

### 7.3. Grice's Conversational Maxims

While we have had many occasions to note the influence of context of how a sentence is interpreted, and whether a further unspoken sentence was also communicated, we have so far offered no details on how context exerts one effect on one sentence, and some different effect on another. That leaves context, and its influence on communication, looking thoroughly 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'.<sup>1</sup>

The idea is that as language users we not only follow these rules, but count on others to follow them as well. Because we each count on others to follow these rules, we can make assumptions about others' utterances that wouldn't be justified outside of these rules. In particular: we will have expectations about one another's language use, and reach conclusions about one another based on these expectations, which we couldn't safely infer without them. (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. Do not make your contribution to the conversation more informative than necessary.

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

The following exchange is an illustration of this maxim at work.

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 it is; for if Rex had known that it was, say, in the junk drawer next to the recycling bin, he would have given less information that was needed to fully answer Barbie's question. And that would violate the Maxim of Quantity. Taking for granted that Rex isn't violating the Conversational Maxims, it's safe to infer 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 Lounge – then 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.

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

Jake: 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 Jake was communicating, he would 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, Rex infers instead that Jake 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 sentences.

**Maxim of Quality:**

1. Do not say what you believe to be false.
2. Do not 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 Dr. Slim 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.

Elvis: I really need to get something to eat.

Trixie: There's a coffee shop around the corner.

Elvis will suppose that Trixie thinks he can get something to eat at this coffee shop (or at least that there's a chance he can). For if, on the contrary, Trixie knew Elvis couldn't get anything to eat at that coffee shop, it would have been completely **irrelevant** of her to have mentioned the location of the coffee shop; and that would violate the Maxim of Relevance.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> Adapting an example from (Grice 1975: 171).

Whereas the Maxim of Quantity concerned the (amount of) information communicated, the final maxim instead applies to the **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, if Neko and Jack can speak Italian, and it's known that Kitty can't, in Kitty's presence Neko might tell Jack in Italian that Kitty's birthday party will be held that weekend at the Bel Aire lounge. In this case, even if Jack didn't already know that the information was being kept from Kitty, he infers this from the way Neko communicated the information in Kitty's presence. For to have switched to Italian (in a non-Italian-speaking context) would have otherwise been a violation of the Maxim of Manner.

As a second example, suppose that rather than simply saying "Miss X sang the national anthem," a newspaper writer instead says: "Miss X made a series of noises that closely corresponded to the score of the national anthem". We assume the writer in communicating a second message indirectly – namely, that Miss X's singing way poor – because if no such further message had been intended, the writer would have been unnecessarily wordy in stating his point, and so be violating the Maxim of Manner.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> Borrowing 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.