

Socialising Grice: on interlocutors' reasons for co-operating in conversation

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A way of extending the applicability of Grice's Co-operative Principle to non-co-operative exchanges is suggested. The argument builds on the premises of rationality and interlocutors' face wants (Goffman 1967; Brown and Levinson 1987 [1978]), which yield different degrees of co-operation depending on the cultural and situational context. More specifically, it is proposed that, in cases of non-co-operation, the correct results are obtained by applying the maxims not just to what is said, but also to what is implicated. What prompts this extended application of the maxims is interlocutors' reciprocal sensitivity to face-wants. Rather than being independently stipulated, the Co-operative Principle now falls out from rationality and interlocutors' mutual face-wants, affording us with a glimpse into interlocutors' reasons for abiding by this principle.

1 INTRODUCTION

Grice's (1989a [1975]) theory of conversational implicature is built on the assumption that interlocutors share some basic goals, captured under the rubric of the Co-operative Principle: "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" (henceforth CP; 1989a [1975]: 26). The CP is a pre-condition of linguistic communication: it is because it is assumed to be in operation at a deeper level that inferring the speaker's intended meaning (which, as much recent work in pragmatics convincingly argues, may well include understanding the proposition expressed by his/her utterance) is at all possible. However, this assumption leaves us at a loss as to how to begin to account for instances of conflictual communication, or even instances when, in Grice's words, the CP is 'opted out of', particularly at a time when research is increasingly drawing attention to the pervasiveness of such instances in everyday communication (Haviland 1997; Eelen 2001; Leezenberg 2003).

Yet Grice's scheme has proved extremely inspiring for linguistic research. One of its major advantages lies in having formulated the maxims of conversation which, by hinging on linguistic aspects of the speaker's utterance, provide an opportune tool with which to explicate otherwise opaque inferential processes. Indeed, attempts at formulating alternatives to the CP (e.g. the Principle of Relevance, Sperber and Wilson 1995 [1986]) may be criticised exactly on account of not having provided us with a tool of similar predictive force. It would then seem that the restrictive nature of the CP is a mixed blessing: it is only because it limits its applicability to 'co-operative' exchanges that it can make predictions of some validity. However, this is not an inescapable conclusion.

In this paper, I suggest a way of extending the applicability of the CP to non-co-operative exchanges as well, while retaining its full predictive power. Informed by recent research tracing the origins of co-operative behaviour back to the pursuance of self-interest or status (Dessalles 1998, 2000), the argument put forward builds on the premises of rationality and interlocutors' face-wants (Goffman 1967; Brown and Levinson 1987 [1978]), which yield different degrees of co-operation depending on the cultural and situational context. This move takes into account variability in definitions of the self, and as to which aspect of face, defined as wants of the self, is prioritised in context, thereby enabling us to account not only for instances where co-operation is preferred, but also for instances where it may be opted out of,