

# *A Study of Self-Talk as Intrapersonal Communication from the Perspective of Conversational Implicature*

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**Abstract:** Self-talk is a universal phenomenon, yet we often observe that its content does not always align with one's cognition. People may not always be faithful to themselves or to reality, instead using self-talk to meet psychological needs. Moreover, human cognition often interprets self-talk as a form of dialogue, with self-talk inherently possessing certain features of interpersonal communication. The pragmatic view, typically used to explain or guide human communication with the external world, may also be applicable to the internal dialogue that individuals have with themselves. This paper takes the aforementioned psychological adaptive self-talk as an example and employs conversational implicature theory for pragmatic analysis. In doing so, it tries not only to provide a novel theoretical interpretation of psychological strategies but also to expand the scope of pragmatic perspective, exploring its renewed vitality.

## **1. Introduction**

Self-talk, the act of speaking to oneself either aloud or silently, has garnered attention in psychological and linguistic research due to its profound implications for cognition, emotion and behaviour. This phenomenon is not merely an aspect of human behaviour but serves as a critical mechanism for self-regulation, problem-solving, and emotional coping [1]. Its developmental trajectory progresses from social speech (communication with others) to private speech (audible self-talk), and finally to inner speech (silent, internalized dialogue) [2][3].

One notable phenomenon in self-talk is its potential misalignment with an individual's conscious cognition. Research indicates that self-talk does not always faithfully represent one's true thoughts or fits the reality. Instead, it could be distorted or biased, serving as a mechanism for psychological adaptation [4], which could allow individuals to cope with stress, maintain self-esteem, or justify actions.

In the field of psychology, the phenomenon of psychological adaptive behaviours has been already studied extensively within the framework of cognitive dissonance theory [5], according to which individuals experience psychological discomfort when their beliefs, attitudes, or behaviours are inconsistent, leading them to engage in motivated reasoning [6] or self-affirmation [7] to restore cognitive harmony. The misalignment manifests the adaptive function of self-talk, allowing individuals to navigate complex emotional landscapes and preserve psychological well-being.

Linguistic researchers dug about the function of self-talk in terms of psychological adaptation and language acquisition through investigation and experiments. Linguistic analyses focused on the structural and functional aspects of self-talk, examining how it differs from interpersonal communication by defining its features, such as simplified syntax, pronoun shifts (e.g., using the second or third person), and repetitive patterns, which distinguish it from social speech [4][8], suggesting a more streamlined cognitive process.

Although linguistic studies have acknowledged the cognitive significance of self-talk, existing research remains confined to surface-level analyses, neglecting its features as a kind of special communication, thus overlooks its deeper pragmatic dimensions. After all, the development of social communication and self-talk is inherently connected, with an undeniable cognitive linkage, thus research that attempts to separate them risks obscuring comprehensive understanding. By adopting a pragmatic framework to explore self-talk by viewing it as a unique form of communicative behaviour, namely intrapersonal communication, this paper intends to uncover novel perspectives on the intricate relationship between language and thought and might offer fresh insights into the interplay between language use and cognitive processes, and as well expand the scope of pragmatic research to discover its broader applications.

## 2. Theories Adopted

Conversational implicature, as a pragmatic concept introduced by Grice [9], refers to implied meanings derived from contextual and cooperative principles rather than literal utterances. Grice's Cooperative Principle (CP) explains how interlocutors achieve effective communication through implicit conversational norms. Grice proposed that participants in a dialogue generally adhere to four maxims to facilitate coherent and meaningful exchanges (while violations or flouts of these maxims often generate conversational implicatures):

Maxim of Quantity:

Make your contribution as informative as is required.

Do not make your contribution more informative than is required.

Maxim of Quality:

Do not say what you believe to be false.

Do not say that for which you lack adequate evidence.

Maxim of Relation:

Be relevant.

Maxim of Manner:

Avoid obscurity of expression.

Avoid ambiguity.

Be brief (avoid unnecessary prolixity).

Be orderly.

According to the theory, breaking the Cooperative Principle generates implications, while this behaviour could be connected with one's language processing of psychological adaptive self-talk. What's more, the theory of Conversational Implicature is effective for understanding how people convey and interpret implicit meanings in communication, which means through this analysis, it might be possible to gain insights into the cognitive context, psychological state, or survival condition of the self-talker.

## 3. Self-Talk as Communication

In terms of human behaviour, it's easy to see people are accustomed to interacting with themselves and receiving feedback, with the *selves* flexibly changing their roles. This can be

supported by Conceptual Metaphor theory raised by Lakoff and Johnson, which stated that metaphorical thought is mostly unconscious, while our actions are fundamentally metaphorical in nature [10]. As self-talk originates from interpersonal communication and, due to the high degree of consistency between the two, people treat self-talk as a form of communication, not only cognitively, but also behaviourally. For example, in *Self-talk is communication*, where one experiences actions in self-talk as communication, which is easy to be corroborated. To begin with, if humans only hold a single will when confronting themselves, their language would not undergo such purposeful processing and transformation. In self-talk, there are more than one entity playing specific roles:

Oneself as metaphorical interlocuters / Self-talk as metaphorical interaction:

(when speaking to oneself)

Let *me* tell *you* the truth.

*Mary*, *you* can do this.

*You* have to do this for *us* this time.

Let me *help* you.

*Please* don't be nervous.

...

These examples can all manifest the idea of experiential similarity, which was raised as a part of Conceptual Metaphor theory. Many other studies can also provide support. From the perspective of dialogical Self Theory [11][12], people can take at least two points of view or "I-positions" within their intrapersonal communication. Inner speech can easily evolve into internal dialogue between two subjects inside one's mind [13].

For example, in the process of self-motivation (A: the original self; B: a higher self to give guidance; C: a willingness-toward but undigested self; Purpose: to fit C into A), in utterance *You are going to be brave today*, *you* represents A, who is under B's instruction (which suggests C), with the instruction selected by A and thus B comes into being. And if A finishes its job, C would then emerge and be integrated into A.

There is also abundant evidence which suggests that self-talk exhibits many of the general characteristics of interpersonal communicative behaviour, such as contextual relevance, and it is rule-governed and has certain feedback mechanism, not to mention that psychological adaptive self-talk has an even stronger communicative nature. For the sake of brevity, further illustration will not be covered here. We have already sufficiently demonstrated that self-talk can be examined as a form of communicative behaviour, thus is qualified to be analysed through the lens of conversational implicature.

## 4. *Flouting* in Psychological Adaptive Self-Talk

### 4.1 A General Thinking Mechanism

Even though self-talk is consistent with communicative behaviour when viewed from a metaphorical perspective, metaphors also have the feature of *hiding* that can obscure our awareness of the differences between the two. Therefore, before conducting theoretical analysis, we need to first delineate the scope adaptable to the theory of conversational implicature, which is also suitable for the *flouting* in psychological adaptive self-talk.

Based on two basic insights into language, we can accomplish the construction of Figure 1:

- (1) Initially, language did not exist, and human survival did not necessitate its use. However, once the need for sharing arose, language emerged and became conventionalized, ensuring its necessity to function effectively on a broader scale.
- (2) Language is abstract because, in practice, it does not encompass all information but rather

focuses on the most directive or salient aspects.

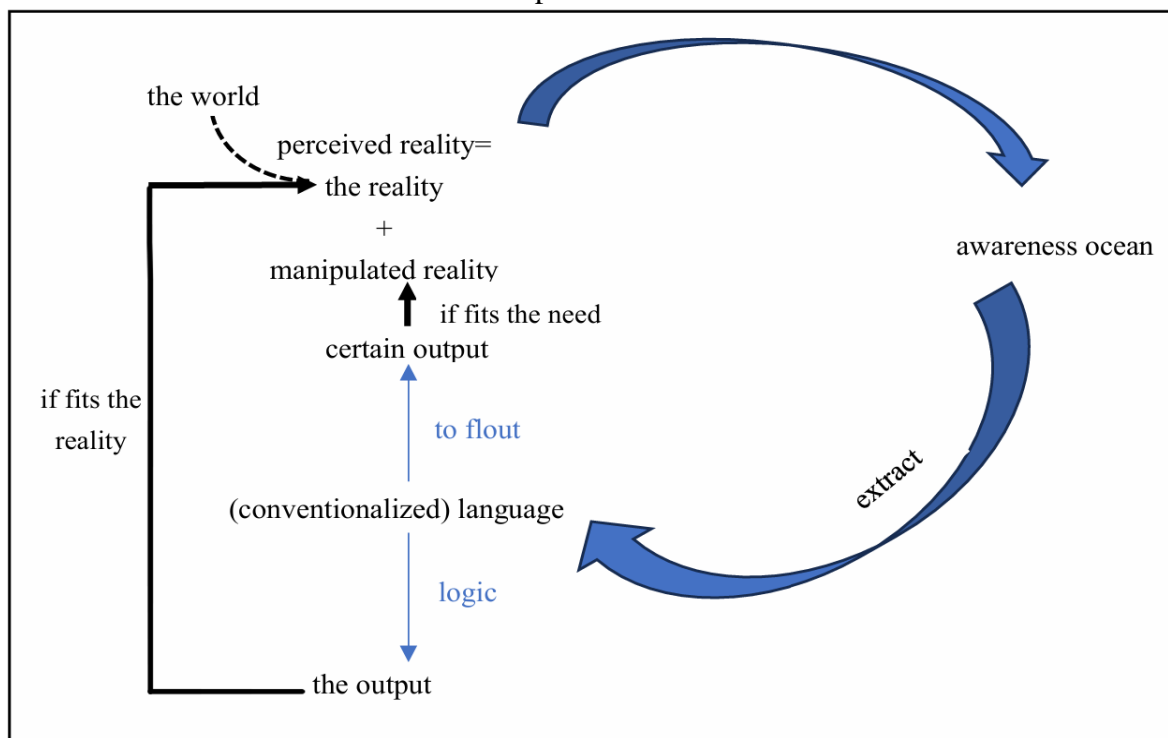


Figure 1: A general thinking mechanism

Thought can be divided into two types, visible and invisible.

Language abstracts specific thought processes into visible thinking. It is the most directional content we abstract in our minds (manifested as language) to make thought visible and form the basis for logical analysis. In other words, as individual's internal world is vast and chaotic, humans use visible thinking to extract a limited, specific, and directional part of it, which is generally true, valid, and consistent with the external world.

Invisible thinking includes subconscious, unconscious, and enlightenments, etc.

Human subconscious responses usually align with reality. However, if one intentionally violates the rules (here we say Cooperative Principle), they need tools with limited and conventional meanings, namely language, because only the visible thought has the potentiality of being manipulated. An individual's consciousness lying in his / her cognitive context, roughly connected with the awareness ocean, represents an authentic self, which would have interactions with the self that functions in daily life, and the latter takes the responsibility of psychological adaptive self-talk most of the time. The analysis here would be confined to this part.

#### 4.2 Flouting maxims in Psychological Adaptive Self-Talk

According to Grice's (1975) identification of flouting, the speaker deliberately fails to observe a maxim (or maxims) as a means of prompting others to look for a meaning which is different from, or in addition to, the expressed meaning.

This raises a question: Do people really intentionally violate cognition or reality in their self-talk? In fact, people are often aware of this kind of behaviour, but they do not care much about it as they would in interpersonal interactions. However, examples like the one in 4.2.2 are indeed hard to define; in the film, it could be an exaggeration for artistic effect, but in real life, it might indicate a mental disorder.

#### 4.2.1 Flouting quantity (make your contribution as informative as is required)

##### Example 1

Lady Macbeth (to herself): Out, damned spot! Out, I say! — One, two. Why, then, 'tis time to do 't. Hell is murky! — Fie, my lord, fie! A soldier, and afeard? What need we fear who knows it, when none can call our power to account? — Yet who would have thought the old man to have had so much blood in him?

(*Macbeth*, Act 5, Scene 1) [14]

Lady Macbeth's repetitive self-talk, "Out, damned spot!", focuses narrowly on the imagined bloodstains, symbolizing her guilt over Duncan's murder. This fixation on a localized detail allows her to avoid confronting the broader moral and emotional consequences of her actions. Her fragmented speech and third-person references (e.g., "the old man") further illustrate self-distancing, a psychological strategy to detach from the full weight of her crimes. However, this avoidance ultimately fails, as her obsessive behaviour reveals the unsustainable nature of such self-deception.

This example shows how self-talk can serve as both a coping mechanism and a form of self-deception. By fixating on a specific, repetitive action or phrase, individuals may temporarily shield themselves from the broader implications of their behaviour.

#### 4.2.2 Flouting quality (do not say what you believe to be false)

##### Example 2

The Narrator (to himself): All the ways you wish you could be, that's me. I look like you wanna look, I fuck like you wanna fuck, I am smart, capable, and most importantly, I am free in all the ways that you are not.

(*Fight Club*, 1999)

The Narrator's self-talk reveals a profound act of self-deception, as he projects his idealized self onto Tyler Durden, a split personality he has created. By attributing qualities like freedom, strength, and charisma to Tyler, the Narrator avoids confronting his own dissatisfaction and powerlessness in reality. This internal dialogue serves as a coping mechanism, allowing him to escape the mundane and unfulfilling aspects of his life. However, the revelation of Tyler's true nature exposes the Narrator's self-deception, highlighting the psychological cost of such avoidance.

#### 4.2.3 Flouting quality (do not say that for which you lack adequate evidence)

##### Example 3

Sherlock Holmes (to himself): Okay, focus. She's got a wedding ring, but no tan line. Married, but recently separated. Expensive perfume, but her coat's from a cheap chain store. She's trying to impress someone, but not her husband. Who? Who's important enough to dress up for but not enough to spend money on?

(*Sherlock*, Season 1, Episode 1, "A Study in Pink")

Sherlock's self-talk is filled with speculative statements and assumptions (e.g., "recently separated") that lack direct empirical evidence. However, this deliberate use of unverified reasoning serves a positive purpose: it helps him organize his thoughts, generate hypotheses, and rapidly narrow down potential leads in the investigation. By verbalizing these assumptions, Sherlock not only clarifies his own thinking but also creates a mental framework to guide his problem-solving process. This example illustrates how self-talk, even when based on unproven claims, can be an effective cognitive tool for achieving specific goals.

#### 4.2.4 Flouting relation (be relevant)

##### Example 4

Michael Scott (to himself): Okay, you know what? I'm just gonna say it. I'm gonna say it. I'm gonna say it. I love inside jokes. I'd love to be a part of one someday. And... I have herpes.

(*The Office*, Season 2, Episode 12, "The Injury")

This self-talk happens after Michael Scott accidentally burns his foot on a George Foreman grill and comes to the office limping, seeking sympathy. His talk filled with unrelated and abrupt statements, serves as a deliberate strategy to diffuse tension and redirect attention. By introducing random topics like "inside jokes" and "herpes," he shifts focus away from his awkward behaviour and physical injury, creating a humorous diversion. This approach not only alleviates the discomfort of the situation but also reinforces his role as a comedic figure within the office dynamic. Michael's use of irrelevant self-talk highlights how language can be employed to achieve positive social outcomes, such as easing awkwardness or fostering group cohesion.

#### 4.2.5 Flouting manner (avoid obscurity of expression; be brief; be orderly)

##### Example 5

Hamlet:

To be, or not to be, that is the question:  
Whether 'tis nobler in the mind to suffer  
The slings and arrows of outrageous fortune,  
Or to take arms against a sea of troubles  
And by opposing end them. To die—to sleep,  
No more; and by a sleep to say we end  
The heart-ache and the thousand natural shocks  
That flesh is heir to: 'tis a consummation  
Devoutly to be wish'd. To die, to sleep;  
To sleep, perchance to dream—ay, there's the rub,  
For in that sleep of death what dreams may come...

(*Hamlet*, Act 3, Scene 1) [14]

Hamlet's soliloquy exemplifies deliberate ambiguity and convoluted reasoning, as he oscillates between opposing ideas—existence versus non-existence, action versus suffering. His language is intentionally vague and philosophical, avoiding clear conclusions while indulging in lengthy metaphors (e.g., "slings and arrows of outrageous fortune"). This rhetorical strategy reflects his internal conflict and hesitation, as he uses convoluted self-talk to mask his indecision and evade the immediate demands of action. The soliloquy thus serves as both a psychological escape and a manifestation of his complex emotional state.

## 5. Discussion and conclusion

Through these case studies there are several findings: self-talk that intentionally violates the cooperative principle can have both negative and positive impacts. The meanings generated through such self-talk reflect an individual's psychological state and their strategies for coping with their environment. Furthermore, the context in which this occurs is shaped by the interplay between social context and individual cognitive context.

For instance, self-talk that deliberately avoids direct or clear communication may serve as a defensive mechanism to protect the individual from emotional distress, or it may act as a creative tool for problem-solving by allowing the exploration of unconventional ideas. The underlying

meanings of such self-talk often reveal deeper cognitive and emotional processes, such as avoidance, self-deception, or adaptive coping. Meanwhile, the broader social context (e.g., cultural norms, interpersonal dynamics) and the individual's cognitive context (e.g., personal beliefs, mental frameworks) together influence how and why these violations of the cooperative principle occur. This dual-layered context highlights the complexity of self-talk as both a psychological and sociolinguistic phenomenon.

Two particularly insightful points deserve special attention: First, a new coherence has emerged that brings the dialogic nature of self-talk into focus. This realization requires us to maintain a conscious awareness and naturally assume the role of an interlocutor in our own internal dialogues. Second, the violation of the cooperative principle in self-talk occurs exceptionally easily and almost instinctively, often carrying profound implicit meanings. This encourages us to consider pragmatic strategies in psychological adjustment and even therapeutic interventions, as the way we engage in self-talk can reveal and influence our mental states in significant ways.

By recognizing self-talk as a form of internal dialogue, we can better understand its role in shaping thoughts, emotions, and behaviours. Moreover, the ease with which individuals deviate from the maxims in self-talk suggests that these behaviours are not random but deeply rooted in cognitive and emotional processes. This understanding opens up new possibilities for leveraging pragmatic approaches in mental health practices, such as guiding individuals to reframe their self-talk in ways that promote resilience and well-being.

Last but not least, apart from conversational implicature, self-talk could also demonstrate its vitality when examined through other pragmatic theoretical lenses. For example, from the perspective of speech act theory, we can examine the perlocutionary effects of self-encouragement, while relevance theory can be used to explore the formation of self-suggestive utterances and the varying degrees of their effectiveness. These novel perspectives not only enrich our understanding of self-talk as a pragmatic phenomenon but also open new avenues for research and application. Furthermore, such analyses could inform the development of targeted interventions in fields like psychology, education, and personal development, where self-talk is increasingly recognized as a powerful tool for fostering resilience and growth.

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