

2.3. 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”.

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 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 without hesitation when I have the right of way without hesitating at each side road out of concern that the other drivers 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.

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

Neko: Where does Cosmo live?

Jack: Somewhere in the south of France.

Neko infers from what Jack said that Jack doesn't know more precisely where Cosmo lives; for if Jack had known, he would be giving less

information that was relevant, and hence violating the Maxim of Quantity (Grice 1975: 171).

Another illustration comes from people's utterances of tautologies in ordinary conversation (Grice 1975: 171), 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.
Ace: 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 Ace 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 Ace 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 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.

This maxim applies most obviously to non-literal communication, where the sentence spoken is, on the face of it false (i.e., if interpreted literally). So, looking at the mess Dr. Slim left in the kitchen, Neko may say: "That man is a real pig". Neko 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 way like a pig – namely, in being messy (Grice 1975: 172).

The third maxim concerns sticking to the topic of the conversation, and more generally saying things important to that situation and conversation.

Maxim of Relevance:

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

As an example, consider this exchange.

Dr. Slim: I'm out of gasoline.

Jake: There's a garage around the corner.

Dr. Slim will suppose that Jake thinks he can get some gasoline at this garage (or at least that there's a good chance that he can). For if, on the contrary, Jake knew that Dr. Slim couldn't get gasoline at that garage, it would have been completely irrelevant of Jake to have mentioned the garage – and so a violation of the Maxim of Relevance (Grice 1975: 171).

Whereas the Maxim of Quantity concerned the (amount of) information communicated, the final maxim instead applies to the wording and structuring of the speaker's sentences.

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 parents are planning on surprising a small child with a bicycle for her birthday, one may ask the other, in the child's presence: "Did you get the B-I-K-E?" Even if we didn't know previously that it was meant to be a surprise, from hearing the word "bike" spelled out (rather than just uttered) we would conclude that the information was being withheld from the child; for if that weren't the case, the speaker would have phrased the

sentence in an unnecessarily long-winded way, thereby violating 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 be violating the Maxim of Manner (Grice 1975: 173-4).

Summary: Grice's Conversational Maxims

- **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.

- **Maxim of Quality:**

1. Do not say what you believe to be false.
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- **Maxim of Relevance:**

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

- **Maxim of Manner:**

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