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# Forensic Pragmatics in the Courtroom: Analyzing Quantity and Quality Maxims in Amber Heard Testimony

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## Abstract

This study explores the application of forensic pragmatics in the courtroom, focusing on violations of the quantity and quality maxims in Amber Heard's testimony during the 2022 defamation trial filed by Johnny Depp. The purpose of the study is to examine how pragmatic inconsistencies in legal discourse affect the credibility and interpretation of witness statements. This qualitative research employed descriptive analysis, using courtroom Law & Crime YouTube data sources. The analysis focused on violations of Grice's Cooperative Principle. The findings reveal that Heard's responses frequently violated the maxim of quantity by being overly elaborate or under informative, and the maxim of quality through unsubstantiated or ambiguous claims. These patterns reflect discursive strategies that hinder clarity and cooperation in legal contexts. Ultimately, the jury found Amber Heard guilty of defamation, awarding Johnny Depp \$10.35 million in damages. The study concludes that forensic pragmatics provides valuable insight into courtroom communication, supporting more accurate assessments of testimony and enhancing legal decision-making.

**Keywords:** Pragmatic, Flouting Maxim, Forensic Linguistic, Cross-Examination, Amber Heard

## 1. Introduction

In courtroom discourse, where the stakes of communication are high, every utterance carries weight not only in terms of content but also in the way it is pragmatically structured. One key area of study within forensic pragmatics involves how witnesses observe or flout conversational norms, particularly the Cooperative Principle proposed by H.P. Grice. When a speaker deliberately fails to observe a conversational maxim (not to mislead, but to imply something indirectly) this is known as flouting. In legal contexts, such pragmatic deviations can significantly affect how testimony is interpreted, either enhancing or undermining a speaker's credibility. This study explores flouting of the maxims of quantity and quality in Amber Heard's testimony during the 2022 defamation trial brought by Johnny Depp, with the aim of uncovering the pragmatic functions and legal consequences of such behavior.

The problem is important because flouting maxims in court can be a subtle yet powerful discursive strategy. It may allow witnesses to avoid direct answers, suggest meanings without full accountability, or manipulate

perceptions without explicit falsehoods. While prior research in forensic linguistics has examined deception, hedging, and speech act dynamics in witness testimonies, few studies have provided a focused analysis on how *flouting* (as distinct from mere violation) of conversational maxims shapes legal narratives.

This research builds upon and extends Gricean theory in applied forensic contexts by examining not only what is said, but how it is said, and what is pragmatically implied. The primary objective of this study is to identify and analyze specific instances in which Amber Heard flouts the maxims of quantity (providing more or less information than required) and quality (making statements lacking sufficient evidence or truthfulness), and to interpret how these instances function within the courtroom setting.

A secondary objective is to assess how such flouting contributes to the overall credibility of her testimony and potentially influences the jury's interpretation and final judgment. The study operates within a qualitative, descriptive framework, using official courtroom transcripts on YouTube Law & Crime as primary data sources. The research design is grounded in pragmatic theory, particularly Grice's Cooperative Principle. By closely examining how maxims are flouted rather than strictly followed or violated, the study seeks to expose the layered meanings and rhetorical maneuvers embedded in the testimony. This approach differs from prior studies by emphasizing intention and inference over surface-level non-cooperation. Theoretically, the study contributes to the growing field of forensic pragmatics by refining how flouting is identified and interpreted in high-stakes legal discourse. Practically, the findings highlight how seemingly cooperative speech may conceal evasion or manipulation, underscoring the need for legal practitioners to be attentive to linguistic nuance. Ultimately, the study illustrates how forensic pragmatics can support more accurate interpretation of courtroom testimony and promote justice by revealing the subtle dynamics of courtroom communication.

### *1.1 Linguistic Forensic*

Forensic linguistics, as conceptualized by (Foster, 2021), is a scientific discipline applied in legal settings such as civil law, criminal justice, and litigation. It is defined as a subfield concerned with the comprehensive analysis of language in legal disputes, criminal activity, and judicial proceedings. Similarly, (Taylor, 2021) frames forensic linguistics as an emerging discipline that integrates methodologies from various linguistic subfields—such as phonetics, stylistics, pragmatics, dialectology, and semantics—into investigative processes undertaken by courts and law enforcement institutions to resolve legal and criminal matters.

A significant portion of legal and criminal conflicts depends on the interpretation of written texts, including personal letters, academic works, legal contracts, and other formal documents (Olsson, 2022). Olsson extends this perspective by listing a variety of textual evidence types, such as parking tickets, wills, insurance policies, health department letters, trademarks, patents, and even academic theses, which may be implicated in plagiarism or contractual disputes (Baranov, 2017). Coulthard and Johnson (2007) outline the broad scope of forensic linguistics as encompassing (1) the analysis of language in legal documents; (2) language used by law enforcement; (3) interviewing children and vulnerable witnesses; (4) courtroom interaction; (5) linguistic evidence and expert witness testimony; (6) authorship and plagiarism detection; and (7) speaker identification and forensic phonetics. Consistent with Shuy (2011), forensic linguistics includes the study of language used by witnesses, lawyers, and judges during trials, as well as the analysis of legal discourse found in both civil and criminal proceedings. These studies demonstrate that forensic linguistics is inherently interdisciplinary, involving legal theory, linguistics, and social interaction within judicial institutions.

### *1.2 Courtroom Process and the Role of Legal Language*

(Coulthard & Johnson, 2013) emphasize that the courtroom is not just a site of legal negotiation but also a place where legal language plays multiple roles (as object, process, and instrument). Drawing from (Stygall, 1994), they argue that as an object, legal language reflects complex structures and formal characteristics. As a process, it requires analysis of how institutional language interacts, builds, and maintains authority. And as an instrument, legal language functions to fulfill institutional goals and social control.

This approach highlights the dual function of legal texts in both legislation and documentation. Legislative texts include constitutions, statutory laws, and legally binding treaties. Documentation-related texts include police interrogation transcripts, affidavits, courtroom cross-examinations, and other procedural records (Stygall, 1994). These texts are not neutral; they actively shape how legal meaning is constructed and interpreted during trials.

One of the core aspects of courtroom discourse is cross-examination, which is constrained by a strict question-answer format (Atkinson & Drew, 1979) describe this as "turn-type pre-allocation," a system in which roles and responses are tightly managed. Through this structure, lawyers construct narratives over time that persuade juries and judges. These narratives emerge not from single utterances but through the accumulation and strategic sequencing of questions and answers.

Understanding how legal narratives are linguistically formed and how speakers (e.g., witnesses) manage their speech within this system—is central to forensic pragmatic analysis. It reveals not only how truth claims are constructed, but also how power, control, and credibility are linguistically negotiated in court.

### *1.3 Legal Framework of Defamation*

Defamation, as a legal offense, occurs when a person's reputation or honor is harmed through false or damaging statements. In Indonesia, this can lead to police reports filed by individuals who feel their dignity or name has been unjustly tarnished (Fatahuddin et al., 2022). In English, the term "defamation" is generally used as an umbrella term that encompasses both slander and libel. Slander refers to spoken defamatory statements, while libel pertains to written or published forms of defamation.

In the United States, particularly under Virginia law, defamation is addressed explicitly in the Virginia Code, particularly in Chapter 3, Article 4. According to the Code of 1950, § 8-630; and 1977, Chapter 617, the law categorizes defamatory acts as those involving insulting language that incites violence or disturbs the public peace, thereby requiring legal redress (Provisions et al., n.d.). The law views any words deemed offensive or provocative as actionable under defamation statutes. Additionally, Virginia Code § 8.01-48 provides further regulation concerning defamation mitigation, particularly in civil cases involving media publications. When individuals (such as publishers, editors, journalists, or staff members) are sued under § 8.01-45 for libel or slander stemming from written or verbal content in newspapers, magazines, or similar publications, they are permitted to submit mitigating evidence. This includes the origin of the information, the credibility of its source, whether it had been previously published in similar contexts, and whether the defendant acted in good faith, without malice or negligence. The law also considers whether a timely and fair apology or retraction was made. However, such evidence is admissible only insofar as it supports the defendant's legal position and does not serve as a defense for actual monetary compensation (Code of 1950, § 8-632; Code of 1954, Chapter 333; Code of 1977, Chapter 617).

In sum, the comparative legal perspectives demonstrate that both Indonesian and Virginian legal systems provide structured mechanisms to address defamation, recognizing both its verbal and written forms, while also allowing room for mitigating circumstances depending on intent, context, and corrective action.

### *1.4 Pragmatic*

Pragmatic theory in this research is used to examine the intent speaker (suspect). This research also explains the rules that must be obeyed by speakers so that what is said can be accepted effectively by the interlocutor. These rules are called principles of cooperation or cooperation maxims. Pragmatics, according to (Yule, 1996), is a field that investigates how users and linguistic forms interact with one another. The study of how language and context interact with each other is known as pragmatics. This method is used as a basis for explaining the meaning of language. To understand language terms or utterances, one must understand the context. This is called linguistic understanding. Parera (2001:126) explains that pragmatics is the study of internal language use communication, the relationship between sentences, context, situations, and the time they are said in that sentence. In pragmatics, it is also necessary to study how partner speech understands what is said to understand the meaning intended, according to Yule (2006:4).

#### 1.4 Principles of cooperation

The main assumption underlying a productive discussion is the concept of collaboration (Radfar et al., 2020). This shows that people involved in conversation are guided by principles that determine how language can be used most effectively to achieve rational communication. Besides that, (Ceballos & Sosas, 2018) outlined cooperative principles as an outline for action of what participants must do so that they can speak effectively, rationally, and maximally cooperatively. To achieve this, they must speak honestly, relevantly, and clearly, and provide sufficient information. In addition, Grice (1975) created standards for effective language use and efficiency in conversation, the so-called “conversational maximum”. He outlines quantity, quality, relevance, and method as ideal categories that must be adhered to by discussion participants, and violations of these categories can have different consequences. In this research, we focus specifically on the violation of the maxims of quantity and quality. These two maxims are particularly critical in courtroom settings, where questions and answers must be carefully aligned to ensure clarity and honesty. As Gibbons (2003) emphasizes, witnesses are expected to answer questions in a way that aligns with the information being sought by legal counsel. Any deviation (either by giving too little, too much, or unsubstantiated information) can obstruct the trial’s fact-finding function.

#### 1.4 Violation of Conversational Maxims

Conversational principles, as proposed by Grice (1975), are occasionally violated without necessarily rendering communication uninformative or uncooperative. Grice’s cooperative principle (Cutting, 2005) is formulated through four maxims yet we focused on Maxim Quantity and Quality, each of which is outlined below:

##### 1.4.1 Maxim of Quantity

The first maxim under the cooperative principle is the maxim of quantity, which states that speakers should provide as much information as is required—neither more nor less. Some speakers tend to indicate their awareness of how much information the listener needs or is capable of processing, by saying something like, *“Well, to cut a long story short, she didn’t get home till two.”* Providing insufficient information risks leaving the listener unable to understand the intended message due to lack of clarity or explicitness. Conversely, providing excessive information may overwhelm the listener or bore them due to irrelevance or redundancy (Cutting, 2005).

##### 1.4.1.1 Providing Too Little or Too Much Information

Providing either too little or too much information can be problematic. Insufficient information implies that the speaker is withholding relevant details, thereby preventing the interlocutor from obtaining a full understanding. On the other hand, offering excessive information often exceeds the demands or relevance of the conversational context, and may be perceived as digressive or unnecessary (Cutting, 2005).

##### 1.4.2 Maxim of Quality

The second maxim is the maxim of quality, which requires speakers to be truthful and only assert what they believe to be true. Speakers are expected to avoid stating anything they believe to be false or for which they lack sufficient evidence. Some speakers make explicit their limitations in knowledge or certainty to avoid misleading the listener, such as in the following dialogue:

A: *I’ll ring you tomorrow afternoon then.*

B: *Erm, I shall be there as far as I know, and in the meantime have a word with Mum and Dad if they’re free. Right, bye-bye then sweetheart.*

A: *Bye-bye, bye.*

In this case, B’s phrase *“as far as I know”* indicates that they are not entirely certain, thereby protecting themselves from the accusation of lying if circumstances later prove otherwise. Generally, listeners assume that speakers are not intentionally deceptive, and speakers are typically aware of this expectation (Cutting, 2005).

#### 1.4.2.1 Hyperbole, Metaphor, Irony, Banter, Insincerity, and Deception

Hyperbole refers to exaggerated statements that go beyond literal truth. Metaphors involve the use of language that departs from its literal meaning. Irony and banter serve opposite functions: irony expresses a positive form to imply a negative sentiment, while banter often uses negative expressions to imply a humorous or positive tone. Insincerity occurs when a speaker lacks honesty in delivering information, while deception (lying) refers to the deliberate act of conveying false information (Cutting, 2005).

## 2. Method

This study adopts a qualitative descriptive design situated within the field of forensic pragmatics. The primary objective was to analyze violations of the conversational maxims of quantity and quality, based on Grice's (1975) Cooperative Principle, in Amber Heard's testimony during the 2022 defamation trial. The method was structured to ensure transparency, interpretative depth, and replicability by experienced linguistic and legal researchers.

### 2.1 Participants (Subject) Characteristics

As this study involves the analysis of publicly available trial data, the "participant" is a single subject: Amber Heard, a public figure and witness in the civil defamation lawsuit filed by Johnny Depp. Her testimony, given under oath in a formal courtroom setting, forms the linguistic data corpus for this study. The analysis focuses solely on her speech acts, responses to examination, and manner of testimony delivery during the trial proceedings. No personal or identifying private data was accessed beyond what was already part of the public record. Therefore, traditional demographic criteria (age, gender, ethnicity) were not variables in the sampling process.

### 2.2 Sampling Procedures

The data were selected using purposive sampling, focusing specifically on parts of the trial where Amber Heard's testimony was central and where critical interaction occurred (cross-examination). Courtroom video at Law & Crime YouTube, and official trial exhibits were used to validate findings. The primary sources include courtroom video from Law & Crime YouTube (public domain). No payments, agreements, or ethical clearance were required as the data is publicly available and the study does not involve human subject experimentation.

#### 2.2.1 Measures and Covariates

This study focused on identifying violations of two Gricean maxims:

- **Quantity:** Over-informing, under-informing, or providing irrelevant levels of detail in response to specific questions.
- **Quality:** Providing claims lacking evidence, offering ambiguous or unverifiable assertions, or stating information that conflicts with documented facts.

Each instance of Heard's response was coded according to whether and how it violated either maxim. Supplementary contextual features, such as courtroom interaction dynamics (e.g., question form, legal pressure), were noted as qualitative covariates, although not quantified or statistically analyzed.

Data collection and coding followed this sequence:

1. Identification of utterances where potential violations occurred
2. Categorization into quantity or quality violations (based on Grice's definitions)
3. Cross-referencing with video and exhibit content for validation

To ensure measurement reliability, each excerpt was analyzed multiple times over multiple sessions, with attention to paralinguistic features visible in the video, such as tone, pause, hesitation, or prosodic stress.

### 2.2.2 Research Design

The study was conducted using a naturalistic, observational research design. There was no experimental manipulation or assignment to conditions. Amber Heard's testimony was observed in its original courtroom setting, with no interference or interaction by the researcher.

This design is best described as a within-subject, single-case pragmatic analysis, appropriate for studies where the subject's linguistic behavior is evaluated across multiple moments and contexts within the same discourse event. The approach allows for thematic tracking of maxim violations across different examination stages and questioning techniques. The methodological design prioritizes depth of interpretation and triangulation of data types over statistical generalizability, in line with best practices in forensic discourse analysis and pragmatics research.

## 3. Results

In the results section, summarize the collected data and the analysis performed on those data relevant to the This section presents the research findings in alignment with the study's focus on forensic pragmatics, specifically the identification and analysis of violations of the maxims of quantity and quality in Amber Heard's courtroom testimony. The results are organized into two main thematic categories: (1) violations of the maxim of quantity, which include instances of overstatement and understatement; and (2) violations of the maxim of quality, characterized by expressions lacking in truthfulness or evidential support. Each theme is supported by selected excerpts from the transcribed testimony, providing linguistic evidence for the pragmatic strategies employed and their potential implications for witness credibility and courtroom interpretation.

Table 1: Intensity of Flouting Maxim (Quantity and Quality) on Amber Heard Testimony on Law&Crime

No	Data Sources / Speakers	Quantity	Quality
1	Amber Heard Testimony	17	2

### 3.1 Violation of the Maxim of Quantity in Amber Heard's Testimony

DATUM 1: 23.47- 24.38

Camila Vasquez : That's your voice from recording right?

Amber Heard: Yes It is

Camila Vasquez: You were speaking with Mr. Depp

Amber Heard: Yes

Camila Vasquez: and you said to Mr.Depp quote you can tell, you can tell please tell people that it was a fair fight and see what the jury and the judge think tell the world Johnny tell them johnny depp I johnny depp a man victim too of domestic violence end quote that's what you said right?

Amber Heard: *I was saying it to the man who beat me up, yes.*

Conversational Context: Attorney Camille Vasquez requested that Exhibit 357a, along with records numbered 2122 to 2124, be played in court, all of which had been previously admitted as official evidence during the trial proceedings.

#### *Providing Excessive Information.*

According to Grice's cooperative principle, the maxim of quantity requires that speakers provide information that is neither more nor less than what is necessary to maintain effective communication. In the courtroom testimony of Amber Heard, there is clear evidence of a violation of this maxim, particularly in instances where she supplies more information than what is contextually required. In one such instance, when asked a question that merely

required a confirmation (i.e., a simple “yes” or “no”), Heard proceeded to include an emotionally charged description by referring to Johnny Depp as “the man who beat me up.” This additional detail, while not solicited by the question, introduces a heightened emotional tone that may influence the perception of the courtroom audience—namely, the judge and jury. From a forensic linguistic perspective, the inclusion of surplus information can be interpreted as a narrative strategy intended to shape the listener’s interpretation of the event. Such strategies are often employed in forensic testimonies to frame the speaker’s position, reinforce their credibility, or elicit emotional alignment from the audience.

In this case, Heard’s use of the phrase “the man who beat me up” not only addresses the question but also reframes her role in the narrative by positioning herself more firmly as a victim. This practice, commonly referred to as reframing, is a strategic linguistic move used to assert control over the discourse. It extends beyond the informational needs of the interaction and serves to emotionally color the testimony.

Therefore, the violation of the maxim of quantity lies in Heard’s provision of superfluous information (specifically, an unsolicited characterization of Depp) which may be viewed as an attempt to influence courtroom interpretation. From a forensic pragmatic standpoint, such a response functions as a discursive strategy aimed at strengthening a particular narrative and subtly guiding the perception of the jury in the context of the trial.

DATUM 2: 1.04.17- 1.04.43

Camila Vasquez: So you decided to take a picture of Mr.Depp asleep on the floor?

Amber Heard: *He was passed out and I took picture of him because he uh wouldn’t remember he claimed he didn’t pass out and sometime the security would carry him like a baby into bed get him changed and he would be not the wiser. So I started taking pictures of it so that he knew that was real that had gotten this bad.*

Conversational Context: In this courtroom exchange, Johnny Depp’s legal counsel submitted Exhibit 1090—an evidentiary photograph showing Depp lying unconscious on the floor, taken by Amber Heard in July 2013. The question posed to Heard was narrowly focused: whether or not she had taken the photo. However, rather than responding with a simple confirmation, Amber Heard provided an elaborated explanation that significantly exceeded the informational scope required by the question.

Drawing on Grice’s maxim of quantity, which emphasizes the need for speakers to provide information that is sufficient but not excessive, Heard’s response constitutes a clear violation. Instead of merely affirming her role in capturing the image, she proceeded to include a range of supplementary details unrelated to the core inquiry. These included descriptions of Depp’s repeated episodes of unconsciousness, his alleged denial of such incidents, the involvement of security personnel in managing his condition (e.g., assisting him to bed and changing his clothes), and her rationale for documenting the episode through photography—namely, to confront Depp with the reality of his behavior and to underscore the worsening of their situation.

Such a discursive strategy reveals an intentional shift from addressing the direct question to shaping a broader narrative about Depp’s condition. By embedding this surplus of information, Heard reframed the act of taking the photo not as a matter of privacy invasion or evidence gathering, but as a form of justified intervention. From a forensic pragmatic standpoint, this constitutes a deliberate violation of the quantity maxim, used to redirect the courtroom’s focus away from the controversial nature of the image itself and toward a constructed narrative of concern and justification. This tactic may subtly influence the jury’s interpretation of her actions by foregrounding context that elicits sympathy or understanding, thereby functioning as a persuasive mechanism embedded within a seemingly factual response.

DATUM 3: 1.05.36-1.05.55

Camila Vasquez: This is another picture of Mr Depp asleep in a chair?



Amber Heard: No he was um nodding off uh.. sleep is different when you're nodding off you're high on drugs didn't even feel the cigarette in his hand that had you know been burning on his leg uh it was caused for alarm for me naturally um because I cared about him.

Conversational Context: In another cross-examination sequence, the courtroom was presented with Exhibit 1091 (an evidentiary photograph depicting Johnny Depp asleep on a tropical island, dressed in beachwear. The image was reportedly taken during a vacation in the Bahamas. The defense counsel's question was narrowly framed, simply requesting confirmation regarding whether the photograph showed Depp asleep in the chair. From a forensic pragmatic standpoint, the expected response would ideally be a direct confirmation) either affirmative or negative possibly accompanied by minimal clarification if deemed necessary.

However, Amber Heard's response diverged substantially from this expectation. Rather than limiting her answer to the scope of the question, she provided an elaborated narrative that extended far beyond the required information. Her explanation included speculation that Depp was not merely sleeping but had "nodded off" due to substance use—a distinction not elicited by the original inquiry. Additionally, she introduced details concerning an incident in which a cigarette allegedly burned Depp's leg, as well as reflections on her emotional response to Depp's condition.

This extended response constitutes a violation of Grice's maxim of quantity, which obliges speakers to contribute only as much information as is required for the current purposes of the exchange (Grice, 1975). Heard's inclusion of extraneous and emotionally charged details not only deviated from the cooperative principle but also served a rhetorical function: to frame Depp's behavior in a negative light and to shape the jury's perception of his character and condition. From the lens of forensic pragmatics, such a linguistic strategy is significant. It demonstrates that testimony within the courtroom is not merely about truth-telling in a literal sense, but also about constructing persuasive narratives. The overextension of information—particularly when it evokes emotional or moral judgment—can be a deliberate move to influence jury interpretation, adding an affective dimension to otherwise factual content.

Thus, this instance further underscores the strategic use of language by witnesses within legal proceedings. By violating the quantity maxim, Amber Heard introduced a broader contextual framing that was not solicited by the question, yet which functioned persuasively within the adversarial setting of the courtroom. Such strategies warrant close analysis in forensic linguistic research, particularly for their implications on how testimony shapes legal narratives and informs judicial interpretation.

DATUM 4: 1.16.10-1.16.19

Camila Vasquez: so you have a habit of sending stage photographs your friend rocky don't you?

Amber Heard: I had a habit of communicating with my best friend about what was going on in my life.

Conversational Context: In this part of the examination, Camille Vasquez questioned Amber Heard regarding her habit of sending routine photographs (such as during breakfast or even of Johnny Depp in inappropriate conditions) to her friend, Rocky Pennington. The conversation transcript presented as Exhibit 252a was introduced to assess the consistency of Amber Heard's responses. Additionally, a photograph dated March 2013 was submitted as further evidence.

Grice's maxim of quantity asserts that speakers should provide information that is as informative as required, but not more or less than is necessary. In legal discourse, this principle becomes crucial in establishing clarity, accountability, and relevance in a witness's testimony. Heard's response constitutes a clear underdelivery of information. The question from Vasquez was narrowly framed: it specifically inquired about the act of sending staged photographs to a particular individual. However, Heard's reply—"I had a habit of communicating with my best friend about what was going on in my life"—is intentionally less informative than required.

From a forensic linguistic standpoint, where the speaker provides less information than is required to truthfully and directly answer the question. The term communicating is overly general and fails to confirm or deny the specific act of sharing staged visual content. Moreover, her use of the past tense "I had a habit" introduces temporal ambiguity, which serves to distance herself from the present relevance of the behavior in question.

In legal testimony, especially under cross-examination, this kind of underinformativeness may suggest strategic omission, a feature often associated with deceptive or defensive linguistic behavior.

This gap reduces the evidentiary clarity of the response, diminishing its usefulness for the jury or judge in establishing the veracity of the claim.

In conclusion, Amber Heard's response violates the maxim of quantity by failing to meet the expected level of informativeness. Through forensic linguistic analysis, such a violation may indicate a deliberate communicative choice to avoid incriminating detail, thereby affecting the overall credibility of the witness in judicial proceedings.

DATUM 5: 1.21.44-1.22.23

Camila Vasquez: In response you publicly demanded that Mr.depp pay the divorce settlement directly to you instead of the charities right?

Amber Heard: *That was always the agreement actually is for him to pay me directly it was not his money as per the settlement agreement to give away and reap a tax benefit from I said if he wants to do it and give to charity all of sudden then he should pay the correct amount and not try to get a big tax break for it so effectively for his tax bracket he should be paying double that amount to the charity directly and if he wanted to pay the charity directly he could do that was fine with me but he would need.*

Conversational Context: Camille Vasquez requested the submission of trial evidence in the form of a statement made by Amber Heard regarding her donation pledge after she won the court case and received a settlement payment from Johnny Depp. This evidence was presented in Exhibit 125.

The maxim of quantity, as proposed by Grice (1975), requires that speakers provide an amount of information that is sufficient (neither too much nor too little) for the purposes of the conversation. In legal discourse, especially during cross-examination, adherence to this maxim is essential to ensure clarity, precision, and accountability in the delivery of testimony. A violation of this maxim can signal an attempt to obscure, deflect, or manipulate meaning, making it a critical focus in forensic linguistic analysis.

Amber Heard's response constitutes a clear and specific violation of the maxim of quantity, more precisely where the speaker provides more information than required—often in a disorganized, tangential, or strategically overwhelming manner. Instead of directly confirming or denying the core proposition—that she publicly requested the settlement be paid to her rather than the charities—Heard delivers an extended and elaborate justification involving legal interpretations, tax implications, and hypothetical alternatives.

From a forensic linguistic perspective, this response reflects a strategy of discursive overproduction, where verbosity is used to deflect attention from the binary nature of the question. This linguistic behavior can be classified as testimonial evasion. By overloading the response with excess information, the speaker introduces ambiguity, making it more difficult for the interlocutor (in this case, the jury or judge) to extract a clear and direct answer.

This exchange demonstrates a textbook case of maxim of quantity violation, characterized by an excess of peripheral information and a lack of directness. From a forensic linguistic standpoint, such violations are not incidental but can serve as indicators of strategic evasion, credibility management, and discourse manipulation. In the courtroom context, this pattern diminishes the communicative clarity of the testimony and may affect how the witness's reliability is perceived.

### 3.2 Violation of the Maxim of Quality in Amber Heard's Testimony

DATUM 1: 30.19-30.29

Camila Vasquez: there isn't a picture of you with injuries after that alleged incident is there?  
Amber Heard: *I don't know if i've seen one um I. I cant recall there are a lot of pictures*

Conversational Context: Camilla Vasquez presented Exhibit 170A to the court, a piece of evidence that had been officially admitted into the proceedings on that day. This exhibit displays a photograph taken by Amber Heard, allegedly showing bruises on her arm.

Within this exchange, there is a strong indication that Amber Heard violated the maxim of quality as proposed in Grice's Cooperative Principle (1975). The maxim of quality stipulates that speakers must only provide information that is true and supported by adequate evidence. However, during cross-examination, Heard appeared evasive when asked whether any photographs existed that documented injuries sustained after the alleged incident.

When Johnny Depp's attorney, Camilla Vasquez, posed the question, "There isn't a picture of you with injuries after that alleged incident, is there?", Amber Heard responded, "I don't know if I've seen one. Um... I... I can't recall. There are a lot of pictures." This response, characterized by uncertainty and hesitation, suggests that she either lacked knowledge of such evidence or intentionally withheld a clear answer.

Yet, in contrast to her statement, the court had already been presented with Exhibit 170A, which depicts a visible bruise on Heard's arm. The existence of this photograph as a formal exhibit undermines her claim of not recalling whether such documentation exists. Therefore, her response may be interpreted as a violation of the quality maxim, as she failed to convey information aligned with the available facts. From the perspective of forensic linguistics, evasive answers are often examined as forms of defensive communication strategies. Witnesses who perceive a line of questioning as potentially damaging may resort to indirect, vague, or ambiguous responses in order to deflect responsibility or generate uncertainty in the minds of the audience. Such linguistic maneuvering can be understood as a deliberate attempt to obscure facts or to protect oneself from legal consequences.

In this case, Amber Heard's statement can be classified as a breach of the maxim of quality, as it lacks both truthfulness and evidential support in light of the photographic evidence already submitted. This kind of response may adversely impact her credibility as a witness before the judge and jury, particularly in legal contexts that demand clarity, consistency, and alignment between testimony and documentary evidence.

DATUM 2: 38.58- 39.06

Camila Vasquez: a picture you haven't produced or shown to the jury right Miss Heard?  
Amber Heard: I absolutely I produced everything  
Camila Vasquez: but you haven't shown it to this jury.  
Amber Heard: I would like very much like to its not my job.

Conversational Context: Evidence presented in trial exhibit 1254 showed a photograph of Amber Heard after allegedly being hit by Johnny Depp, in which she appeared to be wearing makeup and looked fine. In this context, Camille Vasquez questioned whether there were any other photographs besides the one presented, aiming to verify whether Heard had indeed been assaulted prior to attending the award event. According to Grice's Cooperative Principle, the maxim of quality requires speakers to provide information that is truthful and supported by adequate evidence. In the following exchange between Camille Vasquez and Amber Heard during the courtroom cross-examination.

This exchange occurs in the context of trial exhibit 1254, which presented a photograph of Amber Heard appearing uninjured despite allegations of physical abuse. Camille Vasquez challenges the integrity of Heard's narrative by asking whether additional photographic evidence was made available to the jury. Forensically, such a move can be interpreted as a strategic ambiguity, a technique often scrutinized in legal contexts for its potential to mislead without making an overtly false statement. By claiming to have "produced everything" but also indicating it is

"not her job" to present it, Heard creates a discursive space that challenges the transparency expected in sworn testimony. This type of linguistic behavior indicates a violation of the maxim of quality, as the utterance lacks the necessary evidential grounding and may be interpreted as evasive or manipulative.

In forensic pragmatics, such violations are key indicators in the assessment of speaker reliability, intent, and the communicative impact on a jury or judge. The analysis reveals how language, even in brief utterances, can reflect underlying strategies of persuasion or obfuscation within legal proceedings.

#### 4. Discussion

This study examined instances of pragmatic violations within the cross-examination exchanges between actress Amber Heard and attorney Camille Vasquez during the defamation trial involving Johnny Depp. The analytical focus was placed on breaches of Grice's maxims (particularly the maxims of quality and quantity) within the framework of forensic linguistics. These violations are not merely conversational lapses; they represent strategic linguistic choices that can directly influence perceptions of credibility, reliability, and truthfulness in a courtroom setting. The cross-examination context inherently pressures witnesses to deliver concise and truthful answers. However, as the data shows, Amber Heard's responses frequently deviated from these expectations. One notable example of maxim of quality violation was Heard's claim, *"I produced everything,"* in response to a question about whether she had submitted all relevant photographs. Although the statement projected cooperation, it was immediately undermined by her acknowledgment that the images had not been shown to the jury. From a forensic linguistic viewpoint, this response demonstrates evidential insufficiency, suggesting the speaker may have intentionally exaggerated the completeness of her cooperation (Rock, 2019).

In addition to issues of truthfulness, violations of the maxim of quantity were consistently observed across multiple responses. In one instance, Vasquez posed a targeted question: *"So you have a habit of sending staged photographs to your friend Rocky, don't you?"* Rather than directly affirming or denying the act, Heard responded vaguely: *"I had a habit of communicating with my best friend about what was going on in my life."* This form of under-informativeness deflects the interrogator's focus while still maintaining a surface-level engagement with the topic. As (Olsson & Luchjenbroers, 2014) note, such vague or partial responses are characteristic of strategic evasion in high-stakes legal contexts.

Equally significant were examples of over-informativeness, where Heard introduced extraneous justifications in response to simple, fact-oriented questions. For instance, when questioned about the donation of her divorce settlement (Exhibit 125), Heard launched into an elaborate explanation about tax benefits and legal interpretation of the settlement agreement. The response lacked syntactic cohesion and failed to provide a clear answer, violating the maxim of quantity by exceeding the required level of detail and introducing discursive noise. (Harris, 2020) emphasize that in adversarial legal settings, such excessive elaboration can function as a rhetorical device to destabilize the cross-examiner's control and obscure the communicative intent of the speaker.

In the context of this trial, the interactional dynamics between Camille Vasquez and Amber Heard serve as a compelling case study in forensic pragmatics. Vasquez's questioning style was direct and precision-driven, aiming to elicit definitive answers that could expose contradictions or misrepresentations. Heard, in contrast, often employed linguistic mitigation strategies such as hedging, digression, and abstraction, which can be interpreted as attempts to manage face and reduce potential legal consequences (MacLeod, 2020). From a forensic linguistic standpoint, the systematic violation of conversational maxims (particularly those involving quantity and quality) suggests a pattern of discursive manipulation. These strategies may serve defensive psychological purposes but can significantly undermine the transparency expected in legal testimony. The interaction between Vasquez's probing questions and Heard's evasive answers exemplifies how language use in cross-examination becomes a strategic battlefield where control, credibility, and narrative framing are at stake.

## 5. Conclusion

This research has examined the courtroom discourse between Amber Heard and Camille Vasquez within the 2022 defamation trial initiated by Johnny Depp. The analysis, grounded in the principles of forensic linguistics and pragmatic theory, specifically Grice's Cooperative Principle, demonstrates how several of Heard's utterances during cross-examination violated key conversational maxims—particularly the maxims of quantity and quality. These violations were manifested through ambiguous, overly elaborate, irrelevant, or evasive responses that failed to fulfill the expectations of informativeness and truthfulness in legal testimony.

Throughout the 26-day public trial, linguistic evidence, including recorded testimony and exhibits, revealed significant inconsistencies in Heard's statements. The pragmatic violations observed (such as under informativeness and over elaboration) highlighted the speaker's attempt to obscure the clarity of her responses, thereby affecting the perception of her credibility. These findings support the forensic linguistic view that pragmatic inconsistencies can serve as indicators of discursive manipulation or strategic avoidance under legal pressure.

The outcome of this trial underscores how forensic linguistic analysis can meaningfully contribute to the legal process. Through detailed examination of language use, discourse patterns, and pragmatic inconsistencies, this study confirms that linguistic evidence can influence legal interpretation, reinforce or challenge credibility, and assist jurors in reaching a just verdict. Ultimately, the application of linguistic pragmatics in this trial supports the broader function of language as both a medium of evidence and a mechanism of justice.

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