

Semantics and Pragmatics

Lecture No.21

Study Material

Cooperative Principle: Introduction

- The British philosopher H. Paul Grice (1913–1988) is regarded as an eminent representative of Ordinary Language Philosophy.
- His most significant contributions came in philosophy of language and mind, on meaning, intention, presupposition, conversation, and the theory of communication.
- Grice argued for an intention-based theory of meaning, and was the first to illustrate the distinction between what came to be called semantic and pragmatic meaning, that is, between what a speaker's utterance means in the abstract, and what else a speaker can mean by uttering it in a particular context.
- Grice (1975) posited a general set of rules, contributors to ordinary conversation; called Cooperative Principle (CP).
- He (1989) stated, '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'.
- Grice never intended his use of the word 'cooperation' to indicate an ideal view of communication.
- Rather, he was trying to describe how it happens that – despite the haphazard or even agonistic nature of human communication – most discourse participants are quite capable of making themselves understood.
- Grice invites us to consider the following exchange:
- A: I am out of petrol.
- B: There is a garage round the corner (Grice, 1989: 32).
- Assuming that A immediately proceeds to the garage, secures the petrol, and refills his car, we may describe B's contribution as having been successful.
- By what rational process of thought was A so quickly able to come to the conclusion that the garage, to which B refers, would fulfill his need for petrol?
- Why did B's utterance work?

- Grice's answer:
- Because A and B adhere to the Cooperative Principle of Discourse.
- It is not hard to imagine that two friends sharing a ride would want to help each other through a minor crisis; thus, 'cooperation' in this scenario seems quite appropriate. (End)

Observing the Maxims

- Grice identified the Cooperative Principle as a 'super principle' or a 'supreme principle' (1989) that he generalized from four conversational 'maxims'.
- He identifies these maxims as follow:
 - 1. Quantity
 - 2. Quality
 - 3. Relation
 - 4. Manner
- Maxim of quantity – says that speaker should be as informative as is required.
- They should give neither too little information nor too much.
- Maxim of Quality – information provided in conversation to be genuine and justified.
- Speakers are assumed not to say anything that is false or lacks evidence.
- Maxim of relation – says that speakers are assumed to be saying something that is relevant to what has been said before.
- Maxim of manner – says that we should be brief and orderly, and avoid obscurity and ambiguity.
- Clear fulfillment of these maxims may be demonstrated in the following exchange:
 - A: Do you know where I can buy some petrol?
 - B: You can buy petrol at the garage right around the corner.
- Let us assume that B is sincere and knowledgeable, and A finds the garage right away based upon B's advice; If it is the case then B's response to A's question follows the maxims completely.
 - 1. Giving exactly the right amount of information (quantity).

- 2. Information for which B has the required evidence (quality).
- 3. Information that is directly connected to A's question (relevance).
- 4. Information given in a fashion effectively and efficiently understood (manner).
- Grice said that hearers assume that speakers observe the cooperative principle, and that it is the knowledge of the maxims that allows hearers to draw inferences about the speakers' intentions and applied meaning. (End)

Flouting the Maxims

- When speakers appear not to follow the maxims but expect hearer to appreciate the meaning implied, we say that they are 'flouting'.
- For instance, in Britain, it's quite common to say, 'Do you find it's getting a bit chilly in here?' and mean 'I want to put the fire on'.
- When flouting a maxim, the speaker assumes that the hearer knows that their words should not be taken at face value and they can infer the implicit meaning (Cutting, 2002).
- Flouting quantity – the speaker who flouts this maxim seems to give too little or too much information.
- For instance:
- A: Does your dog bite?
- B: No
- A: (Bends down to stroke dog and is bitten) ow!! But you said it does not bite.
- B: it's not my dog.
- Flouting quality – speaker may do it in several ways e.g. exaggerating as in hyperbole, using metaphor, irony and banter.
- For instance – using a metaphor as in 'My house is a refrigerator in January' or 'Don't be such a wet blanket – we just want to have fun'.
- Here again, hearers would understand that the house was very cold and the other person is trying to reduce other people's enjoyment.
- Flouting relation - the hearer will be able to imagine what the utterances did not say, and make the connection between their utterances, e.g.

- A. So what do you think of Mark?
- B. His flat mate is a wonderful cook.
- B does not say that she is not very impressed with Mark.
- Flouting manner – speaker appears to be obscure, often trying to exclude a third party, see this exchange between husband and wife:
- A. Where are you off to?
- B. I was thinking of going out to get some of that funny white stuff for somebody.
- A. ok. But don't be long – dinner is nearly ready.
- B speaks in an ambiguous way, saying 'that funny white stuff' and 'somebody', because he is avoiding saying 'ice-cream' and 'Sara', so that his little daughter does not become excited and ask for the ice-cream before her meal. (End)

Violating the Maxims

- Violation takes place by speaker intentionally or when speaker knows that the hearer will not know the truth and will only understand surface meaning.
- People tend to tell lies for different reasons, e.g. hide the truth, feel jealousy, cheer the hearer, etc.
- Maxim violation is unostentatiously, quiet deceiving.
- Violating the maxim Quantity –
- Husband: How much did that new dress cost?
- Wife: Less than the last one.
- Here, the wife covers up the price of the dress by not saying how much; thus, not giving required information to the husband and violating maxim of quantity.
- Violating the maxim Quality –
- Considering the same example, the wife when asked 'How much did that new dress cost?'
- It could have violated the maxim of quality by not being sincere and giving him the wrong information i.e. thirty-five hundred rupees'.
- Violating the maxim relation –

- Similarly, in answer to ‘How much did that new dress cost?’ the wife try to distract him and change the topic saying:
- I know, lets go out tonight. Now, where would you like to go?
- This shows the violation of the maxim of relation.
- Violating the maxim manner –
- In answer to ‘How much did that new dress cost?’, if she said that ‘a tiny fraction of my salary, though probably a bigger fraction of the salary of the women that sold it to me’,
- Hoping that it could be taken as an answer and the matter could be dropped.
- It is, thus, like the wife answers the question in a way that could be said to be violating the maxim of manner, in that she says everything except what the husband wants to know. (End)

Limitations of the Cooperative Principle

- Despite the care with which he used the term “‘cooperation,” Grice is regularly accused of promulgating a theory that assumes too friendly a spirit of communicative interaction among people.
- For example, Tannen (1986) claims that Grice’s maxims of cooperative discourse can’t apply to “‘real conversations’”.
- In conversation, “we wouldn’t want to simply blurt out what we mean, because we’re judging the needs for involvement and independence”(Tannen, 1986).
- He assumes that Grice’s maxims are prescriptions that conversations must follow strictly in order to be considered cooperative.
- Another problem with the cooperative principle is that there is often an overlap between the four maxims.
- It can be difficult to say which one is operating or there are two or more operating at once e.g.
- A: What did you have to eat?
- B: Oh, something masquerading as chicken chasseur.
- Here, B is flouting the maxim of quality saying that his food was pretending to be something, and implying that it was not ‘chicken chasseur’.

- However, it could also be the flouting the maxim of manner because he does not say exactly what the ‘something’ was or looked like.
- Then again, he is also flouting the maxim of quality because he does not give enough information to identify what he ate.
- In fact, all these maxims are operating together here.
- What he is not flouting is the maxim of relation, since his answer is relevant to the question.
- Another major objection to Grice’s model is different cultures, counties and communities have their own ways of observing and expressing maxims for particular situations.
- For instance, in Britain it is not acceptable to say’ “we’ll call you in about two weeks” and then not call, as this will be considered a violation of maxim of quality.
- Whereas, in some countries this is quite a normal way of flouting the maxim and saying “we are not interested”.