

INTERDISCIPLINARY APPROACHES TO LANGUAGE AND ITS USE

Conversational maxims and implicatures: An introduction

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RATIONAL CONVERSATION

CONVERSATIONAL MAXIMS – unwritten but commonly known rules of rational conversation – were argued by Grice (1975) to lie at the heart of **CONVERSATIONAL IMPLICATURES**, ad hoc meanings that arise due to a complex interplay of semantic and pragmatic factors:

(1) *Situation*: A is visiting B for a couple of days. A is planning breakfast and is inspecting the fridge.

A Oh, you have no eggs?

B There's a store around the corner.

(i) 'The store around the corner is a grocery store; it sells eggs.'

(ii) 'The store is open (and will be for at least a while from now).'

- Why can't the above implications be presuppositions, be it semantic or pragmatic?
- Which tests could you apply to find out?

RATIONAL CONVERSATION

Presuppositions – whether semantic or pragmatic – cannot be easily cancelled. The meanings in (i) and (ii) **can be cancelled**.

(2) A Oh, you have no eggs?

B₁ There's a store around the corner...

(i) 'The store around the corner is a grocery store; it sells eggs.'

(ii) 'The store is open (and will be for at least a while from now).'

B₂ ...but they don't sell eggs.

B₃ ...but it's closed now.

COOPERATIVE PRINCIPLE

The Cooperative Principle

Grice 1975: 45

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's assumption was that communication is **rational**: conversation participants try to be **cooperative**, they are sensitive to the goals, wishes of their partner and adapt their contributions accordingly.

Apparent non-cooperative contributions are a common source of pragmatic inferences – implicatures – which arise as a result of trying to figure out the cooperative bit behind the apparently non-cooperative contribution.

COOPERATIVE LINGUISTIC BEHAVIOR

Which response answers the question? Which is cooperative?

(3) A Oh, you have no eggs?

B₁ There's a store around the corner.

B₂ No.

The semantic answer is not always the most cooperative one. Hearers are expected to be sensitive to the wishes and intentions of the speaker.

REFERENCES

Grice, H. Paul. 1975. Logic and conversation. In Peter Cole & J. L. Morgan (eds.), *Syntax and semantics, Vol 3: Speech acts*, 41–58. New York: Seminar Press.