

## Conversational Implicature Used by The Character Sean From Good Will Hunting Movie

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### Abstract:

Communication with individuals who have experienced trauma, such as PTSD, requires strategic linguistic choices so as not to offend them. This study aims to analyze the meaning behind the utterances and the use of conversational implicature by the therapist character, Sean, in the movie Good Will Hunting (1997) as a primary tool for engaging with his interlocutors. Employing a qualitative descriptive method, this research examines Sean's utterance from the original movie script by categorizing them as either generalized or particularized conversational implicature. The findings reveal that Sean almost exclusively uses particularized conversational implicature. This is not a random occurrence but a deliberate therapeutic strategy designed to deal with Will's intellectual and emotional defense mechanism, which make their communication ineffective. The analysis demonstrates that Sean's implicature function to establish trust, challenge Will's intellectual shields, model vulnerability, and facilitate an emotional breakthrough. This study concludes that particularized conversational implicature may serve as a powerful and empathetic communication tool in sensitive interactions by bridging linguistic theory with psychological analysis to illustrate how indirect language can be fundamental to therapeutic progress.

**Keywords:** Conversational Implicature; Film Analysis; Pragmatic; Good Will Hunting

### Abstrak:

Komunikasi dengan individu yang pernah mengalami trauma, seperti PTSD, menuntut pilihan linguistik yang strategis agar tidak menyinggung perasaan mereka. Penelitian ini bertujuan menganalisis makna di balik tuturan dan penggunaan implikatur percakapan oleh karakter terapis, Sean, dalam film Good Will Hunting (1997) sebagai alat utama untuk berinteraksi dengan mitra tuturnya. Dengan menggunakan metode deskriptif kualitatif, penelitian ini mengkaji tuturan Sean dari naskah asli film tersebut, dengan mengategorikannya sebagai implikatur percakapan umum (generalized) atau khusus (particularized). Hasil penelitian menunjukkan bahwa Sean hampir secara eksklusif menggunakan implikatur percakapan khusus. Hal ini bukanlah kebetulan, melainkan strategi terapeutik yang disengaja untuk menghadapi mekanisme pertahanan intelektual dan emosional Will, yang membuat komunikasi mereka tidak efektif. Analisis ini menunjukkan bahwa implikatur Sean berfungsi untuk membangun kepercayaan menantang perisai intelektual Will, mencontohkan kerentanan (modeling vulnerability), dan memfasilitasi terobosan emosional. Penelitian ini menyimpulkan bahwa implikatur percakapan khusus dapat berfungsi sebagai alat komunikasi yang kuat dan empatik dalam interaksi sensitif. Penelitian ini menjembatani teori linguistik dengan analisis psikologis untuk menggambarkan bagaimana bahasa tidak langsung dapat menjadi fundamental bagi kemajuan terapeutik.

**Kata kunci:** Implikatur Percakapan; Analisis Film; Pragmatik; Good Will Hunting



## INTRODUCTION

In the study of Linguistic, implied meaning or conversational implicature theory was originated by H. Paul Grice in 1975, he stated that an implicature is what a speaker suggests or implied in an utterance, which is distinct from what they are literally say. The theory stated that implicature has 2 types which are generalized and particularized implicature, the two have distinct focus that separate how linguist view how implied meaning are used. (Grice, 1975). However, I believe people has been using implicature before the theory even exist.

Furthermore, implicature has been used in daily communication scenario, such as debate, gossip, and storytelling. Making a good conversation is the key to a successful communication, when talking to a person, we have to consider their background either it's cognitive, culture, intellectual, or even mentality to avoid misinformation, Collins et al., 2022 stated that engaging with people who have different mentality background we must be careful to avoid causing distress and misunderstanding. It is rather difficult to find the right words, which can lead to frustration that might be misinterpreted by the listener, for instance, some materials may feel patronizing, and abstract or out of context words can cause confusion rather than aid conversation.

Moreover, Bond, 2020 explains that A person with a trauma-related disorder may face significant challenges in communication due to a range of symptoms. These include re-living the event through intrusive memories or flashbacks, experiencing vivid nightmares, and "blanking out" or dissociating, especially when overwhelmed or triggered. They may also actively avoid any reminders of the trauma, be easily startled or constantly on alert for danger, have difficulty concentrating, and struggle to manage intense feelings of anger, fear, shame, or guilt. These symptoms can make it difficult for them to relate to others, build trust, or retain information.

Good Will Hunting is a movie about the story of Will Hunting, a genius from South Boston whose psychological state is defined by a deep conflict between his innate intellectual brilliance and the severe trauma from his abusive childhood, this past shaped a negative self-concept and low self-esteem, leading him to feel unworthy and causing him to sabotage personal and professional opportunities (Mistry, 2024). his journey to have a better future force him to came in contact with several therapist, but many failed. Until a



professor of therapy specialist named Sean made a session with Will, he uses a different approach to understand Will further. This article will analyze how conversational implicature used to engage a person with PTSD.

While there are many studies that focus on implicature function implied in films, very few have analyzed its specific application in communicating with individuals with different backgrounds either it's cognitive, culture, or even mental health. This can be used to fill the gap of analysis to understand further about types of implicature used in movie utterances. This article's purpose is to examine utterances that are used by the character Sean in the movie *Good Will Hunting*.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

### Conversational Implicature

Conversational implicatures, according to the original definition of Grice, 1975 stated that conversational implicatures are meanings that are not tied to specific words but arise from general principle of cooperative conversation, because they are context dependent, they are often misinterpreted without a specific understanding the situation or context that are intended by the speaker, for instance, if a student who wants to have feedback on his work, but the lecturer simply stated "I have a meeting in 5 minutes." If the listener doesn't get the right intended meaning from the speaker which are "I cannot give you a feedback now, maybe later." The student will have a hard time processing such small information that given by the lecturer.

However, Lewerentz, 2025 argue that there are two types of Conversational Implicatures which are additive and substitutional implicatures. Arguing that existing definitions are flawed and proposing a new one. Traditionally, an additive implicature is one where the speaker intends to communicate both what they say and what they implicate. On the contrary, substitutional implicature occurs when the speaker intends to communicate the implicature instead of what they say, which is common in non-literal speech like metaphor or irony. The author argues that this traditional definition fails in cases of multi-stage implicatures. For example, if a speaker uses a metaphor to generate a first implicature, and that first implicature then generates a second one, the traditional definition incorrectly classifies both implicatures as substitutional, simply because the literal sentence wasn't meant.

### ***Generalized Conversational Implicature***

Potts, 2003 explained that generalized implicature is a meaning that is considered a default inference and does not require any special context to be understood. It's an implication that is normally conveyed by a certain word or phrase unless the context specifically blocks it. Meaning that a person can easily if not immediately understand what the speaker says without any specific context or knowledge.

### ***Particularized Conversational Implicature***

In contrast to generalized conversational Implicature, particularized conversational implicature explained by Potts, 2003 said that it is a meaning that only generated because of a special or specific context. If you take the sentence out of that exact situation, the implied meaning completely disappears. These are one-time-only implications that depend entirely on the circumstances of the conversation or the speaker himself.

### **Implicature in film**

A previous study from Harianto et al., (2021) Studied about implicature function in speech act forms such as directive, assertive, commissive, declarative, and expressive used in film scenario. Another previous study from Sili & Setyowati, (2020) focused in the types of conversational implicature which are generalized implicature, an implicature which does not need any specific context or knowledge to understand, in contrast of the second type of implicature is particularized implicature, which need a specific context or specific knowledge to understand the full meaning in the utterance. Musdalifa et al., (2022) study also analyzed the types of conversational implicature integrated with Indirect Act and conversational maxims. However, there are still few who has analyzed the use of implicature to engage a person with PTSD.

## **RESEARCH METHODS**

His article employed a qualitative descriptive method to analyze utterances from the film Good Will Hunting. The subject of the analysis was the character Sean, a professor specializing in psychotherapy, and the data was a transcript of his utterances that had a connection or were directly with Will Hunting, the main character of the movie. The primary instrument for this analysis was the original film script written by Matt Damon and Ben Affleck. The process began with a thorough viewing of the film to identify relevant

data. After finding the data, it was compared to the original script to determine if the character had adhered to the written dialogue or improvised. If improvisation occurred, the text was manually transcribed. Finally, all collected data was compiled as either generalized or particularized conversational implicature. The data from each category was then described to understand the meaning behind the utterances and the context they provided to the story, and to see if there were any influences from the utterance of Sean to Will.

## FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

This chapter will explain about the Conversational Implicatures found in Sean's utterances, the following data will provide a clear examples and explanations.

**Table 1. Conversational Implicature in Sean's utterances**

Type of Conversational Implicature	Frequency	(%)
Generalized	2	20%
Particularized	8	80%
<b>Total</b>	<b>10</b>	<b>100%</b>

According to the table data, the character Sean used generalized conversational implicature 2 time only, because generalized implicature does not require any special context to be understood. Furthermore, in movie scenario, everything has been set up and the script as well as the context has been built for the characters to act on stage, Sean's character utterances are deeply tied to the specific situations he is in with Will. Therefore, particularized implicature was always used by the character in the movie Good Will Hunting.

### Data context and explanation

**Datum 1 Context:** Sean says this to Professor Lambeau after the very hostile first therapy session with Will. Lambeau, expecting Sean to quit like the others, says he understands if Sean doesn't want to see Will again.

Sean: "Thursday, four o'clock. Make sure the kid is here."

Sean: The utterance literally functions as scheduling a new appointment. However, in this specific context, the implicature is a powerful declaration that Sean accepts Will's challenge and is fully committed to continuing the therapy, directly countering Lambeau's expectation of failure.

**Datum 2 Context:** This is Sean's direct response during the second session, after Will intellectually deconstructs Sean's life and marriage based on a painting in his office.

Sean: "You're just a boy. You don't have the faintest idea what you're talking about."

Analysis: The literal meaning is a simple, pejorative statement about Will's youth. The implicature, however, is a profound critique: it implies that Will's knowledge is purely academic and lacks the depth of real-life experience, making his judgments superficial and meaningless.

**Datum 3 Context:** Will is probing Sean about his late wife, suggesting he "remarried." Sean clarifies that she is dead, and Will presses on. Sean says this for the second time to end the topic.

Sean: "My wife's dead."

Analysis: While this is a statement of fact, its repetition in this specific context carries a strong particularized implicature. It implies: "This topic is painful, sacred, and not open for your intellectual analysis or discussion."

**Datum 4 Context:** This phrase is repeated multiple times by Sean during the climax of the therapy. Will, confronted with his abuse file, defensively and intellectually agrees, saying "I know".

Sean: "It's not your fault."

Analysis: The literal meaning is a simple affirmation of Will's innocence. But the repeated implicature is a complex therapeutic act: "You may 'know' this intellectually, but you have not accepted it emotionally. All of the things that you did are not driven by yourself, but there is something from the past that made you did it."

**Datum 5 Context:** Sean says this after Will cleverly turns Sean's own philosophy (about not needing to know anyone personally) back on him, effectively ending the session on his own terms.

Sean: "Time's up."

Analysis: While literally true that the session's time was over, the implicature here is an acknowledgment of Will's valid point. It implies, "You've successfully challenged me, and you're right. The session is over."

**Datum 6 Context:** During his very first session with Will, Sean says this to Professor Lambeau and his assistant, who are lingering in the office.

Sean: "Would you excuse us? You too, Gerry."

Analysis: The literal meaning is a simple, polite request for them to leave the room. However, the implicature is a firm establishment of boundaries and control, implying: "This is my therapeutic space, and your presence is not required or welcome."

**Datum 7 Context:** Sean says this after Will points out the hypocrisy in Sean's advice about relationships, given that Sean is also hesitant to move on.

Sean: "I teach this shit, I didn't say I knew how to do it."

Analysis: Literally, he is distinguishing between theoretical knowledge and practical application. The implicature, however, is a strategic act of building rapport. He is implying, "You have correctly pointed out my own vulnerability, and I am acknowledging that I am not perfect either. We are more alike than you think." This builds a bridge by admitting his own flaws.

**Datum 8 Context:** Sean said to professor Lambeau after he asked Sean why he did not attend to their college reunion.

Sean: "I'm--I've been busy."

Analysis: Giving a state ("busy") as a response to a question about absence generally implicates that the state is the reason for the absence. While context could make it a PCI (e.g., if it's an excuse), the most straightforward interpretation relies on the general expectation linked to this kind of response.

**Datum 9 Context:** Response to professor Lambeau asking him to take Will Hunting on as a patient.

Sean: "Not much free time, Gerry."

Analysis: Similarly, to "I've been busy," stating that he cannot accept the offer professor Lambeau gave to him, but he did not say no straightforward, rather he said "Not much free time" to give Lambeau a signal that Sean wanted to decline his job offer.

**Datum 10 Context:** Will found a girl that he likes and he tell it to Sean, but he cannot seem to express his feeling because he didn't want to ruin her "perfect" image in his mind. Sean said it to make Will consider what he truly feels.

Sean: "And right now you're perfect too. Maybe you don't want to ruin that."

Analysis: This implicates that Will's fear about discovering his crush imperfections, are just his idealism of self-imaging perfection and that is something he does not need to worry about thus crushed by Sean.

### **The use of Conversational Implicatures**

The analysis of these data reveals that Sean's use of implicature is methodical, evolving throughout his session with Will. It serves as a crucial tool to navigate Will's formidable defense mechanism, which are rooted in a history of trauma, abuse, and abandonment. A direct, confrontational approach, as attempted by previous therapist, proves futile against Will's intellectual aggression and deep mistrust. Sean's strategy, therefore, is to use the ambiguity and context dependency of implicature to bypass these defenses and foster a genuine connection.

The specific examples from the results illustrate a clear therapeutic progression:

#### ***Establishing Resilience and Authority***

In the first session, after being intensely provoked by Will, Sean's utterance, "Thursday, four o'clock. Make sure the kid is here," functions as a powerful particularized implicature. Its literal meaning is a simple scheduling instruction. However, its implicature, delivered in the context of professor Lambeau expecting him to quit, is a firm declaration: "I am not intimidated by him, and I am committed to this process." This act of standing firm, communicated indirectly established Sean's resilience and sets a new dynamic that Will has not previously encountered in therapy.

#### ***Challenging Intellectual Defenses***

Sean's monologue, beginning with "You're just a boy" is a masterclass in using particularized implicature to dismantle Will's intellectual shield. While literally stating Will is young, the implicature is a profound critique of Will's entire worldview: "Your vast knowledge is derived from books, not from life, and therefore you cannot truly understand the complexities of human experience, including my own." He isn't challenging Will's intelligence but the authenticity of his understanding, implying that lived experience is a form of knowledge Will cannot access through reading. This shifts the ground from an intellectual debate, which Will would win, to a discussion about life, where Sean has the upper hand.



### ***Modeling Vulnerability and Setting Boundaries***

When Will probes Sean about his late wife and suggest he hasn't moved on, Sean's repeated utterance, "My wife's dead," carries an implicature that deepens with its repetition. The second time he says it, he is no longer simply stating fact; he is implying, "This is a sacred part of my life, not a puzzle for you to intellectually deconstruct. You have reached a boundary." By shutting down the conversation, he models a healthy emotional boundary and demonstrates profound love and loyalty concepts Will has never experienced. It is a lesson delivered not through explanation, but through implied meaning.

### ***Facilitating Emotional Breakthrough***

The climax of the therapy, Sean's repetition of "It's not your fault," is the most potent use of implicature in the movie. Will's initial response of "I know" are intellectual agreements. He understands the logic but does not feel the truth. Sean's repetition carries the implicature: "I will continue to repeat this truth until you move your past intellectual defense and allow yourself to feel it emotionally for once. I will not abandon you in this moment of pain." The implicature is a promise of steadfast presence, which directly counters Will's core trauma of abandonment and allows him to finally break down.

His study's findings both support and extend the work of previous research on implicature in film. While studies by Harianto et al., (2021), Sili & Setyowati, (2020), and Musdalifa et al., (2022) effectively categorize the types and function of implicature found in film scenarios, this paper provides a deep analysis of how these implicature are applied strategically within a single, continuous character interaction. It moves the analysis from classification to application, demonstrating the role of implicature in haracter development and narrative progression, particularly within a psychologically complex context.

Furthermore, this analysis creates a bridge between linguistic theory and psychological principles. The psychological profile of Will, as detailed by Mistry (2024), provides a clear justification for Sean's linguistic choices. Mistry identifies Will as having an "avoidant attachment style" and a tendency to push people away before they have a chance to leave him as a defense mechanism rooted in his abusive childhood. This explains why direct communication would fail, as it would be perceived by Will as a threat, triggering his self-defense mechanism. Sean's reliance on implicature is a linguistic strategy perfectly tailored to navigate this psychological landscape. His indirectness allows him to



communicate empathy, challenge, and support without triggering Will's fear of being abandoned.

The primary contribution of this research is its focused, in-depth analysis that bridges the fields of linguistics and film studies. By applying the pragmatic theory of conversational implicature to the character of Sean, this study demonstrates how linguistic choices are not merely decorative but are fundamental to constructing character, developing relationships, and driving a narrative centered on therapy.

Secondly, this study helps fill the research gap identified in the introduction. There is limited research analyzing the specific application of implicature in the context of communicating with individuals who have experienced significant trauma such as PTSD. This paper provides a rich, albeit fictional, case study of how indirect implicature language can be a more effective and empathetic tool than direct discourse in such sensitive interaction.

Lastly, the interaction between Sean and Will serve as an excellent, accessible example for illustrating the complex, context-dependent nature of particularized implicature. It provides a clear case study for students of linguistics on how pragmatic theories function in dynamic, emotionally charged conversations.

## CONCLUSION(S)

This study set out to examine how the character Sean uses conversational implicature throughout the movie to engage with other characters especially Will Hunting, a young man suffering from the psychological effects of childhood trauma. The analysis concludes that Sean almost exclusively employs particularized conversational implicature as a deliberate and sophisticated therapeutic strategy. This indirect communication style is essential for bypassing Will's intellectual and emotion defences, establishing trust, and guiding him toward a critical emotional breakthrough that direct communication failed to achieve.

Despite its contributions, this study has several limitations. The most significant is its reliance on a fictional source. The dialogue in Good Will Hunting is from a screenplay, meaning it was crafted by writers for dramatic effect, narrative efficiency, and emotional impact. It is an idealized representation of therapeutic communication. Real-world therapy sessions are likely to be far less articulate, more ambiguous, and less perfectly structured

than what is depicted in the film. Therefore, the findings, while illustrative of the theory, cannot be generalized to authentic therapeutic interactions.

Lastly, this analysis is based solely on the written text of the script. A comprehensive pragmatic analysis would also incorporate non-verbal cues—such as tone of voice, facial expression, posture, and timing of pauses—which are essential for the full interpretation of implicatures. The performance of the actors adds a layer of meaning that cannot be fully captured by an analysis of the screenplay alone.

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