

Grice's Conversational Maxims (1976)

employing the co-operative principle

Grice's Maxims

- Based on empirical observation of how we structure conversation (in English)
- The maxims apply to the expectations we use in interpreting literal and implied meaning
- These conversational maxims depend on the cooperative principle, i.e. speakers in the conversation have agreed to abide by these maxims
- What is more interesting to Grice et al is the flouting of these maxims

Maxim of Quantity

- Contribute as much information as is needed...
- If a comment gives more information than is needed it invites an alternative interpretation
- Flouting this maxim leads the listener to think that something is wrong with the information that has been supplied
 - e.g, How much is that TV?
 - It's only \$1100 and the DVR is \$399 and the iPod is \$199 and the digital camera is on sale today for just \$59.99

Maxim of Quality

- Do not say what you believe to be false
- Do not say that for which you lack adequate evidence
- Your answer is relevant... but...
 - Q. Do you think this dress makes me look fat?
 - A. Nice weather today...

 - Q. Have you cleaned your room?
 - A. You know, mom, blue really suits you...

Maxim of Manner

- Avoid obscurity of expression
- Avoid ambiguity
- Be brief
- Be orderly
- But.... What are the implications of the following...
 - I'm low on gas.
 - There is a station around the corner on Main St.

When do we fail to observe a maxim?

- When we want to violate it...
- Flouting it
 - Did you enjoy the soufflé?
 - Your wine is always so good!
- Opting out
 - Q. Did you do your homework?
 - A. I need you to sign my field trip form.

How to Violate Conversational Maxims, cont'd

- **Flouting** a maxim in order to **exploit** it:

Unlike someone who is simply violating a maxim, someone who is flouting a maxim expects the listener to notice.

Flouting the first Maxim of Quality (avoid falsehoods):

A: Tehran's in Turkey, isn't it?

B: Uh-huh, and Boston's in Armenia.

Conversational Implicature

- “Conversational implicatures are not tied to linguistic form. To make a conversational implicature, a listener must have already parsed the sentence, assigned it its literal interpretation, realised that additional inferences must be added to make it conform to the Gricean maxim, and determined what these inferences are. Such activity could not reasonably affect the initial steps of parsing.”
- (Clifton & Ferreira, 1989)

Criticisms of Grice

- Very Anglocentric..
 - Different cultures may have different settings for maxims of quantity, quality, and manner
 - Some cultures may expect conversational co-operation to meet different norms... i.e. brevity is not always considered appropriate, truth is not always the guiding principle of conversation, and you do not always have to display your perspicacity
 - Some cultures may value form over content...

Modified Gricean maxims

- Quantity

- Be as informative as possible within the bounds of the discourse parameters of the given cultural norms
 - How would you measure “given cultural norms”?
 - Design an experiment/observation

Modified Gricean maxims

- Quality

- Do not say what you believe to oppose your cultural norms of truth, harmony, charity, or respect
 - In what situation would you flout the original maxim in order to adhere with the modified maxim?
 - Food?
 - Clothing?
 - Manners?

Modified Gricean Maxims

- Manner

- Do not be more difficult to understand than is dictated by questions of face or authority
 - Who in this culture would flout this maxim?

Make clear your communicative intent—

Unless your culture dictates that politeness and dignity driven cultural core values dictate otherwise—

Speak at an appropriate length

Gricean maxims in writing

- Form based writing cultures favor linear argument, highly structured hierarchy of argumentation
 - Anglo-American
- Content based writing cultures that favor content and knowledge
 - German
 - Eastern European
- What issues could these differences raise in judging writing? For papers, publications, newspapers?

Modified Maxim of Manner

- Co-operative principle could mean different things in different cultural contexts
 - In Chinese, Vietnamese, Japanese cultures it means to say little to avoid conflict
 - In Israeli, African-American, Italian cultures it means to be contrary and say a lot.
- What about in your micro-culture?

Modified Maxim of Manner

- Manner varies inter-culturally in writing
 - Anglo/American/Australian writing favors linearity
 - Vietnamese, Japanese, Chinese, favors implicitness, non-assertiveness, tolerance for ambiguity, and a circular discourse structure that suggests implicit perception and returns repeatedly to expand on it. Indirectness is favored.
 - The question remains which culture should determine communication patterns when there is more than one?

Revised maxim of Quality

- Gricean maxim calls for truth
- This reveals Eurocentric bias
- European discourse favors truth as an absolute goal
- In Vietnamese, S.E. Asian, and Chinese culture, truth need not be a criterion that is in competition with harmony, charity, or respect.