

Lecture 6: Conversation Analysis (2)

1. Conversational Maxims

1.1. The Cooperative Principle

As humans we are social beings and when we talk we usually talk with or to others (unless we do a monologue). Paul Grice, an English language philosopher, argues that speakers intend to be cooperative when they talk. For Grice, *cooperative* means that the speaker knows that each utterance is a potential interference in the personal rights, autonomy and wishes (a potential face-threatening act) of the other. That is why we have to shape our utterances in a certain way. Grice formulated the **principle of cooperation** that underlies conversation, as follows:

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 1975: 45)

Grice's cooperative principle is a set of norms that are expected in conversations. It consists of **four maxims** that we have to follow in order to be cooperative and understood.

Put differently, the Cooperative Principle describes how people work together to communicate. A core part of the Cooperative Principle is how speakers and listeners assume what kind of knowledge each other has and what kind of language to be used based on that assumed information.

The Cooperative Principle is not prescriptive; instead it is just a way to describe and understand how communication often works.

1.2. The Four Maxims of Conversation

The Cooperative Principle is broken down into four different maxims, called Gricean maxims.

1.2.1. Maxim of quality

Supermaxim

- Try to make your contribution one that is true.

Generally, when communicating, we have an assumption that each participant is telling the truth.

Submaxims

- Do not say what you believe is false.

Speakers will not intentionally lie.

- Do not say that for which you lack adequate evidence.

Speakers will only provide information that they can provide evidence for. That is, they have a reason to provide the information they provide.

1.2.2. Maxim of quantity

- Make your contribution as informative as is required for the current conversation, purpose, or situation.

The speaker will provide all the information he or she knows to asker.

- Do not make your contribution more informative than is required.

The speaker will not provide extra information that is not needed to complete the current conversation, purpose, or situation.

1.2.3. Maxim of relation (or relevance)

- Be relevant.

The speaker will only provide information that is related to the current situation. For example, if asked a specific question such as “Do you know John’s phone number,” the response would be related to something similar.

1.2.4. Maxim of manner

Supermaxim

- Be perspicuous.

Submaxims

- Avoid obscurity of expression.
- Avoid ambiguity.
- Be brief (avoid unnecessary prolixity).
- Be orderly.

--- These maxims look at first sight like rules, but they appear to be broken more often than grammatical or phonological rules are, for example

Sources

<http://www.ello.uos.de/field.php/EarlyModernEnglish/GriceSMaximsOfConversations#:~:text=Grice's%20cooperative%20principle%20is%20a,is%20provable%20by%20adequate%20evidence.>

<https://linguisticsstudyguide.com/the-cooperative-principle-and-the-four-maxims-of-conversation/>