

Grice's Cooperative Principle, Maxims and Implicatures

Cooperative Principle - CP

- Grice (1975) proposes that participants in a conversation obey a general ‘Cooperative Principle’ (CP), which is expected to be in force whenever a conversation unfolds:

“Make your conversational contribution such as is required, at the stage at which it occurs, by the accepted purpose or direction of the talk exchange in which you are engaged.”

Implicatures

- The capacity of interlocutors to make sense of the utterances they exchange in spite of some missing elements, is that such elements are often *implicated* and such *implicatures* are made possible by *cooperation* between speaker and listener.
- Expecting to observe the CP enables language users to realise when a certain assumption has been suspended and why interlocutors have chosen to disregard an accepted set of conversational postulates.

Implicatures

- Grice views pragmatic interpretation as heavily relying on inferencing processes: the hearer is able to hypothesise about the Speaker's meaning, based on the meaning of the sentence uttered, on background or contextual assumptions and, last but not least, on general communicative principles which speakers are expected to observe.

Implicatures

- “To imply is to hint, suggest or convey some meaning indirectly by means of language” (Thomas 1995: 58).
- In his explanation of implied or additional meaning, Grice distinguishes between two kinds of implicatures:
 - *Conventional implicatures*, which convey the same extra meaning regardless of context and which are always lexicalized;
 - *Conversational implicatures*, which convey different meanings according to different contexts, i.e. are calculated afresh each time the Speaker and the Hearer interact.

Implicatures

- Conventional implicatures are carried by a restricted number of words: *but, even, therefore, yet*.
- Grice gives the following convincing examples:
 - *He is poor but honest.*
an utterance stating that honesty appears contrary to expectations in relation to financial underprivileges.
 - *John is an Englishman therefore he is brave.*
an utterance which triggers entailment built on the argumentative of reaching a conclusion based on a set of premises:
 - Premise 1: All Englishmen are brave.
 - Premise 2: John is an Englishman,
 - Conclusion: John is brave

Implicatures

- Conversational implicatures:

- A: Is that scotch over there?

- B: Help yourself.

A's utterance is literally a request for information (on the nature of the liquor), yet B interprets it as a request for a drink. Nothing in the literal meaning of A's utterance could lead B to that interpretation, which can only be derived by means of conversational implicature.

Implicatures

- Any implied meaning *risks being (mis) understood* by the Hearer as the Speaker intended it to be uptaken, since a Speaker may imply something that the Hearer may fail to infer appropriately. Consider the following exchange excerpted from Konchalovki's movie, 'Tango and Cash':
 - Tango (to Cash, his partner who is driving recklessly through rising flames): Who taught you to drive like that?
 - Cash: Stevie Wonder.Cash's reply may fail to be inferred correctly, i.e. the implicature may have been misread if his interlocutor did not know that Stevie Wonder is blind and that only somebody driving with their eyes shut could be daring and irresolute enough to get their way through the flames.

Conversational maxims

- Implicatures can be established by envisaging the four conversational rules or 'Maxims' comprised by the CP:

I. **Maxims of Quantity:**

1. Make your contribution as informative as is required for the current purposes of the exchange.
2. Do not make your contribution more informative than is required.

II. **Maxims of Quality:** Supermaxim: Try to make your contribution one that is true.

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

III. **Maxim of Relation:** Be relevant.

IV. **Maxims of Manner:** Supermaxim: Be perspicuous.

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

Non-observance of maxims

- Faced with a speaker's non-observance of a maxim, a competent hearer will draw one of several possible conclusions:
 - A. The speaker is openly 'opting out' from the operation of the maxim and is unwilling to abide by the CP.
 - B. The speaker is deliberately and secretly subverting the maxim and the CP, usually for some self-serving purpose. This constitutes an instance of maxim violation.
 - C. The speaker means to observe the CP, but fails to fulfill a particular maxim through ineptitude. For example, he may ineptly use words too technical for the audience and occasion, thus inadvertently non-observing the Maxim of Manner. This is an instance of maxim infringement.

Non-observance of maxims

- D. The speaker presumably means to observe the CP, and yet s/he is blatantly not observing a maxim; if he is not inept, s/he must mean something additional to what s/he is saying.

For example, when asked what she thinks of a new restaurant, a woman who replied,

‘They have handsome carpets’

would appear to be flouting the first Maxim of Quality. If there is no reason that she means not to be observing the CP and that she is not inept either, then her remark must mean something other than what it literally asserts - for example, that the food they serve is not the best in town. When non-observance of a maxim is deliberate and intended to be recognised as deliberate, this is a case of Maxim Flouting (Hancher 1978).

Failing to observe the maxims

- Paradoxically enough, more often than not, people fail to observe the maxims, be it deliberately or accidentally.
- There are five major ways of failing to observe a maxim:
 1. Flouting
 2. Violating
 3. Infringing
 4. Opting out
 5. Suspending

Flouting of a maxim

- “A S blatantly fails to observe a maxim, not with any intention of deceiving or misleading, but because the S wishes to prompt the H to look for a meaning which is different from, or in addition to, the expressed meaning” (Thomas 1995: 65).
- Mey (1996: 70) reinforces Thomas’s claim by providing a more concise yet comprehensive definition of ‘flouting’, understood as a case of verbal communication when “we can make a blatant show of breaking one of the maxims... **in order to lead the addressee to look for a covert, implied meaning**”.

Flouting of a maxim - Examples

- Flouts exploiting the Quality Maxim: Such flouts occur when the Speaker says something which is and needs to be perceived as blatantly untrue.
 - On Christmas, an ambulance picks up a collapsed drunkard who collapsed on the sidewalk. Soon the drunkard vomits all over the paramedic. The paramedic says:
 - ‘Great, that’s really great! That’s made my Christmas!’

Inferencing in the Gricean framework unfolds as follows:

1. The paramedic expressed pleasure at having somebody vomit over him
2. There is no example in recorded history of people being delighted at having somebody vomit over them.
3. I have no reason to believe that the paramedic is trying to deceive us.
4. Unless the paramedic’s utterance is entirely pointless, he must be trying to convey some other proposition.
5. The most obviously related proposition is the exact opposite of the one he has expressed.
6. The paramedic is extremely annoyed at having the drunkard vomit over him.

Flouting of a maxim - Examples

- Flouts exploiting the Quantity Maxim: When a Speaker blatantly gives more or less information than required, s/he may flout the Quantity Maxim and deliberately talk either too much or too little in compliance with the goal of the ongoing conversation:
 - George Costanza's message on his answering machine: Believe it or not, George isn't at home. Please leave a message after the beep. I must be out or I'd pick up the phone. Where could I be? Believe it or not, I'm not at home.
- George provides redundant information – obviously, a person is either at home or they are not – alongside with acknowledging the Hearer's disbelief as to his not being in.

Flouting of a maxim - Examples

- Flouts exploiting the Relation Maxim: As a rule, such flouts tend to occur when the response is obviously irrelevant to the topic (abrupt change of topic, overt failure to address interlocutor's goal in asking a question):
 - Father to daughter at family dinner: Any news about the SAT results?
 - Daughter: Ice-cream anyone?
- Daughter is reluctant to discuss SAT issues either because she feels her family are too intrusive or because she has no good news (her score is quite low). To postpone discussing the topic, she switches the line of conversation to a 'safe' topic, such as an offer to serve ice-cream.

Flouting of a maxim - Examples

- Flouts exploiting the Manner Maxim: In most cases, such flouts involve absence of clarity, brevity and transparency of communicative intentions. In the example below:
 - Interviewer: Did the Government promise teachers a raise and did not start any legal procedures about it?
 - Spokesperson: I would not try to steer you away from that conclusion.
- The long-winded and convoluted response is not caused by the Speaker's inability to speak to the point because the Speaker faces a clash of goals: she would like to cooperate during the interview but successful conversation conflicts with another goal: sparing the government she is the spokesperson of from acquiring an unfavourable public image.

Violation of a maxim

- Violation is defined as the *unostentatious or 'quiet' non-observance of a maxim*. A Speaker who violates a maxim 'will be liable to mislead' (Grice 1975: 49).
- Violating a maxim is quite the opposite of flouting a maxim. Violating a maxim rather prevents or at least discourages the Hearer from seeking for implicatures and rather encourages their taking utterances at face value. Examples:
 - **Violation of the Quantity Maxim:**
 - Supervisor: Did you read the articles and write up the review of literature?
 - Supervisee: I certainly read the articles. Weren't they captivating!
 - **Violation of the Quality Maxim**
 - A: You stained my dress with red wine, you klutz!
 - B: Nobody will notice.

Violation of a maxim

- **Violation of the Relation Maxim**

- A: Did you like my presentation?

- B: The attendance was impressive, wasn't it?

- **Violation of the Manner Maxim**

- Pierce: Major Frank Burns, M.D., manic-depressive. It's an honorary title.

- Trapper: He's also schizoid.

- Pierce: He sleeps in two bunks. (*M.A.S.H.*)

Infringing a maxim

- Maxim infringement occurs when a Speaker *fails to observe the maxim, although s/he has no intention of generating an implicature* and no intention of deceiving. Generally infringing stems from *imperfect linguistic performance* (in the case of a young child or a foreigner) or from impaired linguistic performance brought about by nervousness, drunkenness, excitement, disability.

Infringing a maxim

- **Rachel:** Yeah, and also we need more umm, drinks. Hold on a second. (Gets up but stumbles a little bit.) Whup, okay. (She makes it to the phone and picks it up, without dialing.) Hello! Vegas? Yeah, we would like some more alcohol, and y’know what else? We would like some more beers. Hello? Ohh, I forgot to dial!
- (They both start laughing. There’s a knock on the door.)
- **Ross:** That must be our alcohol and beers! (Gets up to answer it.)
- **Joey:** Hey!
- **Ross:** Ohh, it’s Joey! I love Joey! (Hugs him.)
- **Rachel:** Ohh, I love Joey! Joey lives with a duck! (Goes and hugs Joey.)
- **Joey:** Hi!
- **Rachel:** Hey!
- **Joey:** Look-look-look you guys, I need some help! Okay? Someone is going to have to convince my hand twin to cooperate!
- **Ross:** I’ll do it. Hey, whatever you need me to do, I’m your man. (He starts to sit down on the bed. There’s one problem though, he’s about two feet to the left of it. Needless to say, he misses and falls on his butt.) (Looking up at Joey.) Whoa-oh-whoa! Are you, are you okay?

Opting out of a maxim

- A Speaker opts out of observing a maxim whenever s/he indicates *unwillingness to cooperate in the way the maxim requires*.
- This happens when a suspect exerts their right to remain silent or when a witness chooses not to impart information that may prove detrimental to the defendant.
 - Detective: Has the defendant ever told you she hated her father and wanted him dead?
 - Shrink: Such information is confidential and it would be unethical to share it with you.

Suspending a maxim

- Under certain circumstances/as part of certain events there is no expectation on the part of any participant that one or several maxims should be observed (and non-fulfillment does not generate any implicatures). Such cases include:
 - 1) Suspending the Quality Maxim in case of funeral orations and obituaries, when the description of the deceased needs to be praiseworthy and exclude any potentially unfavourable aspects of their life or personality.
 - 2) Poetry suspends the Manner Maxim since it does not aim for conciseness, clarity and lack of ambiguity.
 - 3) In the case of speedy communication via telegrams, e-mails, notes, the Quantity Maxim is suspended because such means are functional owing to their very brevity.
 - 4) Jokes are not only conventionally untrue, ambiguously and seemingly incoherent, but are expected to exploit ambiguity, polysemy and vagueness of meaning, which entails, among other things, suspension of the Maxims of Quality, Quantity and Manner.