

**CONTRIBUTIONS OF THE GRICEAN MAXIMS IN
THE UNDERSTANDING OF MEANING: A REVIEW**

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Abstract

This paper attempts to review how the Gricean maxims contribute to the understanding of meaning cooperatively and mutually. The review identified that observing Gricean's Cooperative Principle can help one to communicate with less ambiguity in a conversation. To observe the Cooperative Principle, H. P. Grice identified four maxims namely: Maxims of quantity, of quality, of relation, and, of manner. Nonetheless, speakers, sometimes, deliberately omit certain parts of their utterances in a conversation in order to send a message to their listeners that is contrary to their actual utterances. This deliberate omission is technically referred to as non-observance of the Gricean's maxims. This omission sends a signal to the listener to compensate for the meaning by guessing. The listener-meaning may have an effect: positive or negative. In so doing, the main purpose of communication can be distorted, there could be many possible interpretations of what has been said. For this reason, the use of the Cooperative Principle is paramount to create an avenue for both the speaker and the listener to act cooperatively, and mutually accept one another in the process of communication. Therefore, there is a need for communicators to understand one another and cooperate in order to construct a meaningful conversation. This principle led to the development of 'Pragmatics' as a separate discipline within linguistics that studies the use of language and context within a community. Thus, this paper explains how the Gricean maxims contribute to the understanding of meaning through an explicit review of related literature on Grice's maxims. The paper concluded that the Gricean maxims still remain at the centre of pragmatics and the role they play in the understanding of meaning cannot be denied.

Keywords: Communication, Cooperative Principle, Implicature, Maxims, Meaning, Pragmatics.

1. INTRODUCTION

Language basically functions as a communication tool. Meaning, language is used in expressing ideas, and feelings as well as establishing relationships in society (Diessel, 2014). Language can be any form of a system of communication by written or spoken words which are accepted and understood by people of a particular society or community (Chomsky, 2011). Hence, language involves people (speakers/writers and listeners/readers) (Trajkova, 2014). For this, there is a need for communicators to understand one another and cooperate in

order to construct a meaningful conversation. This cooperation is termed a Cooperative Principle (henceforth, CP). It is an idea brought about by H.P. Grice in one of his influential works on the philosophical study of semantics termed as a theory of implicature (Hadi, 2013).

The CP describes how listeners and speakers act cooperatively, and mutually accept one another to be understood in a particular way. This principle led to the development of "Pragmatics" as a separate discipline within linguistics (Davies, 2000). Pragmatics as a discipline studies how

language users choose a language and particularly, the problems they face in using such a language within the society and the effects created by its usage on participants within a communication cycle (Kasper & Rose, 1999). It can therefore be said that pragmatics is a study of the use of language and context within a community. Therefore, this paper attempts to explain how the Gricean's maxims in particular contribute to the understanding of meaning through an explicit review of related literature.

2. GRICEAN MAXIMS

H.P. Grice introduced the idea of implicature in 1967 and 1989 where he defined it essentially what is said impliedly not what is actually said (Sadock, 1978). From this definition, it could be deduced that implicature constitutes something else inferred by the listener (addressee) that is not originally or literally said by the speaker (addresser). This can be illustrated by the following examples. If I happen to see a friend eating 'suya' meat, I ask something like 'is it peppery?' My friend might respond by asking me to join him. By that act of offering, my friend has shown that he thinks I was implying that I would like to taste it. I didn't literally say I wanted to taste the meat, and thus I could deny that I implied this as in 'oh I didn't mean I wanted to join you.' or probably 'oh I saw you having a running nose while eating.' However, until I make some kind of denial of what I said, if not, the fact that I wanted to taste my friend's 'suya' meat has been implied. That is, I have communicated the implication that I would like to taste my friend's *suya*. This kind of implication is what Grice termed Implicature. Implicature to Grice is that it is an indication that is related to terms such as imply, suggest, and mean (Saul, 2002a). The capacity of conversers to understand one another in spite of some missing elements which are often implicated is what Grice termed as implicature (Sadock, 1978). Understand such implicatures are made possible by

cooperation between speaker and listener which is termed as CP (Hadi, 2013).

According to Grice (1975), the basic underlying assumption we make in the communication process is that we try to communicate in order to construct a meaningful conversation. That is, people usually cooperate to convey their intentions through utterances and thereby achieve the major aim of communication in pragmatics which is assumed as the exchange of information. It is worth noting that what is most important to Grice is the concept of rationality. It is for this reason that he discusses cooperation. In contrast, most linguists, (Hadi, 2013; Sadock, 1978; Yeboah, 2021), are interested in the use of the CP in language as in Flout, Violation, Infringing, and Opting out. To Grice, these maxims are principles and not a rule (Hadi, 2013). The idea was first introduced and explained as conversational implicature in his article 'Logic and Conversation (Poggi, 2011). Grice (1975) argues that the generation and perception of these implicatures were based on the following principle: Make your conversational contribution as much as required; at the stage at which it occurs; and by the accepted purpose or direction of the talk exchange in which you are engaged (p. 48). This principle implies that Grice considers the coherence or unity of conversations should be rational. That is, Grice is concerned with the ways in which our sentences are meaningfully connected in a conversation and the reason for saying what we say. In considering the interaction between different speakers in trying to promote different issues, it can be clearly seen that their conversations enjoy partial unity (Brown, Brown, Brown, Yule, & Gillian, 1983). In order to explain the processes underlying implicature, Grice (1975) developed the following maxims: quality, quantity, relation, and manner.

In the maxim of quality, there is one super maxim which says that one should make required contribution (Noertjahjo, Arifin, &

Ariani, 2017). Based on this super maxim, there are two more specific maxims of quality: Do not say what you believe to be false; and, Do not say that for which you lack evidence (Fallis, 2012). The maxim of quality means that one should not tell lies for what he/she lacks adequate evidence. What is needed here is the quality of the speaker's contribution to interaction.

In the maxim of quantity, there are two maxims: making contribution as informative as required; and, not making your contribution more informative than is required (Fallis, 2012; Martinich, 1980). It is a kind of conversational maxim noticed on the quantity of information which is given by the speaker to the hearer (Pan, 2012). This mean that one should make contributions that is not more than required. In the maxim of relation, there should and ought to be relation in all what is said 'Be relevant' (Wilson & Sperber, 2002). Ideas should be relevant according to this maxim. This maxim is concerned with the contribution of participants in a conversation which should be relevant based on the situation and condition (Jenny Thomas, 1995).

In the maxim of manner, one should and ought to: be clear; avoid vague expression, be brief, and be orderly (Jacquet, Hullin, Baratgin, & Jamet, 2019). Furthermore, maxims of manner emphasized the avoidance of ambiguous statements. That is, the participants of the discussion are expected to speak or express themselves directly without obscurity. A speaker must communicate using words orderly so that the interlocutor will not be confused in interpreting the speaker's say (Grice, 1975). These maxims explain how listeners assume the way speakers talk. Grice brought about the idea of these maxims as guide for successful communication (Szabó, 2005). He thinks that these maxims are presumptions that listeners and speakers are expected to be aware of the context as they communicate with one another. In other words, as speakers generally observe

the cooperative principle, the listeners assume that speakers are observing it (Gultom, 2022; Marlisa & Hidayat, 2020). According to Davies (2007) when the surface meaning of an utterance does not conform to the Gricean maxims but the circumstances show that the speaker is complying with the CP, then one should go beyond the surface to find the covert meaning of the utterance. For instance, if Mohammed points out that Maryam is not present in a class, and Yakubu replies that Maryam is having Malaria fever, then the implied meaning here is that Malaria fever is the reason why she is absent even though the surface meaning of Yakubu's reply does not conform to the Gricean maxims. The identification of such implied meanings can be achieved through non observance of these maxims (Li, 2015). The non-observance of Grice's maxims can be recognized in different ways.

3. NON OBSERVANCE OF GRICEAN MAXIMS

Sometimes people do observe the Gricean maxims deliberately or accidentally. According to Cutting (2002), the ways of failing to observe these maxims include Flouting, Violating, Infringing, Opting-out, and Suspending. To Thomas (1995) flouting can be identified when a speaker fails to observe a maxim not to deceive or mislead a hearer but to prompt him to search for an additional meaning of what is said. For example:

Adamu: Abuja is the capital city of Tchad.

Aliyu: *Yes, just as Nairobi is the capital city of Saudi Arabia.*

In the above conversation, Adamu is giving a false information which contradicts the Gricean maxim of quality (truth) since the capital city of Tchad is Ndjamen. Aliyu despite knowing that what Adamu said is wrong but answered in the affirmative. However, Aliyu wants Adamu to know that he is wrong and that if Abuja can be the capital of city of Tchad, then Nairobi, the capital city of Kenya, can replace Jeddah,

the capital city of Saudi Arabia. The implied meaning here is that Aliyu has falsified Adamu's statement cooperatively.

Further illustrating, Saradifa (2020), maintains that flouting a maxim is a failure in a conversation where the speaker blatantly gives an implicature in providing the information or responding to a topic. The hearer in this phenomena also has understood the meaning of the implicature without having to think first what is meant by the speaker. For example, in flouting the maxim of quantity, a speaker may be asked A and answered in B:

A: What are you doing?

B: Reading a book. This book is very interesting. It discusses education on a remote island.

The conversation above shows the speaker has flouted the maxim of quantity because she gives more information to the listener. Although the listener just wants to know what the activity is being carried out by the speaker, but the speaker also provides information about the book which is being read by her.

In flouting the maxim of quality, the speaker may say something that misrepresents what others think. Here is one example culled from Cutting (2002):

i. May: I think I am the most beautiful girl in the world.

Ben: *Yeah, and I am the king of the world.*

In (1), May is boasting of her beauty while Ben's answer contradicts her statement. He wants May to know that she is wrong by boasting around with her beauty. The message for May is that she might be beautiful but as long as Ben is not the king of the world, then she is also not the most beautiful girl in the world. In fact, flouting the maxim of quality can be observed in the use the following: hyperbole, metaphor, irony, banter, and sarcasm.

Hornby (1995) defines *hyperbole* as a language used for overstatement in order to create effect. For example:

ii. Ann: Johnny Depp is so cute.

Jean: *Yes, I can eat him alive.*

In (2), Jean exaggerates her utterance by saying that she could eat Johnny Depp alive. In reality, Jean will not eat Johnny Depp alive; she says that to express her admiration to him.

The use of *metaphor* in flouting maxim of quality can be realized through the use of imaginative phrase or word to relating somebody or something to another object in order to give emphasis of the shared quality (Hornby, 1995). To illustrate further, following example is culled from Cutting (2002):

iii. *My house is a refrigerator in January.*

The *metaphor* in (3) compares the refrigerator with the speaker's room. Refrigerator is cold, therefore, the speaker means that his/her room is really cold in January. From this example, the listener can cooperate with the covert meaning by the way of guessing from the context using his schemata experience of what does refrigerator do.

Another way of flouting maxim of quality is by using *irony* and *banter*. Noertjahjo et al. (2017) explain that irony is an apparent friendly way of being offensive (mock-politeness). Whereas, the type of verbal behavior known as "banter" is an offensive way of being friendly (mock impoliteness)." Here are examples of *irony* and *banter*:

Mandy is protesting her husband's behavior earlier in a party, and she said:

iv. *"You know, I'm really proud that you told everyone our marriage problem in the party".*

v. *"My mean and ugly daughter can't give me just one hug?"*

Actually, in (4) Mandy is not proud of her husband's behavior. Through the use of *irony*, she wants to emphasize her disappointment to her husband. This is an example of use of irony in flouting the maxim of quality. In (5), flouting the maxim of quality using banter is presented. In example 5, the speaker does not mean to

insult the daughter only, but to show the affection and the level of intimacy.

The last way of flouting the maxim of quality is by using *sarcasm*. *Sarcasm* is defined by Hornby (1995:1041) as ‘remarks that imply the opposite of what they appear to mean and are intended to upset or mock somebody’. It is directly the opposite of irony and banter where the former means apparent friendly way of being offensive; and the later, means an offensive way of being friendly. Below is one example of use of *sarcasm*:

vi. “*You can ask your beloved moron brother to guide you?*”

The speaker of (6) does not mean to have a joke, but really intends to hurt the interlocutor.

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

In flouting the maxim of quantity the speaker gives less or more information than is needed. Here are some examples:

vii. Well, how do I look?

Your shoes are nice... (Culled from: Cutting, 2002:3).

viii. Alice: You think there’s really anything to it?

Helen: *Well Nell says she heard Mr. Cowdery saying that the Perkins company in Cleveland can handle the entire load. You can figure it out from there. Everybody is talking about it. (Culled from: Saradifa, 2020).*

In (7), the question requires a response to the entire look of the person, but from the response one is expected to understand the implied meaning that only the shoes are nice, which means the others are not. This is a deliberate attempt to give less information in order to engage the interlocutor to guess the meaning.

In (8), Helen flouted the maxim of quantity because Alice just asked: ‘has anything happened to their company? However, Helen’s reply to Alice’s question is full of exaggerated information that another

company (Perkins) can handle the entire load. The Implicature that happened in the dialogue above shows Helen wants to give more information to Alice, who doesn’t know about the rumors going around over their company.

In flouting the maxim of relation, the interlocutors are expected to reflect on the utterances that is not said as answer to the question. For example:

ix. Now, what do you think of my new wife?

Her younger sister is a great cook.

The answer to (9) means that the wife is not too impressed but rather her sister. There was no any compliment about the wife, instead, her sister was praised. So, the answer has impliedly indicated that the wife is not as impressive as her sister.

In flouting the maxim of manner, the speaker makes an obscured statement and usually excludes the third party. Here are some examples culled from Cutting (2002:39):

x. “Where are you off to?”

I was thinking of going out to get some of that funny white stuff for somebody.

This is a conversation between couples who deliberately obscured some expressions (calling names) in their conversation. For example, in (10), the expression ‘... *that funny white stuff...*’ means ‘ice cream’ and the word ‘somebody’ refers to their daughter, a third party named Michelle. The husband does not want his daughter, Michelle, to know that he is going to buy her some ice cream. Hence, the conversation is obscured. Otherwise, the expression should be:

I was thinking of going out to get ice cream for Michelle.’

In such a conversation, the hidden meaning is understood by the interlocutors due to their compensation of meaning from experience.

Violation: This simply refers to the non-observance of a maxim. Violating a maxim could lead to possible misinterpretation

(Ceballos & Sosas, 2018). This means that violating a maxim is quite the opposite of flouting a maxim. Violation prevents or discourages the hearer from seeking for implications but he will only know the literal meaning of the utterance (Hossain, 2021). Violation also takes place across all the maxims. In violating a maxim, the speaker gives insincere, irrelevant, or ambiguous implicature to the hearer. Unlike flouting a maxim which is done blatantly, the violation of a maxim usually makes the hearer confused on the meaning of the implicature given by the speaker. The hearer has to think first to understand what the speaker wants or means in conveying the message (Saradifa, 2020). Therefore, the maxim that usually confuses what is blatantly done often becomes the cause of misinterpretation in a conversation. The following example will illustrate the violation of maxims:

xi. Don't you go to the office?

I will find a new job.

xii. What do you mean?

I'm fine.

In example (11) above, the listener did not mention a reason why he doesn't go to the office any more but rather informed the speaker that he will find another job. The implied meaning here is that the listener is no more working. So also, in example (12), the listener did not clarify what he meant but rather insisted that he is fine. Violation occurs across the four maxims as can be illustrated below.

Violation of the Maxim of Quantity

xiii. Father: How old is your wife?

Son: *Younger than my sister.*

In example (13), the son did not mention the exact year of his wife, rather. The maxim of quantity is violated by giving less information than is required.

Violation of the Maxim of Quality

xiv. Mum: When did you first meet your wife?

Son: *We will celebrate our 4th wedding anniversary next year.*

It is possible that the son does not want his mum to know how long they were together before marrying her. So, he deliberately violated the maxim of quality by saying their anniversary only.

Violation of the Maxim of Relation

xv. Husband: How much did that shoes cost, dear?

Wife: *I understand your concern. Can we go out tonight?*

xvi. Boss: Who bought this expensive car, John?

John: *Sir, the manager has visited you yesterday.*

In example (15), it is clear that the wife has violated the maxim of relation (relevance) by giving an irrelevant answer to the question. In (16), John is completely responding differently. The violation is deliberate to conceal the fact about who bought the expensive car and diverted the mind the Boss. Probably, the Boss will be off completely from the conversation.

Violating the maxim of Manner

xvii. "Husband: How much did that new dress cost, darling?"

"Wife: *A tiny fraction of my salary, though probably a bigger fraction of the salary of the woman that sold it to me*".

Explaining this violation, Yuvike and Menik Winiharti (2009) put that wife's answer in (17) is too long and obscure. She probably wants the conversation to be put to rest by saying so much than needed. She has violated the maxim of manner by saying so. Infringing and Opting out are two maxims difficult to subject to implied meaning. Infringing a Maxim occurs when a speaker fails to observe the maxim, although he/she has no intention of deceiving. Generally infringing comes from the imperfect linguistic performance of a child or foreigner or impaired linguistic performance brought about by nervousness, drunkenness, excitement, or disability (Fitriyani, Mujiyanto, & Suwandi, 2020; Yeboah, 2021). It can also happen because the speaker has an imperfect command of

the language (Saradifa, 2020). Here is a typical example of infringing a maxim:

xviii. A: Did you meet him at the market?

B: *Uh...No. Ah yeah maybe.*

C. I... I... *don't know sorry.*

From (18), one can hardly deduce any meaning from such utterances. It is important for an interlocutor to understand the party engaged in the conversation. As such, the parties can converse cooperatively with patience and tolerance.

Opting out of Maxim:

This happens when a speaker indicates unwillingness to cooperate in the way the maxim requires. It also happens when a speaker is not able to say something because he feels 'unwilling' to say the truth because it will hurt the hearer. The speaker usually hopes to avoid generating a false implicature or appearing uncooperative conversation to the interlocutor. Here is an example:

xix. What happen?

I'm sorry I can't tell you anything.

xx. Police: Who is your informant?

Suspect: *I'm sorry I can't give you the name.*

In (19), the suspect refuses to cooperate to give the informant's name probably because of ethical reasons. Such act means opting out completely from the conversation (Yuvike & Winiharti, 2009).

Suspending a Maxim: This is a circumstance under which no maxim is observed and the non-fulfillment did not generate any implicature, such cases of suspending a maxim can be observed during funeral speeches to honor the deceased, where only the good side of the fellow is expected to be put forth a sign of sympathy and forgiveness; or, in poetry writing due to the use of a diverted form of language use such as paradox, imagery, ambiguity deliberately to ignite critical thinking for its understanding.

4. CRITICISMS OF THE GRICEAN MAXIMS

One of the major aspects of the cooperative principle is the differentiation between what is said and what is implicated. However, the view of interpreting utterances based on what is communicated less has been criticized by many Relevance Theorists such as (Bird, 2002; Clark, 2013; Saul, 2002b). These scholars strongly criticize that the cooperative principle's idea of what is communicated less what is said has limits. They are also of the opinion that pragmatics has a larger role to play in order to determine what is said that Grice would have allowed. However, it is believed that the relevance theorists have misunderstood Grice's theory of conversation, systematically assuming that it is a duplication of their project: psychological processes of interpreting utterances. Despite its shortcomings, Grices' idea is trying to figure out a different perspective of what is said in which both the speaker and audience may be wrong about what is said. As such, his view can coexist with the relevance theorists' notion since they discuss different subject matters. For instance, Wilson and Sperber (1981) report that "Grices' theory is in fact an account of how utterances are interpreted..." (175, foot note 1). They have much interest in explaining the psychological process involved in understanding the interpretation of what is said and that which is communicated. They stated that their own goal is "to do greater justice to the processes involved in the interpretation of utterances" (1981: 156). However, Grice never had the aim of describing utterances interpretation from a psychological point of view. His interest lies in language; hence apart from the theory of implicature, he provided another theory of meaning based upon speaker intentions. Many other scholars' criticism on Grice' theory is derived from Chomsky (1965), his idea of positing an "ideal speaker-listener in a completely homogenous speech community". That is,

they are of the view that Grice's theory is deficient in not considering the complexity of human communication like the nature of man. For instance, in flouting a maxim, one may be considered to be non-cooperative but based on Grice's principle, when one flouts a maxim, he/she is to be considered as only sending an implied meaning rather than being resistant or non-cooperative.

5. CONCLUSION

Based on the review, Grice's work remains a core part of the discipline of pragmatics and has generally contributed a lot in understanding of meaning by viewing meaning from a different perspective of what is meant rather than what is uttered. The role the Gricean maxims play in achieving a successful and effective speaker-listener communication process cannot be overemphasized. These roles are not limited to finding the logic of conversation: how one can explain the gap between saying and meaning, saying and implicating, conventional and non-conventional meaning. That is, they describe the assumptions listeners have on the way speakers talk rather than prescribe how speakers ought to talk (Levinson, 1983). However, Grice's theory has been criticized by many Relevance Theorists such as (Bird, 2002; Clark, 2013; Weichu & Zhanfang, 2017; Wilson & Sperber, 2002) that the Gricean principle has not been adequate in explaining the psychological processes of interpreting meaning. It has also been criticized based on Chomsky's idea of positing an 'ideal speaker-listener in a completely homogenous speech community' in which flouting a maxim, for instance, is misconceived as a resistance in order not to cooperate, which makes communication complicated. However, Grice's idea can best be described in relation to a linguistic perspective of what is said in which both the speaker and audience may be wrong about what is said and not about the psychological aspect (Thomas, 1997); but seems misconceived by the

relevance theorists. Unlike Chomsky's idea, the non-observance of the maxims to Grice is a way of conveying implied meanings in a conversation process by way of deliberate attempt to do so (Fadillah & Imperiani, 2020). This corroborates the findings of Hadi (2013) who states that, though Grice presented the maxims as guidelines for successful communication but they can better be considered as presumptions about utterances that both the speakers and listeners exploit and rely upon respectively, in order to communicate cooperatively and mutually. Therefore, it can be concluded that the Gricean maxims still remain a center of pragmatics and the role they play in understanding of meaning cannot be denied.

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