

How to Make Sense of Conversations

- (1) A: *How did Harry fare in court the other day?*
B: *Oh, he got a fine.*
A: *Puh, it's good to hear he isn't going to jail.*
- (2) A: *Chicago is in Kansas, isn't it?*
B: *Yeah, and L.A. is in Idaho!*
- (3) A: *Do you know where the Wexner Center is?*
B: *In the US, I think.*
C: *In Columbus, Ohio.*
D: *It's at 1871 North High Street.*

Flouting a Maxim

A cooperative speaker can intentionally disobey a maxim, as long as (s)he or the context provides enough indicators for the hearer to notice it. This is called **flouting** a maxim and is used to indirectly convey information (e.g., using sarcasm or irony).

Example:

- (4) *What an amazing baseball player John is!*

This can either be a

- positive comment on John's abilities (maxim of quality obeyed)
- negative comment on John's abilities through irony (maxim of quality disobeyed, clear to hearer, e.g., when said right after John didn't catch the ball)

Cooperative Principle and the Maxims

- For successful communication to take place, according to the philosopher H.P. Grice we must assume that both people in a conversation are cooperating; this is called the **Cooperative Principle**.
- Grice identified four principles which people implicitly rely on when communicating, the **Conversational Maxims**, relating to
 - the **relevance**,
 - the **quality**,
 - the **quantity** of the communicated information, and
 - the **manner** in which it is communicated.

By observing whether a speaker obeys the maxims or not, the hearer finds out how to interpret what the speaker says, e.g., identifies an indirect speech act.

Maxim of Relevance

Maxim of Relevance: Say things that are relevant to the topic under discussion.

Prevents random, incoherent conversations lacking continuity; makes it possible to understand conversations such as the following:

- (5) A: *Is Gail dating anyone these days?*
B: *Well, she goes to Cleveland every weekend.*

Cooperative flouting of the maxim:

- (6) A: *Isn't Larry the biggest jerk you ever met?*
B: *Well, it sure is nice for this time of year, isn't it?*
- (7) A: *Will Bob go to that party?*
B: *Is the Pope catholic?*

Maxim of Quality

Maxim of Quality:

- Don't say what you believe to be false.
- Don't say things you can't back up.

But people differ on they accept as good evidence, which may also depend on the topic.

Cooperative flouting of Maxim of Quality:

- (8) Reporter: *So were celebrating your birthday last week?*
Old film diva: *Yes, I turned 40!*
Reporter: *I'll actually turn 150 next month.*

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Maxim of Manner

1. Avoid obscurity of expression.
2. Avoid ambiguity.
3. Be brief.
4. Be orderly.

These maxims relate to the form of speech you use. You shouldn't use words you know your listeners won't understand, say things which you know could be misunderstood, and state events briefly and following the natural order of events.

- (10) *At the concert last night, Dolly Parton produced a series of sounds corresponding somewhat to the score of "The Star-Spangled Banner".*
- (11) Postmaster: *Here's your five-cent stamp.*
Shopper, with arms full of bundles: *Do I have to stick it on myself?*
Postmaster: *Nope. On the envelope.*
- (12) *Be brief (avoid unnecessary prolixity).*
- (13) *John rode into the sunset and jumped on his horse.*

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Maxim of Quantity

Maxim of Quantity:

- Make your contribution as informative as is required.
- Do not make your contribution more informative than is required.

We usually assume that people are telling us everything we need to know. If they don't say something, then we assume they simply don't know that information.

Non-cooperative breaking of the Maxim of Quantity leads to miscommunication:

- (9) A: *I met John and Mary the other day. They have two children now.*
B: *Are they planning on having a third?*
A: *Well, actually, they already have a third child.*

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Why do we use something like the Maxims?

- They allow us to be more brief in communicating by relying on much to be inferred.
- They allow us to say things indirectly to avoid some of the discomfort which comes from saying unpleasant things directly, or to imply without having to defend a view.

Which maxims are at work here?

- (14) *I come home last night, and there's a car in the dining room. I said to my wife, "How did you get the car in the dining room?" She said, "It was easy. I made a left turn when I came out of the kitchen."*
- (15) Salesman at the door: *Is your mother at home?*
Little Johnny: *Yes.*
Sales man: *May I talk to her?*
Little Johnny: *She isn't here.*
Salesman: *But you just said she was at home.*
Little Johnny: *She is. This isn't our house.*

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