

7.3. Grice's Conversational Maxims

While we've noted how context influences how a sentence is interpreted, and whether a further unspoken sentence was also communicated, we've so far offered no details on how context exerts one effect on one sentence, but some different effect on another. That leaves context, and its influence on communication, looking quite mysterious. To dispel some of this sense of mystery, we here review a proposal by the philosopher H.P. Grice that communication is guided by some rough rules, or 'maxims'.¹

The idea is that as language users we not only follow these rules, but count on others to follow them as well. Because we count on one another to follow these rules, we can make assumptions about others' utterances that wouldn't be justified apart from such rules. (By analogy: because I not only obey traffic laws about right of way, but count on others to do so as well, I can drive when I have the right of way without hesitating at each side road out of concern that some other driver will pull out into my path.)

The first maxim governs **how much information** the speaker gives at any one point in the conversation.

Maxim of Quantity:

1. Make your contribution to the conversation as informative as necessary.
2. Don't make your contribution to the conversation more informative than necessary.

The following exchange is an illustration.

Barbie: Do you know where the remote control for the can-opener is?

Rex: It's somewhere in the kitchen.

Barbie infers from what Rex said that he doesn't know exactly where the remote is; for if Rex had known that it was, say, in the junk drawer next to the recycling bin, his response would have deliberately been less informative than was needed to fully answer Barbie's question. And that would violate

¹ The presentation here follows the discussion of the maxims in (Grice 1975: 171).

the Maxim of Quantity. Taking for granted that Rex isn't violating the Conversational Maxims, Barbie infers that he doesn't know exactly where the remote control is.

[Maybe this belongs in Relevance?

Likewise, if someone clearly flags their response as an inference,

The following exchange is another illustration of this.

Neko: Where's Rex?

Jack: He must be somewhere he can get on foot, since his car's in the driveway.

Jack's act of **inferring** where Rex is communicates that he doesn't know more than this. For if in fact he knew exactly where Rex was – say, because Rex told him he was going to shoot pool with Jake at the Bel Aire – he wouldn't have needed to infer Rex's whereabouts from available evidence.]

Another illustration comes from people's utterances of tautologies, and other trivial or very obvious truths, in ordinary conversation, as illustrated by the following exchange.

Dr. Slim: You can have a beer if you like – but I'm afraid I only have Penny-Saver® brand.

Elvis: Eh, beer is beer.

It is trivially true that beer is beer (and likewise that gold is gold, that unicorns are unicorns, etc.). So if that sentence were all Elvis was communicating, he'd be violating the Maxim of Quantity by uttering a sentence that communicates **no information at all**. Assuming that he's not violating the conversational maxims, Dr. Slim infers instead that Elvis is communicating indirectly, and intends a second unspoken message: "It doesn't matter to me which brand of beer I drink".

The second maxim, the Maxim of Quality, concerns the **truthfulness** of and **support** for the speaker's utterance.

Maxim of Quality:

1. Don't say what you believe to be false.
2. Don't say that for which you lack adequate evidence.

An obvious application of this maxim is in **non-literal communication**, where the sentence spoken is, on the face of it (i.e., if interpreted literally), false. So looking at the mess Elvis left in the kitchen, Kitty may say: "That man is a real pig". Kitty is speaking metaphorically here: she doesn't mean by this that he is (literally) a four-footed, pork-bearing barnyard animal, but rather that he is in some relevant way *like* a pig – namely, in being messy.

The third maxim concerns **sticking to the topic** of the conversation, and more generally saying things important to the discussion at that point.

Maxim of Relevance:

Be relevant (i.e., say things related to the current topic of the conversation).

As an example, consider this exchange.

Letitia: I need to pick up some glitter for my posters.

Lucretia: There's a drug store up the block.

Letitia supposes that Lucretia believes she can buy glitter at this drug store (or at least that there's a reasonable chance she can). For if, on the contrary, Lucretia knew Letitia couldn't get glitter there, it would've been completely **irrelevant** of her to mention the store's location; and that would violate the Maxim of Relevance.²

² Adapting an example from (Grice 1975: 171).

Whereas the Maxim of Quantity concerned the (amount of) information communicated, the final maxim instead applies to **how** the speaker's sentences are spoken, phrased, or structured.

Maxim of Manner:

1. Avoid obscurity of expression.
2. Avoid ambiguity.
3. Be brief (avoid unnecessary wordiness).
4. Be orderly.

In light of this maxim, when the speaker is phrasing his point in an unusual or round-about way, we will infer that there's some reason to his choice of words.

For example, suppose that rather than simply saying "Kitty sang the national anthem" Elvis says: "Kitty made a series of sounds that closely fit the score of the national anthem". We assume he's communicating a second message indirectly – namely, that Kitty's singing was bad – because if no such further message were intended he'd have been unnecessarily wordy in stating his point, and so be violating the Maxim of Manner.³

³ Adapting an example from (Grice 1975: 173-4).

Grice's Conversational Maxims

- **Maxim of Quantity (Amount of Information):**

1. Make your contribution to the conversation as informative as necessary.
2. Do not make your contribution to the conversation more informative than necessary.

- **Maxim of Quality (Truth and Support):**

1. Do not say what you believe to be false.
2. Do not say that for which you lack adequate evidence

- **Maxim of Relevance (Staying on Topic):**

Be relevant (i.e., say things related to the current topic of the conversation).

- **Maxim of Manner (How Sentences are Spoken or Worded) :**

1. Avoid unclear expressions.
2. Avoid ambiguity.
3. Be brief (avoid unnecessary wordiness).
4. Be orderly.