The Concept of Implicature in
(Mis)Understanding Grice Cooperative Principal

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Abstract

The concept of implicature is a fundamental and far-reaching one for studies concerned with politeness and impoliteness – the present one included. With the exception of such direct, baldly expressed phrases as, 'take a seat' and 'quiet!' (both of which can be polite or impolite depending on the context) what interactants communicate, either politely or impolitely, is often very different from the core, unvarnished, propositional content of their message(s). Academically, different views of politeness and impoliteness have, by and large, adopted either a Gricean (1975, 1978, 1981, 1989) maxim-based approach or a Sperber and Wilson (1995) relevance-theory approach. Both, however, have their issues and I will explain the reasons, here, why I choose to follow a Gricean approach in this model. This seems especially prudent in light of the fact that there are at least two major and decidedly different interpretations of the Cooperative Principle, partly because Grice's own writings and conceptualisations of the CP are (a) less than watertight, which I explore below, and (b) were continually developed right up until his death in 1988.

Key words: pragmatics, politeness, communication, Grice, Cooperative Principle, maxim

الملخص

إن مفهوم الضمني هو مفهوم أساسي وبعيد المدى للدراسات المتعلقة بالدعاوى وعدم الرضا – وهي الدراسة الحالية. وباستثناء مثل هذه العبارات المباشرة التي تم التعبير عنها أصلا باسم "اتخاذ مقعد" و "الهدوء" (وكلاهما يمكن أن يكون مهذبا أو غير مهذب تبعا للسياق)، فإن ما يتفاعل معه المتفاعلون، سواء بأدب أو غير متهور، غالبا ما يختلف كثيرا عن جوهر، أونفارنيشد، المحتوى المقترح لرسالتهم (ق). وبشكل عام، اعتمدت وجهات نظر مختلفة من الندب وعدم التحيز، بشكل عام، نهجا يستند إلى أقصى حد في غريسيان (1975، 1978، 1981، 1989) أو نهج سبيربر أند ويلسون (1995). ومع ذلك، على حد سواء، لديهم قضاياهم وسوف أشرح

الأسباب، وهنا، لماذا اخترت اتباع نهج غريسيان في هذا النموذج. وهذا يبدو حذرا على وجه الخصوص في ضوء حقيقة أن هناك على الأقل تفسيرين رئيسيين ومختلفين تماما لمبدأ التعاونيات، ويرجع ذلك جزئيا إلى أن كتابات غريس ومفاهيمها الخاصة ب كب هي: (أ) أقل من الماء، التي أكتشفها أدناه، و (ب) تم تطويرها باستمرار حتى وفاته في عام 1988.

الكلمات المفتاحية: البراغماتية ، الدعاية، لاتصال، غرايتس،المبدأ التعاوني، الحكمة

Introduction

Fundamental to many 'traditional' approaches to politeness (Brown and Levinson 1987; Leech 1983, 2006; Fraser 1975; Fraser and Nolan 1981) is Grice's (1975) principle of cooperation. This, however, has not precluded different researchers from interpreting Grice in their own way, to suit their own ends. One primary aim of this section, beyond that of merely describing Grice's approach (1975) is to put on record my position and my understanding of the Cooperative Principle. We must stress that the following discussion is not, nor is it intended to be an exhaustive critique of Grice's Cooperative Principle, it is merely a conceptualisation of the Cooperative Principle and its subsequent maxims (see below) in relation to the generation and communication of im/politeness.

1. **Grice's Cooperative Principle**

Grice's (1975) Cooperative Principle (hereafter shortened to CP) assumes a tacit understanding between interlocutors to co-operate in an interactive event in a meaningful way. The CP is formulated in Grice's own words as:[…] a rough general principle which participants will be expected (ceteris paribus) to observe, namely: 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. (Grice 1975: 45) What this 'rough general principle' means is that in conversation individuals work on the assumption that there are general expectations to interaction which will be observed by all members unless there are indications to the contrary. Under this 'rough general principle', Grice suggests four conversational categories or 'maxims' as they've come to be known which we generally expect our interlocutors to follow.

– **Maxim of Quantity:**

1. Make your contribution as informative as is required (for the current purpose of the exchange)

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

– **Maxim of Quality:** Try to make your contribution one that is true

1. Do not say what you believe to be false

2. Do not say that for which you lack adequate evidence

– **Maxim of Relation:** Be relevant

– **Maxim of Manner:** Be perspicuous: –

1. Avoid obscurity of expression
2. Avoid ambiguity
3. Be brief (avoid unnecessary prolixity)
4. Be orderly (Grice 1975: 45–46)

Grice (1975) highlights two interesting issues concerning the category of manner. First, Grice emphasises that, unlike what seems to be the norm within the other maxims, utterances that are the concern of the maxim of Manner relate not to what is said, but to how what is to be said is said. Clearly, therefore, non-verbal, prosodic and paralinguistic information may well be included under the category of manner. Consider the following: If I was to wish someone, 'have a good day' then I could be seen to be (a) being conventionally polite (within an appropriate context) and, (b) operating within the maxim of manner (given our appropriate context). However, note the following example taken from one of the examples in my data sets:

Grice was well aware that interlocutors rarely abided by these maxims in conversational or communicative exchanges. Grice understood that users of language often transgressed the expectation that we would follow these maxims and did so for particular, interactional reasons. Transgression, or 'non-observance', of these conversational maxims can take a number of forms. These include:

1. ***Violating a maxim***: The unostentatious or covert non-observance of a maxim.

The speaker in violating a maxim, '...will be liable to mislead.' (Grice 1975: 49)

2. ***Opting out of a maxim***, which effectively makes plain, allows to be understood or indicates clearly that the interactant is unwilling to co-operate in the way the maxim(s) require. (Grice 1975: 49)

3. ***A Clash of maxim****s*: An interactant may be unable, for example, to fulfil the first maxim of Quantity (Be as informative as is required) without breaking the second maxim of Quality (Have adequate evidence for what you say) (Grice 1975: 49)

4. ***Flouting a maxim***: The intentional and blatant non-observance of a maxim at the level of what is said. This blatancy is overt, that is, it is designed to be noticed by the speaker's interlocutor(s) and is therefore designed to generate a conversational implicature, (Grice 1975: 49; 1981: 85). A flout is of course one possible mechanism by which unpleasant or impolite beliefs may be conveyed either politely or impolitely

5. ***Suspending a maxim***: The non-observance of any maxim because there is no (or perceived to be no) expectation on the part of any interlocutor that they must all be fulfilled, (Thomas 1986: 44)

6. ***Infringing a maxim***, (Grice 1981: 185 as cited in Thomas 1986: 38): The unmotivated or unintentional non-observance of a maxim. Essentially, Thomas argues (1986: 38) transgressions of this nature are generated through a speaker's imperfect linguistic performance rather than a desire to generate conversational implicatures, to be uncooperative or to mislead. One such way in which someone

may be said to have infringed a maxim could be where an utterance meaning X is said, which could be constructed as meaning Y by the hearer. However, the speaker is unaware, or, at least, apparently unaware that the utterance could be interpreted and, thus, taken as meaning Y by the hearer. Of course, not every misinterpretation need involve an infringement. The point here is that an infringement is one possible mechanism, however inadvertent, by which such speech acts may be performed.

2. Interpreting Grice

How we interpret and conceptualise Grice's CP is an issue of some import. A number of critics of Grice's theory of conversational implicature (1975) have expressed differing standpoints on how Grice's CP should indeed be interpreted, understood and deployed. One major reason for this is Grice's writing style which while readily accessible is arguably rather 'loose' in nature. This looseness has potentially arisen as a result of the fact that Grice's early work on the subject was prepared and presented as a series of lectures and his thinking on the topic was still developing right up until 1988. It's this issue, of looseness, that has allowed researchers and critics of Grice to view what he argued in such a way as to suit their own ends and purposes: whether that be, either, the exploitation and application of his approach or the criticism of it in support of their own ideas. Additionally, we should note a point made by Thomas:

[…] few of those who in recent years have drawn so heavily on Grice's theories appear to have noticed the many ambiguities which exist in his work, or if they . There is an interesting issue with this reference. Examination of Grice (1981: 185) shows no trace of Grice actually discussing the infringement of a maxim. Indeed, even by 1989, Grice was still not considering the concept in the way that Thomas does. That said, the concept of infringement is still, in this researcher's view, a viable method of non-observance of a maxim. It remains a mystery to me why Thomas (1986) did not claim for herself the concept of 'infringement' as just such an additional way of not observing the maxims of Grice's CP. Thomas (1986) is in effect selling herself short here.

3. Implicature: (Mis)Understanding

Grice have noticed, have taken the trouble to define the way in which they themselves have interpreted the concept of 'conversational cooperation' or are using the term 'cooperative'. (Thomas 1986: 26). Thomas is effectively summing up one of the major issues here in that the very term 'conversational cooperation' is itself ambiguous and misleading in some rather important respects. Indeed, in one reading of Grice's (1975) work, impoliteness would be considered to be some of the most 'uncooperative' behaviour. In another, impoliteness is actually considered to be 'cooperative' behaviour. As such, for the purposes of this book, I will discuss the different major interpretations of Grice, and then clearly define my own position in relation to these competing views.

3.1. *Grice: Should we observe the maxims at the level of what is said?*

Thomas (1986: 26) identifies one particular and rather extreme conceptualisation of Grice (1975) which she views as '[…] a complete misrepresentation of what Grice was concerned to do.' This view would seem to insist that the maxims of Quantity, Quality, Relation and Manner must at all times be observed at the level of what is said. In the words of one of the main proponents of this view: The conversational postulates [maxims] make us believe that the speaker knows the truth and is saying what he knows in a clear, simple and relevant manner. (Apostel 1979: 294, as cited in Thomas 1986: 26)

However, given that Grice has unequivocally stated (Grice 1981: 185) that the ostentatious non-observance of a maxim at the level of what is said (i.e. a flout) in no way contravenes the CP, we can safely disregard this interpretation of Grice's CP and the subsequent maxims. Indeed, a flout of a maxim is the very mechanism that is required in order to generate a conversational implicature.

3.2. Grice: As social cooperation or linguistic cooperation?

One possible reading of the CP is that it is a system of social cooperation or 'social goal sharing' (Thomas 1986: 29). In the words of one proponent:

[T]he Gricean maxims attempt to describe cooperative communication in which the participants strive after the same goal and are equally interested in achieving this goal. (Kiefer 1979: 60. Emphasis added) . Clearly then, by the social goal sharing definition, Grice's view of cooperation

means that an interlocutor would share with their intended addressee some common goal or purpose which is significantly beyond that of merely efficient message communication.

A significant number of linguistic researchers, both explicitly and implicitly, appear to have taken and interpreted Grice's CP as operating as just such a system of social 'goal sharing' cooperation. Thomas identifies Apostel (1980), Bollobas (1981), Corliss (1981), Kasher (1976, 1977), Kiefer (1979), Pratt (1977, 1981) and Sampson (1982) as being amongst them. They are joined by Fraser (1990), Fish (1999) and Watts (2003). Note that though actively believing that Grice is propounding the CP as a model of 'social goal sharing', most of the above do take pains to disassociate themselves from the viability of such a system for linguistic research. However, this

said, such researchers as Watts do appear to take this interpretation to be the one intended by Grice. Watts (2003: 20), in making a number of points towards opening, both, his discussion of the nature of politeness, and a critique of his own earlier work on politic verbal behaviour (1992) suggests the following: the original definition assumes:

1. that all social interaction is geared towards cooperation, an assumption which the literature on conflictual discourse and impoliteness has shown to be false.

We can only be dispensed with only if we are prepared to abandon the Gricean assumption of cooperation. (Watts 2003: 20) .This suggests a 'social-goal sharing' reading of Grice and Grice's use of the term 'cooperation'. We should note also the points supporting this reading of Grice which Watts (2003:203) makes when critiquing earlier models of politeness: […] it comes as no surprise that Grice's Cooperative Principle was the cornerstone of models [which originated from work in the 1970s and 1980s] that explain polite utterances as one way of achieving mutual cooperation or contributing towards the establishment and maintenance of mutual face. At the same time, these models also recognise that such utterances appear to violate one or more of the Gricean maxims. So there's an inherent contradiction in their work; polite language is a form of cooperative behaviour but does not seem to abide by Grice's Cooperative Principle. (Watts 2003: 203).

And herein lies the root of the problem. Clearly, a view like Watts's above which equates the cooperative behaviour implied by politeness with the cooperative behaviour enshrined in Grice (1975, 1989) assumes either (i) that polite behaviour is in no way socially cooperative which would be somewhat disengenious to say the least, or more likely, (ii) that Grice's theory of cooperation is a theory of social cooperation. This, as we will see, simply cannot be the case. Either way, the fact remains that Watts (2003: 203) is confusing two separate definitions of 'cooperation' here.

3.3 (Mis)Understanding the Cooperative Principle (CP)

It would certainly seem that a social goal sharing view of the CP starts to become highly problematic when we consider cases of discourse in which conflicting goals, non-cooperation and impoliteness occur (cf. Watts's comments above).

However, Grice's own writings clearly indicate that social cooperation or social goal sharing is not the intended purview of the CP. Immediately following his own definition of the CP; the maxims of Quantity, Quality, Relation and Manner, Grice says that, "There are, of course, all sorts of other maxims (aesthetic, social or moral in character)" (Grice 1975: 47. My emphasis). Now, it could be argued that had Grice intended his CP to be a model of social cooperation (and

his maxims, therefore, as being socially directed maxims), then he would not have indicated 'social' maxims as being an 'other' type of maxim to the ones he himself had just stipulated for the CP; its categories and subordinate maxims. What really confirms Grice's position is the fact that he explicitly indicates that while he once considered the CP as a possible system of 'social goal sharing', he soon abandoned this view. This is because there are issues between social cooperation, and the types of cooperation in which the CP must sometimes operate, which simply do not coincide. In Grice's own words: For a time, I was attracted by the idea that observance of the CP and the maxims, in a talk

exchange, could be thought of as a quasi-contractual matter, with parallels outside the realm of discourse. If you pass by when I am struggling with my stranded car, I no doubt have some degree of expectation that you will offer help, but once you join me under the hood, my expectations become stronger and take more specific forms; […] and talk exchanges seemed to me to exhibit, characteristically, certain features that jointly distinguish cooperative transactions:

1. The participants have some common immediate aim.

2. The contributions of the participants should be dovetailed, mutually dependent.

3. There is some sort of understanding (which may be explicit but which is often tacit) that […] the transaction should continue in appropriate style unless both parties are agreeable that it should terminate.

But while some such quasi-contractual basis as this may apply to some cases, there are too many types of exchange, like quarrelling […] that it fails to fit comfortably. (Grice 1975: 48) Indeed, Grice's view was to develop substantially over the years. In his retrospective epilogue he reconceptualises the above. In an elaboration of point [1], he says:

1. The participants have some common immediate aim, like getting a car mended; their ultimate aims may, of course, be independent and even in conflict – each may want to get the car mended in order to drive off, leaving the other stranded.

3.4. Impoliteness in Interaction

In characteristic talk exchanges there is a common aim even if, as in over-the wall chat, it is a second-order one, namely that each party should, for the time being, identify himself with the transitory conversational interests of the other.(Grice 1989: 29).

We could therefore argue that one implication of viewing the CP as a principle of social goal sharing would be that conversation should immediately cease, or at the very least become highly problematical when 'quarrelling' or other conflictive or impolite discourse begins to occur which is precisely what Watts (2003) was alluding to. Clearly conversation does not always cease in these types of discourse

– such as those discussed in this book. What this means is that conflictive, impolite, non-socially cooperative talk can and does still occur. The channel of communication in impolite, conflictive exchanges remains open as both participants want to, or are forced to by an imbalance in power relations and permitted actions within a certain context, maintain the channel as open. Essentially, for im/ politeness to occur it has to be communicated. After all, Grice in his retrospective epilogue opines that:

While the conversational maxims have, on the whole been quite well received, the same cannot, I think, be said about my invocation of a supreme

principle of conversational cooperation. One source of trouble has been that it has been felt even in the talk-exchanges of civilized people browbeating disputation and conversational sharp practice are far too common to be offenses [sic] against the fundamental dictates of conversational practice. Another source of discomfort has perhaps been the thought that, whether its tone is agreeable or disagreeable, much of our talk-exchange is too haphazard to be directed toward any end cooperative or otherwise. Chitchat goes nowhere, unless making the time pass is a journey. (Grice 1989: 368–9)

How then does the CP account for such 'conversational sharp practice' and 'browbeating disputation' which can be seen as, and constitute, competitive, impolite, 'socially uncooperative' behaviour? A pseudo-solution to this problem relies upon the social goal-sharing proponents arguing for a structure that accounts for the existence of communication in these areas of disagreement, conflict and 'non-cooperation'. Fish (1999) proposes an 'Uncooperative Principle' which simply put, mirrors the existing CP and reverses the conversational categories and their subsequent maxims. This, one feels, is rather unnecessary as there is a clearer, simpler, and in my view more attractive interpretation of Grice's cooperative principle which, other problems with

3.5. CP as a Linguistic Cooperation

The view of Grice's CP as a principle of linguistic cooperation assumes that the only goal of a given communication is the transmission of information. Thomas (1986) terms this view as 'linguistic goal sharing' as opposed to 'social goal sharing'.

Thomas argues (1986: 28) that Grice only intended the CP to apply to the conventions of interaction and presupposes no shared aims between interactants other than that of correctly establishing the speaker's illocutionary intent and getting the hearer(s) to understand the proposition which is being expressed or implied. Indeed, this would seem to fit with what we have just seen of Grice's (1975, 1989) own writings.

Thomas (1986: 29) goes on to point out that, in this view, the CP does not presuppose that the proposition expressed, entailed or implied is necessarily polite, relevant to any of the hearer's real (extra-linguistic) social goals or even truthful. Indeed, it bears re-iterating here that Grice himself notes that speakers' aims '[…] may even be in conflict' (Grice 1989: 29). In effect, Thomas (1986) is arguing, correctly in my view, that the CP operates purely to allow your interlocutor to understand what you are saying or implying. This is regardless of whether the content of your message happens to be what the social goal sharers would consider 'cooperative' or 'uncooperative'; regardless of whether it be harmonious communication or conflictive; and, more importantly for this book, regardless of whether it be polite or impolite. Indeed, we must accept Leech and Thomas's observation of the CP in that it '[…] makes no claims about the good intentions of the speakers' (Leech and Thomas 1990: 181).

To summarise Thomas's (1986) view, the social goal sharing view of the CP states: Say to your interlocutor what they want to hear, whereas the linguistic goal sharing view of the CP states: Use language in such a way that your interlocutor can understand what you are stating, presupposing or implying.
I believe it is upon this view – that Grice's CP is a model of linguistic cooperation – that the approach to politeness of Brown and Levinson (1987) is founded. Furthermore it is clear to me that this understanding of the CP is, for obvious reasons, absolutely necessary for a full(er) understanding and conceptualisation of im/politeness and its use. For presupposition and conversational implicature see Grice (1989: 269–282).

3.6. Issues with the CP

There are of course a great many other issues concerning Grice's principle of cooperation and it seems that with each passing year there are researchers suggesting refinements to, correctives for, elaborations of, or replacements of the model.

Hawley (2002), Spencer-Oatey and Jiang (2003) and Mooney (2004) are just some of the most recent. However, to explore all of the issues, criticisms, and suggestions for 'improvement' here is beyond the scope and scale. As such I confine the discussion in the pages following to a consideration of only those features which are of direct relevance to the study of impoliteness in use.

Indeed, one primary concern in this regard is that Grice's definition (1975,1989) of the CP is not watertight. The description of how the CP's categories and subsequent maxims operate is, in fact, rather loose. For example, the CP maxim of Quantity stipulates that one is expected to: 'Make your contribution as informative as is required (for the current purpose of the exchange)' and 'Do not make your contribution more informative than is required'. Yet while one given utterance may well be considered by one conversational participant to have been performed in accordance with the CP category of Quantity, it may well be considered by another to be less than informative given the context at hand or some other factor influencing the communicative event. Of course, the same can be said for every one of the categories of the CP as well as their subsequent maxims. How do we know that our hearer will consider an utterance to be maximally efficient with regards to Relation, Quality or Manner either? Indeed, one does not have to think too long or hard to recover at least one instance from personal experience whereby either an utterance of one's own was 'taken the wrong way', or an utterance from another was interpreted in a certain way which, it later turned out, was not the speaker's intended meaning. In short the instructions to, amongst others, 'be relevant', 'be perspicuous', 'avoid unnecessary prolixity' or 'make your contribution one that is true' are all relative terms.

They are relative to the situation, the context and perhaps most importantly they are relative to the individual persons engaged in a

communicative event. As such, we must accept that the categorical requirements of either acting in accordance with, or of not observing Grice's (1975) CP, its categories and their subsequent maxims are decisions that are both subjectively and contextually based. They are decisions made by the speaker, hearer and even analyst, which are relative to themselves and how they interpret the situational context at any given point in space and time. In short, the issue here is to do with intention. Indeed, Strawson (1990: 154) points out that the CP. As such, it would seem that Grice was rather unwise in wording the (sub-) maxims as imperatives.

3.7. Sperber and Wilson's Relevance Theory

Developed as a reaction to Grice's approach, Sperber and Wilson place the concept of implicature on a more explicitly cognitive footing. Their approach subsumes all of the CP's categories (Quality, Quantity, Manner and Relation) under one, overarching, super-maxim – that of Relevance. Arguing that relation is always an issue in terms of implicature recognition, Sperber and Wilson provide a theoretically attractive approach to the phenomenon, so much so that a number of researchers, many who have worked within the "postmodern" approach to politeness, have adopted the theory at the expense of Grice. Escandell-Vidall (1996), Jary (1998),

Jucker (1988), Locher (2004), Terkourafi (1999), Watts (2003) are amongst those who explicitly reject Grice's (1975, 1989) CP and turn to relevance theory. However, the reason I do not explore such approaches, nor adopt the theory itself, here, is that, as Turner (2000, see also Xie (2003: 813)) points out, relevance theory has a deep-rooted and irreparable weakness in its "conceptual incoherence." Thus far, in my view, all efforts at explaining politeness phenomena with relevance theory have failed for this very reason (cf. Fraser 1999). There are other analytical issues as well. The main ones being the fact that relevance theory as used here for these approaches to politeness, is a theory, not about the communication of such Impoliteness in Interaction liteness, but rather, of the interpretation and perception of it. In short the theory over-privileges the recipient/receiver (hearer) at the expense of the originator (speaker) of any given 'im/polite' utterance. Watts suggests that:

[a] theory of (im)polite behaviour needs to take the perspectives of the speakers and the hearers adequately into consideration, firstly, because speakers are also hearers, and vice-versa, and secondly, because social interaction is negotiated. (Watts 2003: 23)

Conclusion

As such, we must note that relevance theory does not take the perspectives of both the speakers and the hearers into account in the way required, as negotiation of 'what-was-meant' does not enter a relevance theory account of meaning in general, or a relevance theory account of im/politeness in particular. Additionally, Watts (2003: 212) notes that relevance theory rarely, if ever, concerns itself with stretches of natural verbal interaction. As any theory of

politeness, as Watts himself argues, must be able to account for how im/polite discourse builds up and pans out as, '[i]t is impossible to evaluate (im)polite behaviour out of the context of real, ongoing verbal interaction.' (Watts 2003: 23) then relevance theory fundamentally fails in this respect. This said,

I certainly view it as a priority for researchers within pragmatics to attempt to clarify relevance theory and rid it of its 'conceptual incoherence'. Once done it needs to be applied, systematically, to stretches of ongoing, real-life interaction from a multitude of different discourse types. However, such an undertaking is at least one project in its own right – well beyond the scope and scale of the present study. As such, and for the other reasons stated above, I still view Grice's CP as the best way of understanding and accounting for implicature being what was meant beyond what was said.

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