

Grice and the so-called “Rules of Conversation”

Intro to Linguistics

October 12, 2015

1 Some short dialogues

Movie tickets cost eight dollars. Alice and Bob are wondering if they can go. Alice has twenty dollars in her pocket:

A: I have eight dollars.

What if movie tickets cost ten dollars?

Josephine and Ellen are planning a trip to the south of France. Ellen’s cousin Jacqueline lives there, and she is trying to work out if they can see her.

E: Where does Jacqueline live again?

J: In France.

Quentin and Jack are coming out of class.

Q: It’s almost two, have you eaten?

J: I have a dentist appointment.

Q: Want to get lunch?

J: Wasn’t that an interesting class!

A car stops at a street corner and the driver talks to a man standing there:

D: Is there a gas station around here?

M: Yes.

Fred is Jessica's new boyfriend, and Jacob is her ex. It's true that Jacob has a cold, but it's also true that Jessica saw him last night.

F: Have you seen much of Jacob lately?

J: He's had a cold for the last two weeks.

At a nice dinner:

A: Mrs. Robinson really is an old bag, isn't she?

B: The weather's been surprisingly warm for this time of year!

2 Some “forensic” examples

From “When Harry Met Sally” – Harry is trying to set Jesse up on a date with Sally:

J: I don't know about this

H: It's just a dinner.

J: You know, I've finally gotten to a place in my life where I'm comfortable with the fact that it's just me and my work. If she's so great, why aren't you taking her out?

H: How many times do I have to tell you? We're just friends?

J: So, you're saying that she's not that attractive.

H: No, I told you she is attractive.

J: Yeah, but you also said she had a good personality.

H: She has a good personality. What?

J: When someone's not that attractive, they're always described as having a good personality.

H: Look, if you'd asked me, "What does she look like?" and I said, "She has a good personality," that means she's not attractive, but just because I happen to mention that she has a good personality, she could be either: she could be attractive with a good personality or not attractive with a good personality.

J: What is she?

H: Attractive.

J: But not beautiful, right?

From "High Fidelity" – Rob has seen his ex-girlfriend Laura last night, and she has told him that she "hasn't slept with her new boyfriend yet":

R: What did Laura mean last night when she said, "I haven't slept with him yet." Yet! What does "yet" mean anyway? It means you're gonna do it, doesn't it? Or does it?

R: Just come on. What would it mean to you, that sentence: I haven't seen Evil Dead II yet?

B: Well, to me it would mean that you're a liar. You've seen it twice. Once with Laura—oops—and once with me and Dick, remember? We had that conversation about the guy making Beretta shotgun ammo off-screen in the 14th century.

R: Right, all right. But let's just say that I hadn't seen it and I said to you, "I haven't seen Evil Dead II yet", what would you think?

B: I'd think that you're a cinematic idiot and I'd feel sorry for you.

R: All right. But from that one sentence, would you think that I was going to see it?

B: I'm sorry, Rob. I'm struggling here. You're asking me what would I think if you told me you hadn't seen a film that you have already seen. What am I supposed to say?

R: Just listen to me. If I said to you—

B: "I haven't seen Evil Dead II yet", yes.

R: Would you get the impression that I really wanted to see it?

B: Oh, uh, well you couldn't have been desperate to see it, otherwise you'd have already gone.

R: Right, I'm not gonna see that movie.

B: But the word "yet". Yeah, you know what? I'd get the impression that you wanted to see it otherwise you'd have said you didn't wanna go.

R: But in your opinion, would I definitely go?

B: How the fuck am I supposed to know?! Probably!

R: Why?

B: Because it's a brilliant film. It's so funny, and violent, and the soundtrack kicks fucking ass. I never thought I'd say this, but can I go work now?

From Katie Couric's one-on-one with Sarah Palin:

SP: I can give you examples of things that John McCain has done, that has shown his foresight, his pragmatism, and his leadership abilities. And that is what America needs today.

KC: I'm just going to ask you one more time – not to belabor the point. Specific examples in his 26 years of pushing for more regulation.

SP: I'll try to find some and I'll bring them to you.

Who's being clever here? Is anyone?

From the Bronston vs. United States trial (1973):

P: Do you have any bank accounts in Swiss banks, Mr. Bronston?

B: No, sir.

P: Have you ever?

B: The company had an account there for about six months, in Zurich.

P: Have you any nominees who have bank accounts in Swiss banks?

B: No, sir.

Bronson was later convicted of perjury, because he had (previous to the time of the trial) had a Swiss bank account, that was closed when he was asked the question. Do you think he should have been convicted?