

Common: 2 kinds of knowledge

Schemata

Systemic

knowledge of what is encoded in the system

Schematic knowledge: a set of default assumptions

The ideal of intersubjectivity

Cultural reality structure

6

The negotiation of meaning

Systemic and schematic knowledge

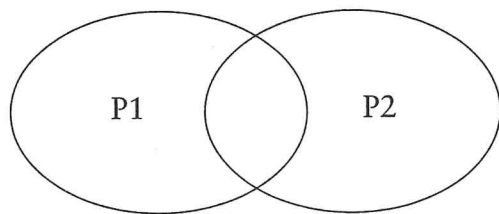
As we have seen in the last two chapters, the process of communication involves the engagement of two kinds of knowledge. In Chapter 4 we saw how people make sense of text, whether spoken or written, by relating it to what they know of the world they live in, the ideational and interpersonal schemata that represent the customary and conventional ways in which their socio-cultural reality is structured. This we can refer to as **schematic knowledge**. But people also need a knowledge of what is semantically encoded in the language itself in order for this schematic knowledge to be pragmatically activated as appropriate. Thus, as we saw in Chapter 5, a reader of a text has to know that particular pro-forms have a semantic relationship with other expressions in a text in order to recognize them as cohesively linked. To realize what the word *she* refers to pragmatically (by intention or interpretation) it is necessary to know that it encodes the semantic features of singular animate and female. This is not sufficient to identify the relevant reference, but it is necessary. We can call this knowledge of what is encoded in the language system itself **systemic knowledge**.

It is important to note, however, that neither kind of knowledge is fixed. They provide us with a necessary starting point in making meaning, but as communication proceeds they are subject to modification. Certain textual features, for example, may serve to key the reader or listener in to a particular schema but as the discourse develops this may be extended, altered, or even abandoned altogether. So **schematic knowledge** provides us with a set of default assumptions: it projects provisional expectations

which are subject to on-line revision as we proceed in deriving discourse from text. Although, as we have seen in Chapter 4, the schemata that we are familiar with will dispose us to interpret a text along certain lines, they do not therefore determine our interpretation. If they did, not only would we never learn anything new, but we could hardly be said to be engaging in communication at all.

Communicative convergence

For communication is always a matter of negotiating some kind of common agreement between the parties in an interaction. The first-person party, the sender (P1), formulates a message by drawing on systemic and schematic knowledge and the second-person party, the receiver (P2), brings similar knowledge to bear in interpretation. Communication is effective to the extent that there is some convergence between the two. We might represent this by the following diagram:



How much convergence is achieved in the communication will naturally depend on there being a measure of correspondence between P1 and P2 knowledge. Thus problems might arise if P1 uses items of language outside P2's competence, or refers to an ideational framework that P2 does not know about, or follows interpersonal conventions that P2 is unfamiliar with. Where the communication is enacted through the immediately reciprocal interaction of conversation, such problems can be resolved by negotiating meaning 'on-line': P2 can ask for clarification, or elicit additional information, or let the problem pass in the hope that it will get sorted out as the conversation develops, seeking perhaps to steer the interaction towards that end. P1, if sensitive to the problem, may try to resolve it by subsequently elaborating on the message, or reformulating it in different terms. As was

pointed out in Chapter 1, when there is no joint production of text, as in written language use, and so no possibility of such reciprocal on-line adjustment, P1 has to somehow anticipate what problems the intended P2 might have. Conversely, P2, free of the need to take part in the co-construction of conversation, is under no constraint to make any particular adjustment, or indeed to make any adjustment at all. All of which explains, in part at least, why writing is a relatively difficult ability to acquire, and reading a relatively easy one.

Communication on this account, then, is a matter of the parties concerned negotiating a measure of convergence. Some degree of correspondence in the prior knowledge of P1 and P2 has to exist beforehand, of course, for otherwise there is nothing to negotiate with in the first place, and the closer the correspondence, clearly, the easier it is, potentially, to converge, and the less close the greater the need to negotiate a convergence. But it is important to note that the degree to which the parties actually converge does not just depend on how far they are able to do so; it also depends, crucially, on how far they want or need to do so. In other words, the degree of convergence that we seek to achieve is regulated by the purpose of our communication. Convergence is always only partial. Although we may say that we understand somebody perfectly well, what we mean is that we understand them well enough. Mutual understanding is never, and never can be, perfect but only approximate to purpose. So even though texts may have the appearance of being fixed and complete, the discourse we derive from them is always indeterminate and partial. No matter how cohesive a text may be, whatever coherent sense we make of it is negotiable.

Negotiating convergence

For communication to take place, then, for texts to realize a discourse function, the two parties involved, P1 and P2, have also to be parties to an agreement to co-operate in negotiating a convergence, a meeting of minds, a mutual understanding, whereby meaning is achieved as required by their purpose in communicating. So it is that what P1 intends to mean and what P2 interprets P1 as meaning come into correspondence. How close

this correspondence actually is on a particular occasion is not easy to tell. The two parties may, after all, be at cross-purposes. But even if they are not, P₁ may intend more, or less, than P₂ takes in. P₂ may, knowingly or not, only partially understand what P₁ is talking about. And we need to bear in mind as well that, as was discussed in Chapter 2, there are different kinds of pragmatic meaning that are to be negotiated in communication, and the two parties may negotiate one successfully but not another. So P₂ may understand what P₁ intends to refer to by saying something, but not what illocutionary force is intended, or may recognize the intended force but not grasp what effect it is meant to have.

Bringing our knowledge (both systemic and schematic) to bear in an appropriate way so as to converge on agreed meaning is, then, a complex process, and it is a process that we only embark upon in the first place if we are prepared to co-operate. But then we also need to know what the accepted procedures or ground rules are for the co-operative negotiation of meaning.

The co-operative principle

The philosopher Paul Grice has proposed that when people converse they tacitly subscribe to what he calls the co-operative principle. Although he has conversation in mind, one can, as we shall see later, apply the same principle to all kinds of communication, whether this takes the form of conversation or not. Grice suggests that the co-operative principle can be expressed in terms of four maxims that parties in an interaction will subscribe to, on condition that both of them also recognize the purpose for which they are communicating in the first place. This is an important proviso, which we will return to later.

The quantity maxim

One of these maxims or negotiating rules is what Grice refers to as the quantity maxim: do not provide more, or less, information than is necessary. This relates to the least effort principle in communication that was discussed in Chapter 5, where it was pointed out that how much actual text is produced is regulated by

assumptions about shared contextual knowledge, including a knowledge of schematic conventions. Clearly there is no need to provide information by means of language if it is already common knowledge. Of course, the assumptions that first-person parties make about this can be wrong. If they underestimate how much context is shared and so over-textualize by producing too much language, then what they say will be heard or read as pointlessly wordy, or verbose. If, on the other hand, they overestimate the extent of shared contextual knowledge, and so under-textualize, then what they say will be heard or read as obscure. Notice again that contextual knowledge includes a knowledge of schematic conventions. So some genres will require a quantity of language which would be quite inappropriate in another. Texts which are designed to meet legal requirements, for example, like contracts, insurance policies, or the small print on the back of an airline ticket, will textualize meanings in great detail because it serves the purpose of this genre to do so. But the same degree of textualization would be absurdly excessive elsewhere.

Or take the case of public notices that were discussed in the first chapter of this book. When taking a stroll through a park in London, for example, you are likely to come across notices of two kinds. One (usually near the entrance) is a text in relatively small print which is an official display of the by-laws regulating the use of the park. It specifies in considerable detail what is legally allowed and prohibited there, often ending with the phrase: BY ORDER, and the name, perhaps even the signature, of some person in authority. We might well also come across a quite different kind of notice, like KEEP OFF THE GRASS: a very short text in relatively large print. We would be surprised to find such a notice couched in the official legal language of a by-law. The point is that both uses of language conform to the conventions of their genre, and are appropriate to their different purposes. Both are in accordance with the maxim of quantity.

One thing to note about this maxim, then, is that, if it is to serve its co-operative function, its application must depend on context and purpose. A second thing to note is that people may choose not to apply it anyway. As has already been mentioned, a P₁ (a first-person party) may intend to be co-operative but make a wrong calculation about common knowledge and so fail

to conform to the maxim by mistake. When this occurs in conversation, it is generally possible to repair the situation on-line. But the first-person party may not intend to be co-operative and may deliberately flout the maxim by saying more or less than the occasion requires. What then? What happens then is that, if the flouting is recognized, P₁ (the speaker, or writer) is taken to be expressing some significance over and above what the language would appear to indicate. The result is what Grice calls a conversational implicature.

Conversational implicature

Imagine, for example, that you are called as a witness in a court of law, and, having sworn to tell the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth, you are asked the following question by the counsel for the prosecution:

Could you tell the court what you did on the morning of February 10th.

And you reply:

I was woken by the alarm clock at 7.15 in the morning. I got out of bed. I put on my slippers and went to the bedroom door and opened it. I then walked to the bathroom and turned on the cold tap over the washbasin, took my toothbrush and cleaned my teeth ...

It is unlikely you would get much further, or even as far as this. It will be made plain to you that in effect you are in violation of the quantity maxim in that you are providing the court with more information than is required for its purposes. You may claim that you are trying to tell the whole truth, but if the judge suspects that you know perfectly well that by convention this means only that part of the truth that cannot be inferred from common knowledge, he, or she, will assume you are being deliberately perverse and that your real intention is not to co-operate as a witness should, but to mock the proceedings. You will have created an implicature and if you continue you are likely to be penalized for contempt of court.

Implicatures can also be created by saying less, not more, than convention requires. Take the case of a certain (fictional)

Professor Parsons Green who has been asked to provide a reference in support of a student (a certain fictional Ms Justine Case) who is applying for a research grant. Professor Parsons Green is, of course, familiar with the genre, and assumes that the recipient of the reference will be too. His letter reads as follows:

Dear Professor Chiswick,

Justine Case

Ms Case was a student of mine last year. She completed her course and always returned her books promptly to the library.

Yours sincerely,

Hugo Parsons Green.

Professor of Plant Propagation

University of Kew

Professor Green knows full well that the genre of a letter of reference requires much more content than this. He knows that what is expected is information about the course of study referred to and what grades Ms Case got, together with an evaluation of her ability, scholarly aptitude, and so on. He is clearly deliberately flouting the maxim of quantity here and creating an implicature, in effect signalling that he has an entirely negative opinion of Ms Case, but without saying so explicitly. Since Professor Chiswick will also be familiar with the conventions of the genre, he will be in doubt that this letter is—in no uncertain terms (all the more certain, indeed, because the terms are so few)—a letter of non-recommendation.

These are, of course, extreme examples of maxim violation and the implicatures it gives rise to. Furthermore, they are fictional. In real life, our frequent disregard of the maxim is generally less blatant, and the implicatures more subtle. When people say more than seems warranted, we might suspect them of 'beating about the bush' so as to impress us, or hide something from us under their verbiage. When people are sparing with their commendation, we suspect them of 'damning with faint praise'. Regulating how much language we use to conform to the quantity maxim, and exploiting the maxim to create implicatures to add further significance to what we say, are complex and elusive processes. We shall have more to say about them in the next chapter.

The maxims of quality, relation, and manner

② Meanwhile, there are still three other maxims to talk about in this chapter. One of them is what Grice calls the *quality maxim*: be truthful and do not say things you know to be false. So, for example, if I tell you that it is raining outside, you will assume that I have good grounds for saying so, that I am not just saying it for fun, or to deceive you. But this maxim too is frequently violated. So even if it is raining outside, I might come out with an obvious falsehood like: 'Lovely weather today,' and if we both know full well that the weather is appalling, this results in an implicature. You recognize that I am flouting the quality maxim in order to lend an extra significance to what I say, to create, in this case, the effect of irony.

Irony is not the only effect that is brought about by the deliberate denial of this maxim. It can lend extra emphasis to what is said, as in the following:

This bag weighs a ton.
The drinks cost a fortune.
My brother is a pig.
I'm starving.

And so on.

People who say things like this do not intend them to be taken literally (the bag does not really weigh a ton, and my brother is not really a pig) though sometimes in striving for even more emphasis they might actually say 'This bag *literally* weighs a ton', 'I'm *literally* starving', thereby flouting the maxim of quality twice over.

The deliberate non-compliance with the maxim of quality is a very common feature of communication. Indeed the maxim is probably as much honoured in the breach as in the observance, and the breaching gives rise to the creativity of ordinary language in the use of metaphor and other figurative turns of phrase. Thus we read in the newspaper about politicians being poodles and puppets, about their painting over the cracks, splitting hairs, stabbing each other in the back, about their ideas being floated, shot down, torn to shreds, put on the back burner, and so on. And these are only examples that have become established

expressions. The deliberate flouting of this maxim is a naturally creative process that goes on all the time.

As with the quantity maxim, we should again note that compliance with this quality maxim is regulated by what is conventionally appropriate. There are genres which sanction the expression of falsehood, or at least being economical with the truth. In an obituary, for example, or funeral oration, it is expected that you will exaggerate the virtues and avoid mentioning anything unpalatable about the deceased. Here compliance with the maxim would require you *not* to tell the whole truth and nothing but the truth, but on the contrary, more like everything but the truth.

③ A third maxim is that of *relation*: make what you say relevant to the topic or purpose of the communication. One way of illustrating compliance with this maxim is by reference to how adjacency pairs work in turn taking, as discussed earlier in Chapter 4. Thus a question sets the conditions of relevance for the answer that follows. Imagine a little domestic scene: a husband and wife getting ready to go out for an evening. The wife asks the husband:

Wife: How do you like my new hat?

If the husband is inclined to be co-operative, comply with the relation maxim and make his turn relevant, then he would recognize that the purpose of the question is to elicit an answer, and that the answer should make reference to the hat, for that is the topic his wife has introduced into the conversation. The following then would all count as relevant (and cohesive) replies:

Husband: Very much.
Husband: Looks nice.
Husband: Well, not sure it is quite your colour.

And so on.

But, of course, the husband (for some reason or another) may not be in co-operative mood and may choose not to comply with the maxim.

Husband: It's ten past eight already.

This remark is irrelevant on two counts: it does not function as an answer to the question and it makes no reference to the topic of

the hat. In consequence, there is an **implicature**: the husband's utterance has a significance over and above its apparent meaning. Without access to more contextual information, it is, of course, impossible to say what exactly its significance might be. Perhaps he is avoiding a negative response (*I hate the hat*) or expressing his indifference (*Who cares about hats*) or his impatience (*This is no time to bother about hats, we're late*). There is no way of knowing.

Compliance with this maxim is again, as with the others, regulated by convention. To return for a moment to Professor Parsons Green and his letter of reference. Even if he had met genre requirements by keeping to the maxims of quantity and quality and provided full and truthful information about Ms Justine Case, if it was all about such things as her personal appearance and her punctual attendance at lectures with no reference at all to her scholarly abilities or achievements, it would not have been relevant to the purpose, and so it would still have created a similar implicature of disapproval.

4 The fourth of the Gricean maxims is that of **manner**: be clear, avoid ambiguity and obscurity. This maxim has to do with what Hymes refers to as **feasibility**, which was discussed in Chapter 2. Unintentional violations of this maxim can have comical consequences, as in the following examples of ambiguous newspaper headlines:

DRUNK GETS NINE MONTHS IN VIOLIN CASE
RED TAPE HOLDS UP NEW BRIDGE

By convention, the **quantity maxim** is appropriately applied in newspaper headlines to concentrate as much information into as few words as possible. This can result in expressions which are, in the Hymes sense, **not normally grammatically possible** (noun phrases without determiners, for example) or **not normally appropriate** (simple present tense used to refer to past events as in *gets*, *holds* in these headlines). As we can see from the ambiguity in these examples, keeping appropriately to the quantity maxim can result in the **unintentional violation of the manner maxim**.

But not all violations are unintentional, of course. They can also be **exploited to produce deliberate ambiguity** so as to attract attention. With headlines, it is not always easy to tell whether the

ambiguity is intended or not. In the examples given above, it seems clear it is not. In *Time* magazine of 20 February 2006, however, there is an article about Olympic athletes adding or switching passports to achieve their ambitions. It bears the title:

WAIVING THE FLAG

Here we can be sure that the **manner maxim** is knowingly flouted to create an ambiguous effect, as is the case with the following advertising slogans:

If you want to get ahead get a hat
The car in front is a Toyota
Nokia—connecting people

We said earlier that for communication to take place, the parties involved have to co-operate in negotiating some degree of agreed convergence, and that these maxims can be taken as a set of **ground rules** for doing so. And yet, as we have seen, **people do not always keep to the rules**. Why then do they not always co-operate? Why do they so often say more, or less, than they need to? Why are they not always truthful, relevant, and straightforward in what they say? **If people are so often uncooperative on purpose**, what is the purpose?

In communication **two parties co-operate to converge on common ground**. For this to happen there has to be some give and take on both sides: each party has to concede some ground of their own. This ground represents his/her own **individual reality**, a sense of self, a **personal territory of identity**, which it is their natural instinct to assert and protect. Co-operation necessarily involves some encroachment on this individual life space, and the **area of convergence** is always a **potential site of contention between self and other**. There has to be give and take, but on whose terms? Who gives way, and who takes advantage? How far is the common ground actually an invasion of your own personal space?

Co-operative and territorial imperatives

So, on the one hand, for communication to take place at all, you have to co-operate, but, on the other, there is always the risk that

this will compromise your own individuality. So this **co-operative imperative** is countered by another that acts against it—a **territorial imperative**, a need to preserve and protect one's own space—just as powerfully instinctive in humans as in other creatures, and there is **continual tension** between them which has to be somehow reconciled. So it is not just meaning that is negotiated in communication but human relations. P1 and P2 are not just parties seeking an impartial agreement about shared knowledge but **individual personalities competing to establish their own position** in the area of convergence.

These **uncooperative floutings** of the maxims we have been considering can be understood as assertions of self, **signs of the territorial imperative** at work. As we have seen, the **implicatures** that result from them can give extra emphasis to what is said, or an undertone of irony or contempt. They project a **personal attitude or point of view**: 'This is my position, this is where I stand on this matter.' So one reason for disregarding the maxims is to assert territorial rights, so to speak, and to project one's self. But there is another reason. **Co-operation involves encroachment**, and this will often need to be tactfully managed. An incursion into the other's space may not be welcome. It may involve an adjustment the other is not prepared to make, or **a threat to face or self-esteem**, and this may cause offence, or embarrassment, a 'loss of face'. **The other may react in ways that threaten your own face**. It is generally in our interests to maintain good relations by a mutual respect for face and the territorial rights of the other. This kind of co-operation which, paradoxically enough, calls for the **non-cooperative departure from the maxims**, goes under the general name of politeness. So there will be occasions when we avoid telling the truth because we want to reinforce the other's self-esteem, not undermine it, when we are deliberately uninformative or irrelevant because giving a direct answer might cause offence, and we prefer to leave it to the other to take responsibility for inferring the appropriate implicature.

Conclusion

Although the violation of the maxims of the kind we have been considering have to do with small-scale adjustments that are

made in conversational negotiation, they are symptomatic of how the co-operative and territorial imperatives operate in discourse as a whole, written as well as spoken, for **the assertion of self and the manipulation of the other**, and generally of how **language is used for persuasion and the control of opinion**. These are matters that are taken up in the next chapter.

Cooperation v individuality
territorial imperative