8.3

Rules of Conversation

The use of language, like most other forms of social behavior, is governed by social rules. Some rules are designed to protect people's feelings by showing respect (e.g., rules governing whether or not you can use a first name in addressing someone or must use a title and last name). Rather more important are rules designed to protect the integrity of our communication. It is reasonably clear that if people were to decide to tell lies in some random way, so that listeners would have no way of determining when speakers were lying and when they were telling the truth, language would cease to be of any value to us. In response to this, we have settled on a set of conventions governing language use that preserves its integrity by requiring us, among other things, to be honest in its use, to have evidence for what we say, and to make what we say relevant to the speech context. What is interesting about these conventions is that they were never officially proposed and voted on by anybody but instead have emerged naturally. And we learn them in much the same way we learn most social rules—by trial and error.

The philosopher H. P. Grice formulated a Cooperative Principle, which he believed underlies language use, according to which we are enjoined to make sure that what we say in conversation furthers the purposes of these conversations. Obviously, the requirements of different types of conversations will be different. In a business meeting, one is normally expected to keep one's remarks confined to the topic at hand unless it is changed in some approved way. Some close friends having a few beers at a bar would not be governed by tight rules of this sort. Nevertheless, even in a casual conversation, the conversation will normally have one or more purposes, and each of the parties to it can be expected by the rest to behave in ways that further these purposes. Thus, even the most casual conversation is unlikely to consist of such random sentences as:

(1) Kim: How are you today?
Sandy: Oh, Harrisburg is the capital of Pennsylvania.
Gail: Really? I thought the weather would be warmer.
Mickey: Well, in my opinion, the soup could have used a little more salt.

Grice argued that there are a number of conversational rules, or maxims, that regulate conversation by way of enforcing compliance with the Cooperative Principle. Recall from file 8.2 that implicatures arise from our knowledge about "how conversation works." The
Cooperative Principle is meant to embody this knowledge. Throughout our discussion of it we will see how it gives rise to implicatures.
At the heart of the system of maxims are the Maxims of Quality.

A. Maxims of Quality:

1. Do not say what you believe to be false.
2. Do not say that for which you lack adequate evidence.

The first Maxim of Quality is self-evident. Without regular compliance with this maxim, language would be useless to us. The second is more interesting, for it is only when we believe we have adequate evidence for some claim that we can have much confidence that we are observing the first Maxim of Quality. Nevertheless, people differ strikingly in what they think is good evidence for their views, especially in the areas of religion and politics (which is why these topics are so often off-limits as topics of conversation).

Because we may normally assume that speakers are obeying the Cooperative Principle, we sometimes draw inferences from what people say that are based on this assumption. Consider the following conversation:

(2) Sandy: We need someone to make some sort of fruit salad for the picnic.
Tom: I can make my family's favorite fruit salad.

Sandy would likely draw the inference that Tom has actually made this fruit salad before, for the best evidence that Tom can make this salad is the fact that he has indeed made it. However, this is not a valid inference, i.e., it is not entailed by Tom's statement; it is only implicated. Tom could legitimately say this was based on the fact that he had watched it being made many times and thought he knew all that was needed to be known to make it. People sometimes say that the word can in a sentence like this is very weak (because they think it means merely 'is possible') and would therefore say that Sandy's drawing this inference is wrongheaded. However, this literalist view is out of touch with how we use the language. Suppose Tom were to make the salad and it were to come out very badly. Something like the following conversation might take place.

(3) Sandy: I thought you said you could make this salad!
Tom: Well, I thought I could.

As Sandy's challenge illustrates, we take claims involving the word can quite seriously—because we assume that speakers using it are obeying the second Maxim of Quality.

A second class of maxims consists of the Maxim of Relation (often called the Maxim of Relevance).

B. Maxim of Relation/Relevance:

1. Be relevant.

This maxim is sometimes called the "supermaxim" because it is central to the orderliness of conversation—it limits random topic shifts like those of (1) above—but also because it is very important to understanding how we draw conversational inferences, in other words, of how implicatures arise. Consider the following conversation:

(4) Sandy: Is Gail dating anyone these days?
Tom: Well, she goes to Cleveland every weekend.}
In this case, Sandy will likely draw the inference that Gail is dating someone because she will assume that what Tom has said is relevant to what she had said. In fact, if Tom knew that Gail goes to Cleveland every weekend because she has a job there, what he said would have been very misleading.

The next pair of maxims are the **Maxims of Quantity**.

C. **Maxims of Quantity**

1. Make your contribution as informative as is required.
2. Do not make your contribution more informative than is required.

The first maxim is intended to ensure that we make as strong a claim as is warranted (see the second Maxim of Quality) in any given circumstance, and the second is meant to ensure that we not make a stronger claim than is warranted in that circumstance. The following conversation illustrates an implicature that might arise on the assumption that the speaker is obeying the first Maxim of Quantity.

\[(5)\]  
Gail: How far can you run without stopping?  
Kim: **twenty-four** miles.  
Gail: I guess you can't run a whole marathon without stopping.  
Kim: Nonsense, I've done it a number of times.

Notice that what Kim says first must be true if what she says next is true. Certainly, if someone can run over twenty-six miles without stopping, then they can run twenty-four miles without stopping. However, Gail quite naturally was assuming that Kim was obeying the first Maxim of Quantity.

The final group of maxims we will discuss are the **Maxims of Manner**.

D. **Maxims of Manner**

1. Avoid obscurity of expression.
2. Avoid ambiguity.
3. Be brief.
4. Be orderly.

These maxims are reasonably self-explanatory. The first enjoins us to avoid use of jargon (terms restricted primarily to specialized areas of knowledge) or other terms our listeners cannot be expected to know. The second maxim requires us to avoid saying things that have two or more meanings (e.g., *He promised to phone at noon*), unless our listeners can be expected to know which meaning is intended. The third maxim tells us not to expound at length on a topic when a few words will do. The fourth comes down to saying that we should organize what we say in some intelligible way.

In discussing Grice's Conversational Maxims we pointed out that we commonly draw inferences from what people say based on the assumption that they are obeying the Cooperative Principle. This system of inference drawing is a kind of side effect of the maxims, whose primary reason for being is to regulate conversation. One major reason for exploiting the maxims in this way is to make conversation easier. (Notice that *How far can you run without stopping?* is shorter than *What is the greatest distance you can run without stopping?*) If we were to be forced in conversation to speak only in logically impeccable ways (e.g., to draw only logical inferences), conversation would proceed at a very slow pace, even assuming (counterfactually) that most of us have the logical capacities to do this. In conversation (4) above, Tom might have said *I believe that she may be dating someone because she goes to Cleveland every weekend, and that's not her hometown, and she doesn't have a job there.*
Given our set of maxims, Tom can say what he says and rely on the listener to figure out what he means.

There are two other reasons we use these maxims to communicate indirectly: (a) we sometimes need to avoid telling the truth because our frankness may hurt us; and (b) we sometimes need to avoid telling the truth because the truth may hurt someone else. Grice gave an example of a professor who was asked to write a letter of recommendation for a recent Ph.D. who was applying for a teaching position. Suppose that the letter went like this:

Dear Colleague:

Mr. John J. Jones has asked me to write a letter on his behalf. Let me say that Mr. Jones is unfailingly polite, is neatly dressed at all times, and is always on time for his classes.

Sincerely yours,

Harry H. Homer

Do you think Mr. Jones would get the job? This is an example of flouting a maxim—in this case, the Maxim of Quantity. Professor Homer wanted to convey his negative impression of the candidate without actually saying anything negative about him. The receiver of this letter will assume that although Professor Homer appears to be violating the Maxim of Quantity, he is nevertheless not actually intending to be uncooperative and thus has said all of the relevant positive things he can think of—which is the essence of “damning with faint praise.”

Conventions of politeness (as well as a desire not to get punched in the nose) often keep us from insulting people overtly. By exploiting the maxims, we can insult people and (usually) get away with it. So, if someone does some bragging and another says, I'm totally awed, the first will probably take this as an insult, but not one that he or she can legitimately take exception to. This conversational inference arises out of the recognition that the insulter is violating the first Maxim of Quality—the recognition that the claim is too strong (see the Maxims of Quantity) to likely be true. Such indirect communication is very important to us. If a teacher believes that his or her students are cheating on a quiz, he or she might say, I see a lot of roving eyes! The students will doubtless take this as an indirect charge that someone appears to be cheating. The Maxim of Relation/Relevance plays a role here because a claim about roving eyes is relevant just in case the eyes are roving to the wrong place. However, this way of trying to stop the cheating, since it falls short of an overt accusation, would probably not poison the atmosphere in the class.

The needs of social harmony and linguistic integrity are not always consistent with each other. It is said that there are societies in which the failure to answer a stranger's question is considered very impolite and therefore people in this society will give a stranger a wrong answer to a question rather than give no answer. Which is to say that Grice's maxims, being conventions, are very different from natural laws.

Exercises

1. Grice’s actual statement of the third Maxim of Manner was “Be brief (avoid unnecessary prolixity).” What two Maxims of Manner does this statement violate?

2. Suppose you ask a friend what he thought of the new movie in town, and he replies, “Well, the costumes were authentic.” Which rule is being flouted to guide you to the inference that your friend probably did not like the movie? Why?
3. Advertisements for over-the-counter drugs often make claims like "contains the most effective ingredient" or "contains the ingredient that doctors recommend most." These claims imply that the drugs are effective. What maxim is involved here? Is the inference a logically sound one? Why?

4. Jokes often rely on the hearer's knowledge of rules of conversation for their humorous effect. In the following joke by the late Henny Youngman, identify the rule that is being blatantly violated:

I come home last night, and there's a car in the dining room. I said to my wife, "How did you get the car in the dining room?" She said, "It was easy. I made a left turn when I came out of the kitchen."