• Pragmatics: Maxims of conversation

Background reading:
• CL Ch 6, §4.4, “Grice’s conversational maxims”
The Cooperative Principle

• How is it possible for people to use language in ways that communicate more than what is said?

• This is part of the linguistic subfield of pragmatics, the study of language meaning in context.

• Two ways that people can use language to communicate more than what is literally stated or asserted are:
  - Presupposition
  - The Cooperative Principle in conversation
1. The Cooperative Principle

• Consider the following conversation:
  Editor: *I’m considering hiring your student, X, as a writer. What can you tell me about X?*
  Writing teacher: *X has good handwriting, and always comes to class on time.*

• Did the teacher communicate anything useful?
  - What was it?
  - Was that information communicated *directly*, through word and/or sentence semantics?
  - How did communication happen?
1. The Cooperative Principle

• Consider the following conversation:

  Editor: *I’m considering hiring your student, X, as a writer. What can you tell me about X?*

  Writing teacher: *X has good handwriting, and always comes to class on time.*

• Did the teacher communicate anything useful? | Yes!
  - What was it? | X is not a good choice for a writer
  - Was that information communicated directly, through word and/or sentence semantics? | No!
  - How did communication happen? → keep reading
1. The Cooperative Principle

- A very influential approach to the question of how people communicate things in this way: The **Cooperative Principle** along with the four **conversational maxims** (H. Paul Grice, 1967/1975)

- Proposal: Human conversations operate according to the **Cooperative Principle**:

  “Make your contribution appropriate to the conversation.” *(CL, p 249)*
1. The Cooperative Principle

• Of course, it is not the case that everyone really is cooperative all the time

But the idea is that people tend to interpret what they hear (or read) based on the assumption that the other speaker meant to be cooperative

• Even more interesting:
Sometimes, people act in a way that is obviously not cooperative, in order to communicate something by doing that

→ This is one type of indirect communication
One basic way of conforming to the Cooperative Principle is to follow the four *conversational maxims* (CL, p 250):

**Maxim of Relevance** — Make your contribution relevant.

**Maxim of Quality** — Make your contribution true. (Do not say things that are known to be false, or for which you lack adequate evidence.)

**Maxim of Quantity** — Do not make your contribution either more or less informative than is required.

**Maxim of Manner** — Avoid ambiguity and obscurity; be brief and orderly. (“Eschew obfuscation.”)
2. Violating conversational maxims

- What happens if you violate a maxim, and you hide that fact from your conversation partner?

A: *Did you eat the last cookie?*

B: *No.* [when B did in fact eat the last cookie]

- Violation of the Maxim of Quality (untrue)

→ Deception!
2. Violating conversational maxims

• What happens if you violate a maxim, but you make that fact completely obvious? (this is often called flouting a maxim)

→ The assumption that you are following the Cooperative Principle overall still holds!

- This is a means of indirect communication
2. Violating conversational maxims

• Consider our recommendation example again:
  Editor: *I’m considering hiring your student, X, as a writer. What can you tell me about X?*
  Writing teacher: *X has good handwriting, and always comes to class on time.*

• Which maxim(s) is/are violated, and what does this violation actually communicate?
2. Violating conversational maxims

Editor: *I’m considering hiring your student, X, as a writer. What can you tell me about X?*

Writing teacher: *X has good handwriting, and always comes to class on time.*

- The teacher is violating the maxims of **Quantity** (not giving enough information) and **Relevance** (giving irrelevant information)

  - This strategy generally communicates, “I have nothing good to say about X as a writer”; that is, “Anything relevant I could say would not be in X’s favor”
2. Violating conversational maxims

- **Blatantly violating**, or flouting, a conversational maxim often indicates **politeness** or **indirectness**
  - indirect requests
  - avoidance of directly stating unpleasant information

- **Sarcasm** often involves blatantly violating a maxim — often Quality (saying the opposite of what you mean)
2. Violating conversational maxims

- Often, more than one maxim is violated at a time
  - Practice considering which maxims are violated in a conversation, and making an argument for your choice
  - See also the assigned and optional videos for more examples
3. Advertising, revisited

- Recall this example from earlier:
  
  *Everything in the store is up to 75% off!*
  
  → Desired conclusion: “*Everything/most things are actually* 75% off”
  
  - We saw before that this conclusion is not **entailed** by the language in the ad

- What **maxim(s)** of conversation would **encourage** the consumer to draw these conclusions?