

- **Pragmatics:**
Maxims of conversation

Background reading:

- CL Ch 6, §4.4, “Grice’s conversational maxims”

1. 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**

1. The Cooperative Principle

- 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?