

These notes are useful to any student taking English Language and Literature A Level. They could help you in any part of the course when you want to examine **represented talk** or conversation in a text, such as in a novel, a play or a poem or extracts from these: this could be either coursework or exam. They will also help your approach to the study of **real talk**, presented in the form of a transcript.

There are notes, tips, examples and tasks here on Grice, Lakoff, Leech and Labov. You can research these people's work further if you wish.

Grice

Paul Grice (1913–1988) was an Oxford philosopher whose ideas have been influential in linguistics since the early 1970s. After making thousands of recordings of people talking, and examining how they worked, he found that there is a tacit agreement and understanding among participants to ensure success. This assumption is a kind of social pressure that participants will communicate in a certain way. He called this **the co-operative principle** with **four maxims** which he found that speakers usually observe.

Grice's four maxims

1. **Quantity** – each speaker says **not too much, not too little**.
2. **Quality** – each speaker says what is **true**.
3. **Relation (or Relevance)** – each speaker says something **relevant**.
4. **Manner** – each speaker says something **clear**.

If a conversation flounders or breaks down, it will be because one or more of these maxims has been **flouted**. People are implicitly aware of them when speaking e.g. 'I won't keep you,' or 'Sorry if that's not clear,' and listeners might express dissatisfaction jokingly, politely or more rudely e.g. 'I don't get that.' or 'What's that got to do with it?'.

Flouting the maxims - notice

- It is the participants in a conversation who might flout the maxims. The authors of texts, e.g. Shakespeare, Dickens or Poe do not flout the maxims: they cannot have heard of them! This is not just a matter of being pre-1970: there is no reason why more modern writers should be familiar with Grice's maxims.
- Much figurative language deliberately flouts a maxim or two as it might seem to say something untrue or unclear but if the speaker's implied meaning is understood by the listener and is obvious in the context of interaction with other participants, then it is inapplicable to refer to these maxims.
- The speaker might therefore flout a maxim with no problems if he/she **implies** a clear meaning and the listener is able to **infer** this clear meaning. When a speaker unintentionally departs from a maxim e.g. talks too much, says something obscure, then h/she is said to **violate** the maxims.

Examples from *Twelfth Night*

When Malvolio talks to Olivia, making references to the letter which he believes that she has written, he is violating the maxims of manner and relevance because his meaning is completely unclear to Olivia and she is unable to detect any relevance.

E.g. **MALVOLIO:** 'Be not afraid of greatness': 'twas well writ.
OLIVIA: What mean'st thou by that, Malvolio?

How talk works

When Feste, dressed as Sir Topas, is pretending to examine the allegedly mad, incarcerated Malvolio, he flouts Grice's maxims of manner and quality in order to confuse Malvolio for a comic response from the audience.

E.g. **FESTE:** Say'st thou that the house is dark?
MALVOLIO: As hell, Sir Topas
FESTE: Why, it hath bay-windows transparent as barricades.

Task

If you are studying *Twelfth Night*, find two or three more examples of unsuccessful conversations and see if you can name the maxim(s) being flouted or violated and comment on the effect.

Example from Text 28 (*She Stoops to Conquer*) in Travel, Transport and Locomotion Anthology

Tony Lumpkin is deliberately flouting Grice's maxim of manner in order to tease and confuse Hastings.

TONY: Left them! Why where should I leave them, but where I found them?
HASTINGS: This is a riddle.
TONY: Riddle me this then. What's that goes round the house, and round the house, and never touches the house?
HASTINGS: I'm still astray.

Task

If you are studying the AS anthology, find two or three more examples of unsuccessful conversations and see if you can name the maxim(s) being broken and comment on the effect. (Try Texts 24 and 27.)

Example from a transcript

In this exchange, 'A' dominates and does not allow 'B' to participate much. 'A' is breaking Grice's maxim of quantity and does not listen to 'B' who could decide that this was not an enjoyable conversation.

A: yeah (.) anyway (.) anyway (.) so so I said so I said (.) I didn't sort of say anything I just sort of said this and er (.) I said I can see
B: she wants to
A: no no (.) I said I can see that there's erm a sort of er balancing act (.) in the sense that when I started you could either do it or you couldn't and if you couldn't you still got the job (.) but I thought it was a shame but she said she thought it was necessary
B: oh it's
A: and then and then she she immediately started talking about how the best person she'd known was one they all hated ...

Guess the gender of A and B!

Lakoff

Robyn Lakoff (American, female, alive and in her sixties) found that much of the interaction of conversation is governed by what she called **the politeness principle**. She identified **three strategies** that speakers usually follow.

Lakoff's three strategies

1. **Don't impose** – avoid intruding on others' lives.
2. **Give options** – avoid making the listener feel obliged to do something.
3. **Make your receiver feel good** – make others feel appreciated.

Examples

1. **Don't impose** – speakers follow this by saying such things as 'Excuse me...' or 'I'm sorry to bother you...' before addressing a stranger. Saying to a friend, 'I know it's a lot to ask,' or 'Is there any way you could?' are also examples.
2. **Give options** – speakers follow this by saying such things as 'It's totally up to you' or 'I won't mind if you don't want to' or 'Where should we go first?'
3. **Make your receiver feel good** – speakers flatter others by saying such things as 'Don't know what I'd do without you!' or 'Just the person!' or 'You're good at this sort of thing.'

Examples from *Twelfth Night*

When Malvolio is sent after Viola to give her the ring, his rudeness is displayed in the way that he flouts Lakoff's politeness principle, making her feel bad about the trouble she has allegedly caused: 'You might have saved me my pains, to have taken it away yourself.'

E.g. In their first appearance, when Sebastian is talking to Antonio, he observes Lakoff's maxim of not imposing by saying 'O good Antonio, forgive me your trouble.'

Task

If you are studying *Twelfth Night*, find two or three more examples of Lakoff's maxims being followed or broken and comment on the effect.

Example from Text 17 (Transcript) in *Travel, Transport and Locomotion* anthology

When discussing possibilities, Speaker 2 (Line 38) phrases his suggestion in a way that abides by Lakoff's politeness principle, giving options as he suggests, 'it might be worthwhile taking the car.'

Examples from *The Big Sleep* by Raymond Chandler

Chandler conveys Marlowe's powerful, intimidating character by the terse, direct way in which he speaks, often using interrogatives. He consistently breaks Lakoff's politeness principle by intruding on people without equivocating or excusing himself, for example, 'Is Mrs Regan in?', 'How come you had a key?' and 'I haven't got forever.' When necessary to achieve what he wants, he will modify this, sounding more polite in keeping with Lakoff's maxims by imposing less, for example, 'Would you do me a favour, a very small favour?' Find more examples in your texts.

Leech

Geoffrey Leech (British, alive and younger than Lakoff) developed Lakoff's work by formulating a set of maxims for the **politeness principle** in the same way that Grice did with conversation. He identified **six maxims**.

Leech's six maxims

1. **Tact** – minimises the cost to the listener and maximizes the cost to the speaker e.g. 'Could I interrupt you just for a second?'
2. **Generosity** – minimises the benefit to the speaker and maximises the benefit to the listener e.g. 'You must come and have dinner with us.'
3. **Approbation** – minimises dispraise to the listener e.g. 'Yes, I've seen your dress. It's so unusual.'
4. **Modesty** – minimises praise of the speaker e.g. 'I'm so stupid. I didn't get that. Did you?'
5. **Agreement** – minimises disagreement e.g. 'Perhaps we could agree to go at midday.'
6. **Sympathy** – minimises antipathy and maximises sympathy e.g. 'I was sorry to hear you weren't well.'

Because Lakoff's theory is easier to work with, there are no examples or tasks here but try applying Leech's theories to any text that you're studying.

Labov

William Labov is an American linguist born in 1927 and very influential in the area of sociolinguistics. Useful to us, however, is his work on spoken narratives, especially if you encounter a monologue which is a story being told by the speaker. Labov showed how a speaker structures a story if telling it spontaneously. He identified a **six-part structure** to **oral narratives**.

Labov's six-part structure

1. **Abstract** – briefly, what is the story about?
2. **Orientation** – who, what, where, when?
3. **Complicating action** – then what happened?
4. **Evaluation** – how is this interesting?
5. **Result or resolution** – what finally happened?
6. **Coda** – the story is finished

An example – In reality, the speaker would expand on several parts of this.

Check how each part fits the list above.

1. A really strange thing happened last week.
2. A friend of mine was in the audience at the Children in Need show at the BBC on Friday ...
3. ... when the lead singer of a band got very irritated that he had only been allowed five minutes for a sound check.
4. So all the studio audience watched him having this hissy fit but the TV audience didn't see it.
5. The band removed all their stuff and Terry Wogan announced to the cameras that the lead singer was ill.
6. I used to like them but now I think the lead singer's a moron!