■ *Stephen C. Levinson*
MAX PLANCK INSTITUTE FOR PSYCHOLINGUISTICS

Maxim

A maxim is an aphoristic principle of conduct. The term is now associated by anyone who studies language with H. P. Grice's "maxims of conversation," which in turn are held to follow from a "cooperative principle" that informs (rather than strictly governs) conversation. The "cooperative principle" states, "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." To achieve this, Grice suggests that conversationalists follow four maxims named after the Kantian categories, which we may abbreviate as follows:

Quality: "Don't say what you believe to be false, and don't say that for which you lack adequate evidence."

Quantity: "Give sufficient information, but don't give too much information."

Relevance: "Be relevant (stick to the point, etc.)."

Manner: "Be perspicuous—avoid obscurities, be brief and orderly."

The imperatival wording is meant to suggest neither moral imperative nor legal requirement, but rather a recipe-like rational mode of conduct to achieve one's conversational goals.

Despite the fact that at first sight all this looks like poor sociolinguistics, the underlying idea remains extremely important. Grice was trained in Oxford "ordinary language philosophy," which held that many deep philosophical problems arise from equivocations in meaning; thus he learned from John Austin the trick of looking at how words are used in context. What he noted was that, for example, it would be odd to say "Sandra is either an anthropologist or a theologian" when you knew she was only an anthropologist—it would be true, but less than fully helpful. From the disjunction, we assume the speaker isn't sure. But how do we get from statements to unstated beliefs about speakers' states of mind? We can only do that if there are some principles linking what we say with what we should be thinking when we say it, and the maxims of conversation were a first

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guess at those principles. Grice believed that by spelling out these principles we could disentangle *meaning* from *psychology*, or convention from intention (although he also held that, ultimately, meaning conventions derive from special kinds of intentions). A much simpler theory of meaning should result.

Why was this important? Because for the first time we had a systematic way to talk about the *unsaid*. There are many professions built on exegesis of the unsaid, from theology to psychoanalysis to anthropology. But most of these see the professional as diviner and his powers as based on a mixture of long apprenticeship and inspiration. Instead, Grice offered us a glimpse of a science of the unsaid. Unsaid messages could arise in at least two ways. First, by following the maxims, the speaker raises expectations that the maxims are being adhered to. So when in answer to your question "Is Sandra an academic?" I reply "She is either an anthropologist or a theologian," you think that I'm sure she is at least one or the other (Quality), I'm sure she is not both (Quantity), and I'm sure she is an academic but unsure which kind (Relevance). Second, by flagrantly "flouting" the maxims, the speaker can trigger more open-ended inferences: if I were to say "Sandra is an excellent theologian" when you know that I know she is nothing of the kind but just an anthropologist, I would suggest that there is some passing analogy between the way Sandra practices her profession and theologians practice theirs (convoluted and specious arguments, or sound arguments for the unsound, or preoccupations with angels on the heads of pins).

Grice left us no more than a hint of how to establish a science of the unsaid; consequently, even among the Griceans there has been bickering ever since—are there really three maxims, or just two, or even only one? But there have also been strands of considered anti-Griceanism. The Cognitive Linguists think all meaning is undifferentiated psychology, lumping together levels of conceptualization, of semantics, and of pragmatics, so there is certainly no principled distinction between the said and the unsaid. The ethnographers of speaking take a look at how people use language in "their" society and report that Grice was only (at best) depicting language use at the high tables of Oxford: there's always an economy of information, so people don't tell the truth at all (Quality), certainly don't volunteer the whole of it (Quantity), don't always reply directly (Relevance) or find it appropriate to speak in unveiled ways (Manner). The conversational analysts think Grice's armchair ethnography is science fiction: people indulge in all manner of highly detailed practices which are much more revealing about the generation of the unsaid than Gricean principles. For example, I ask you "Why on earth did you do that?" and you say nothing, thereby signaling guilt—this works because the practice of asking a question assigns you a turn, and your withholding an answer indicates you do not have an adequate one.

But Grice's idea survives these radical doubts. If the Cognitive Linguists were right, there would be no exploitation of the unsaid—no rhetoric, no cross-cultural misunderstandings, no language of intimacy or politeness. If the ethnographers of speaking were right and no-one felt obliged to tell the truth, and there was no relation between what was said and how and when

it was said (nothing governing Quantity, Relevance and Manner), then not only could no child learn the language, but there would be no account of the special value of veiled speech, indirect reference, or how hints and allusions work (which is precisely what the ethnographers are interested in). As for the conversational analysts, they do indeed have a point: we won't have a science of the unsaid without doing the laborious archaeology of unearthing the common conversational practices we all employ but of which we are not conscious. But if Grice was even partly right, there are also special background assumptions that have an omnipresent relevance and whose very modulation constructs special contexts and signals social motivations (like politeness and deference) for deviating from them. Recent work in both linguistics and semiotics gets good mileage from such ideas applied cross-linguistically and cross-culturally.

There is a moral in Grice's maxims, principles that operate even when being flouted: there's a need throughout the social sciences for a new kind of explanatory principle, more flexible and semiotic than rule, norm or custom. (Grice's maxim is clearer than Pierre Bourdieu's habitus, but a similar kind of beast.) It is presumptive heuristics that govern social life, constrain our behavior for fear of generating unwanted meanings, and allow us to generate the most subtle and extended meanings without ever having had to say them.

(See also *act, competence, functions, power, truth, turn*)

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Max Planck Institute for Psycholinguistics
P.O. Box 310
NL-6500 AH Nijmegen
The Netherlands
levinson@mpi.nl