



FACOLTÀ DI STUDI UMANISTICI
Lingue e Comunicazione

Lingua Inglese 2

LESSON 6

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Grice's Maxims of Conversation: The Principles of Effective Communication



When you write or talk, you generally do so with the purpose of conveying information, and the better you are at this, the more likely people are to understand and accept what you have to say.

Unfortunately, when trying to do this, we often make mistakes, some may be minor, some major mistakes.

The negotiation of meaning



The constant interaction among speakers ensures that the message is successfully conveyed and understood. Strategies employed when negotiating **meaning** include asking for clarification, rephrasing, or paraphrasing.

**THE GOAL IS TO REACH A MUTUAL
UNDERSTANDING OF MEANING,
A CONVERGENCE**

*General understanding between speakers of the same L1
Importance of such negotiation in second language
acquisition (SLA)*

Negotiating convergence


- for communication to take place, the two parties should come up with an agreement to co-operate in negotiating a convergence
- A meeting of minds, mutual understanding
- Achieved meaning required by their purpose in communication
- What p1 intends to mean and what p2 interprets p1 as meaning come into correspondence
- Some rules for the co-operative negotiation of meaning(convergence)

Communicative convergence



Communication: a matter of negotiating some type of common agreement between the parties in an interaction

There must be some knowledge correspondence between the two in order to have effective communication

- How much communication < measure of correspondence 
- **PROBLEMS** < items of language outside P2 knowledge, ideational framework P2 does not know, interpersonal convention P2 is unfamiliar with
- **Spoken language**: If immediate reciprocal interaction of conversation -> online meaning negotiation, clarifications
- **Written language**: no joint production of text: P1 should anticipate possible problems for P2

**WRITING REMAINS A MORE DIFFICULT ABILITY TO
ACQUIRE THAN READING**

Negotiating convergence



- P1 and P2 have to agree to cooperate in negotiating a convergence, a mutual understanding to achieve meaning, as required by their purpose in communicating.
- Diverse pragmatic meanings to be negotiated as well.
- This convergence of meaning and agreement is a very complex process, only possible to be achieved IF WE ARE PREPARED TO COOPERATE.

Conversation Maxims



- *Grice's maxims of conversation* are a collection of maxims proposed by linguist Paul Grice (1975) to describe principles that people intuitively follow in order to guide their conversations, in order to make their communicative efforts effective.
- There are four main maxims, which revolve around the **quantity**, **quality**, and **relevance** of what people say, as well as on the **manner** in which they say it.

Negotiating convergence



GRICE'S COOPERATIVE PRINCIPLES:

1. The quantity maxim
2. the quality maxim
3. The relation maxim
4. the manner relation

While these maxims were originally meant to describe how people intuitively communicate, they can be used to actively **guide** the way you communicate in various situations.

GRICE'S COOPERATIVE PRINCIPLES:



Paul Grice was an eminent philosopher and linguist, who researched the ways people derive meaning from language. In his book, [“Studies in the Way of Words”](#), Grice outlined four main *maxims of conversation*, which describe how people communicate when they want to make sure that they’re properly understood by others.

Grice’s rationale for these maxims was as [follows](#):

The quantity maxim: Be informative



There are two maxims of quantity:

- **Make your contribution as informative as is required.** Provide all the information which is necessary for the purpose of the current exchange; don't leave out anything important.
- **Do not make your contribution more informative than is required.** Leave out any unnecessary details that aren't important to the current exchange.



- This leads to over-textualization (redundant, pointless, verbose) or under-textualization (obscure)
- Difference on the basis of the genre considered
-> legal texts v. public notices
- Application of the principle must depend on context & purpose

“If you are assisting me to mend a car, I expect your contribution to be neither more nor less than is required. If, for example, at a particular stage I need four screws, I expect you to hand me four, rather than two or six.” (Grice, 1975)

«How do I get from here to the library?»



1. “Keep walking straight until you reach the intersection, and then turn right.”
2. “Keep walking.”
3. “Keep walking straight ahead; there will be some nice flowers on your right and some lovely new trees that they just planted a few months ago on your left. Anyway, once you reach the big intersection—it’s one of the biggest in the area, it took forever to build it—then you need to turn to your right.”

People may choose not to apply the quantity maxim deliberately.



What happens then?

CONVERSATIONAL IMPLICATURES: flouting the maxim (ex. pp. 58-59), disobeying to the quantity principle.

On the basis that a speaker and listener are cooperating, and aiming to be relevant, a speaker can imply a meaning implicitly, confident that the listener will understand.

Thus a possible conversational implicature of *Are you watching this program?* might well be 'This program bores me. Can we turn the television off?'

(Ref. Also, Indirect speech acts)

CONVERSATIONAL IMPLICATURES



Conversational implicatures are pragmatic inferences: they are **not tied to the particular words and phrases** in an utterance **but arise instead from contextual factors and the understanding that conventions are observed in conversation.**

Paul Herbert Grice observed that in conversations especially **what is meant often goes beyond what is said** and that this additional meaning is inferred and predictable.

CONVERSATIONAL IMPLICATURES: flouting the maxim (ex. pp. 58-59)



A cooperative speaker can intentionally disobey a **maxim**, as long as (s)he or the context provides enough indicators for the hearer to notice it. This is called **flouting** a **maxim** and is used to indirectly convey information.

ARE YOU WATCHING THIS PROGRAM?

- DO YOU HAVE A WATCH?

-YES, I DO

CONVERSATIONAL IMPLICATURES: flouting maxim (ex. pp. 58-59)



Flouting Grice's Maxims is very common. When Grice's Maxims are being flouted, it should be apparent to all those concerned.

Being ironic, using metaphors, pretending to mishear someone, and using a tone of voice that does not match the content of what you are saying are all examples of flouting Grice's Maxims.

The Quality Maxim: Be truthful



- Only say things you believe to be true.
- Not say things that you cannot back up with evidence.

“I expect your contributions to be genuine and not spurious. If I need sugar as an ingredient in the cake you are assisting me to make, I do not expect you to hand me salt; if I need a spoon, I do not expect a trick spoon made of rubber.” (Grice, 1975)

The Quality Maxim: Be truthful



- FLOUTING THE QUALITY MAXIM:

Zack: 'Wow, this place is awesome. Where do they keep the Archies?'

Sheldon: 'In the bedroom of ten-year-old girls, where they belong.'

In this extract from *The Big Bang Theory*, Sheldon flouts the Maxim of Quality by giving an answer that both people know is not true. Here, the maxim has been flouted for comedic effect.

CONVERSATIONAL IMPLICATURES: Violating or Flouting the maxim (ex. pp. 58-59)



When Grice's Maxims are violated, they have been broken surreptitiously (secretly) or covertly (undercover). This means that others involved in the conversation are unaware that a maxim has been broken.

- The most common maxims that get violated are the **Maxim of Quality** and the **Maxim of Quantity** .
- **Maxim of Quality** is violated when an individual purposely tells a lie.
- **Maxim of quantity** is violated when an individual secretly withholds information that someone else wants to know.

The Relation/Relevance Maxim: Be relevant



Following the Maxim of relevance keeps conversations on track and helps prevent random conversations that lack continuity. This maxim also helps us to understand utterances in conversations that may not be initially obvious. When abiding by this maxim, you should:

Only say things that are relevant to the conversation.

- Speaker A: ' *Do you think Leo is dating someone new?*'
- Speaker B: ' *Well, he goes to Brighton most weekends.*'

Due to the Maxim of Relevance, we can infer that there is a link between Leo dating someone and him going to Brighton, and speaker B isn't just randomly telling us about Leo's trips to Brighton.

The Relation/Relevance Maxim: Be relevant



Make what you say relevant to the topic or purpose of the communication. Omit irrelevant information:

«If I am mixing ingredients for a cake, I do not expect to be handed a good book, or even an oven cloth (though this might be an appropriate contribution at a later stage).” (Grice, 1975)

Compliance w this maxim is well represented by **adjacency pairs**, i.e. a pair of utterances in a conversation of which the second one is a conventional response to the first:

- Do you like my new hat?
- Looks very nice

Flouting the Relevance Maxim:



The Maxim of relevance is flouted when someone pretends to mishear what has been said to change the conversation.

Much studied in film scripts and cinema dialogues

Flouting the Manner Maxim: Be clear



The Maxim of Manner mainly refers to the choice of words you use, **how what is said is said, not what it is said.**

For example, when following this maxim, we should avoid using big or overly complex words that we know our listeners won't understand and should try our best to be concise and coherent.

When abiding by the Maxim of Manner, you should:

- Avoid obscurity of expression (lg difficult to understand)
- Avoid ambiguity (lg that can be interpreted in multiple ways)
- Be brief and be orderly (concise and in an order that makes sense)

The Manner Maxim: Be clear



Be clear, avoid ambiguity and obscurity

The Maxim of Manner is flouted when speakers use many big words and technical jargon that they know their listeners won't understand.

Unintentional violations -> comical consequences:

RED TAPE HOLDS UP NEW BRIDGE

Intentional violations -> to produce ambiguity:

VISITING AUNTS CAN BE BORING...

Again, unlike the previous maxims, which have to do primarily with *what* is said, the maxims of manner have to do with *how* what is said is said.

Grice's Maxims of Conversation



We can say that the maxims of conversation might seem almost trivial, since they're all fairly intuitive, and follow what common sense tells us our communication should be like.

For example, it seems obvious that, if we want to communicate effectively, we should make sure that what we say is relevant to the discussion at hand.

However, in reality, people often violate many of these maxims without realizing that they're doing so, which hinders their communication efforts, especially in L2.

USING GRICE'S MAXIMS AS GUIDING PRINCIPLES



- Am I including all the necessary information?
- Am I being as concise as possible, by omitting unnecessary details and irrelevant information?
- Am I certain that everything that I'm saying is true, and can be backed up with evidence?
- Am I using language that is clear and without any ambiguity?
- Am I presenting the information in a structured, well-organized, and logically ordered manner?

YOU SHOULD APPLY THESE PRINCIPLES ALSO TO THE TEXT YOU ARE ANALYSING