Love me? Why, it must be requited”** is emotionally exaggerated and unclear, showing Benedick’s confusion and vanity. Pragmatically, the lack of straightforwardness here enhances the humor through dramatic irony, as the audience realizes he is proudly reacting to a lie.

METHODOLOGY

This study employs a qualitative descriptive design. According to Hall and Liebenberg (2024), qualitative descriptive research aims to provide rich and straightforward descriptions of experiences or events in everyday terms, staying close to the data without extensive theorization or abstraction. In this research, the approach is applied to analyze the use of conversational maxims in Shakespeare’s *The Comedy of Errors*. The focus of analysis lies on how characters in the play either observe or violate the four maxims proposed by H. P. Grice (1975), namely the maxim of quantity, maxim of quality, maxim of relation, and maxim of manner. The primary source of data is the play script *The Comedy of Errors* from the Folger Shakespeare Library Digital Texts. The script was read carefully to identify dialogues that reflect the cooperative communication. The selected dialogues were then being explained contextually to reveal what actually happens in the scene. Then, the dialogues were explained theoretically to classify them into the types of maxims that are being violated. Through

qualitative descriptive approach, the research aims to reveal how Shakespeare constructs humor and dramatic irony by manipulating the dialogues.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Table 1. Percentage Types of Maxims Violation

No.	Types of Maxims Violation	Quantity	Percentage
1.	Maxim of Quantity	11	22%
2.	Maxim of Quality	10	20%
3.	Maxim of Relation	16	32%
4.	Maxim of Manner	13	26%
Total		50	100%

Maxim of Quantity Violation

Act 1, Scene 1

Dialogue

Eagon: Yet this my comfort: when your words are done; My woes end likewise with the evening sun.

Duke: Well, Syracusan, say in brief the cause Why thou departedst from thy native home and for what cause thou cam'st to Ephesus.

Egeon: **A heavier task could not have been imposed Than I to speak my griefs unspeakable; Yet, that the world may witness that my end Was wrought by nature, not by vile offense, I'll utter what my sorrow gives me leave. In Syracuse was I born, and wed; Unto a woman happy but for me, and by me, had not our hap been bad. With her I lived in joy. Our wealth increased. To Epidamium, till my factor's death; And the great care of goods at random left Drew me from kind embracements of my spouse; From whom my absence was not six months old.....**(still continue for longer sentences)

Duke: Nay, forward, old man. Do not break off so, for we may pity though not pardon thee.

The dialogue is the beginning of the drama play where the Duke first meets with Egeon. The scene happens when the Duke must execute any Syracusan that come due to the law of Ephesus, that is why the Duke asks Egeon to briefly explain the reason for his visit to Ephesus. However, instead of providing a fitting answer and not providing a short answer, Egeon tells an emotional long story about his life, starting from how his family was separated to other sufferings. This dialogues when Egeon's answer "**A heavier task could not have been imposed Than I to speak my griefs unspeakable; Yet, that the world may witness that my end Was wrought by nature, not by vile offense, I'll utter what my sorrow gives me leave.....**" has already violated the Maxim of Quantity because Egeon provides more information than is needed; and the line keeps on continue "**.....In Syracuse was I born, and wed; Unto a woman happy but for me, And by me, had not our hap been bad. With her I lived in joy. Our wealth increased...**(still continue). The principle of cooperation demands that the speaker provide sufficient information, no more and no less. Egeon's

excessively long story makes the conversation inefficient and does not meet the needs of the Duke's questions.

Maxim of Quality Violation

Act 2 Scene 1

Dialogues:

Luciana: "Spake he so doubtfully thou couldst not feel his meaning?"

Dromio of Ephesus: "Nay, he struck so plainly I could too well feel his blows, and withal so doubtfully that I could scarce understand them."

Adriana: "But say, I prithee, is he coming home? It seems he hath great care to please his wife."

Dromio of Ephesus: "Why, mistress, **sure my master is horn mad**"

This dialogue happens when Adriana and Luciana are speaking with Dromio of Ephesus to figure out what is going on with Adriana's husband which is Antipholus. Adriana asks seriously, wants to know whether Dromio has spoken with Antipholus recently, also whether Antipholus will be back home soon or not. In this scene, Dromio gives confusing answer. The sentence "**sure my master is horn mad**" is considered as the violating maxim of quality because Dromio gives an answer where the truth of which is not confirmed yet.

Maxim of Relation Violation

Act 5 Scene 1

Dialogue:

Antipholus of Syracuse: "I think I had. I never did deny it"

Merchant: "Yes, that you did, sir and forswore it too"

Antipholus of Syracuse: "Who heard me to deny it or forswear it?"

Merchant: "These ears of mine, **thou know'st, did hear thee. Fie on thee, wretch. 'Tis pity that thou liv'st; To walk where any honest men resort.**"

This dialogue happens when Antipholus of Syracuse is being accused by Angelo the Goldsmith and the Second Merchant of denying possession of a gold chain that he supposedly received. However, it was actually Antipholus of Ephesus who received the chain earlier. When Antipholus of Syracuse insists that he never denied it, the merchant angrily contradicts him and adds personal insults. This exchange highlights the chaos and frustration. This the sentence "**thou know'st, did hear thee. Fie on thee, wretch. 'Tis pity that thou liv'st; To walk where any honest men resort.**" violates the Maxim of Relation because the Second Merchant goes beyond what's relevant to the question and turns the exchange into a personal attack in which according to Grice's Cooperative Principle, every contribution to a conversation must be relevant to the topic at hand.

Maxim of Manner Violation

Act 4 Scene 3

Dialogues:

Antipholus of Syracuse: "What, thou mean'st an officer?"

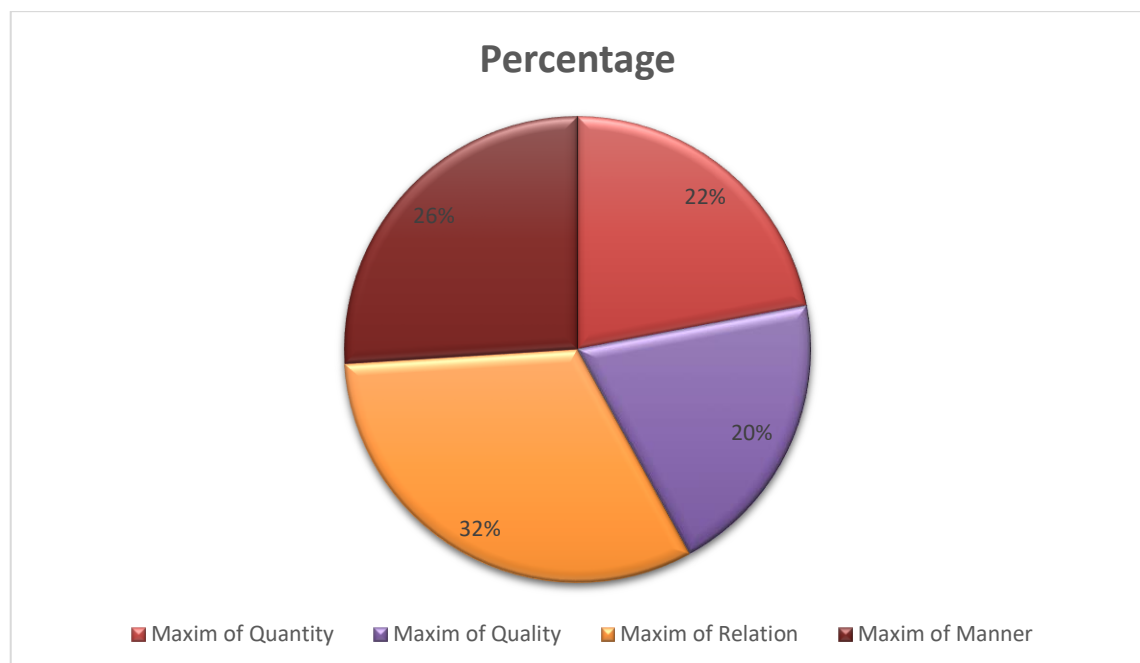
Dromio of Syracuse: "Ay, sir, **the sergeant of the band; he that brings any man to answer it that breaks his band;** one that thinks a man always going to bed and says "God give you good rest.""

Antipholus of Syracuse: "Well, sir, there rest in your foolery. Is there any ships puts forth tonight? May we be gone?"

Dromio of Syracuse: “Why, sir, I brought you word an hour since that the bark Expedition put forth tonight...”

This dialogue happens when **Antipholus of Syracuse** and his servant **Dromio of Syracuse** are still in Ephesus, confused by the strange behavior of everyone around them. Dromio answers Antipholus question by a playful and confusing explanation that frustrates Antipholus, until the topic of the talk changes Antipholus asks about the ships leaving that night, hoping to escape Ephesus. Dromio answers that a ship called the Expedition is indeed departing. The first line **“the sergeant of the band; he that brings any man to answer it that breaks his band”** violates the maxim of manner where Dromio answers Antipholus’s question in a confusing way. Instead of directly answers the question with the exact name of the officer, Dromio keeps on explaining but gives ambiguity of the answer.

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS



Picture 1

Based on the analysis, this study found a total of 50 violations of Grice’s Maxims in *The Comedy of Errors* by William Shakespeare. The distribution of maxim violations shows that the Maxim of Relation was violated most frequently (16 times or 32%), followed by the Maxim of Manner (13 times or 26%), the Maxim of Quantity (11 times or 22%), and the Maxim of Quality (10 times or 20%). The dominance of Relation violations which is 16 times (32%) indicates that much of the humor in the play arises from irrelevant, confusing, or mismatched responses between characters who misunderstand each other’s identities. These irrelevancies create situational irony and comedic misunderstanding, which are the central sources of humor throughout the play. While the Maxim of Quality showed the lowest frequency of violation, occurring 10 times (20%) throughout the play. This indicates that the characters in *The Comedy of Errors* tend to avoid

giving completely false or untruthful information, even though misunderstandings frequently occur. Overall, the study concludes that Shakespeare deliberately employs violations of Grice's Maxims as a linguistic strategy to construct humor. The breakdown of cooperative communication among the characters, particularly through irrelevant, unclear, or excessive exchanges to highlights the chaos of mistaken identity and reinforces the play's farcical and comedic tone.

FURTHER STUDY

This research still has limitations, so it is necessary to conduct further research related to the topic of Maxims Violation as the Construction of Humor in William Shakespeare's *The Comedy of Errors* in order to perfect this research and increase insight for readers.

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