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So What's Your Point? Relevancy in Conversation

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FRANKLY SPEAKING

A DISCUSSION OF THE ENGLISH LANGUAGE

BY FRANK BRAMLETT, PH.D.



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of cooperation. When the Huskers play Texas, the athletes can be said to be cooperative because they have similar assumptions about the game. All the players know what constitutes a touchdown, and they all know the appropriate and inappropriate means of scoring. But the object of the game is to win, and that doesn't necessarily mean to make friends while you're doing it.

Understanding the nature of The Cooperative Principle is a lot like understanding the Law of Gravity. Sir Isaac Newton did not write about gravity in order for everyone on the planet to start obeying Newton's Gravity Law. He inferred gravity from his observations about the world. We always obey the Law of Gravity—but before Newton, maybe no one really thought about it. Likewise, Grice inferred conversation guidelines from what he knew about principles of communication. In other words, the rules for conversation are already in place. We all know how to follow the rules, but we just don't necessarily know we are following them.

So Grice's Cooperative Principle is one approach to understanding the way we communicate. It explains the way we orient toward rules for playing the game of conversation. From the general principle, Grice extrapolated four specific rules or maxims.

The Maxim of Quantity. This rule broaches the idea of how *much* to say. Say

The Relevance Maxim is in danger here. Does the Good Samaritan's utterance about road construction have anything at all to do with going to see Stevie Nicks? Perhaps. The only way to know is to hang on and hope that directions are forthcoming.

In situations other than information exchange, we frequently break the maxims with impunity:

Margot: Did you have soccer practice yesterday?

Nicholas: Does a bear shit in the woods? If Nicholas were following the letter of the law, then he would have simply answered "yes" or "no" to Margot's question. But people being who we are, we like to engage in sarcasm, humor, and irony. So even though Nicholas clearly flouts the Relevance Maxim, the spirit of the Cooperative Principle allows Margot to infer Nicholas's answer—"Yes."

Some readers may be thinking, "Now wait a second. The two scenarios we just read are very similar. In both instances, one person is seeking information from another person." That's true. Margot is indeed seeking information from Nicholas about soccer practice, just as the concert-goer is seeking directions. I think an important difference here is the relationship between the interlocutors. It is clear that Margot knows enough about Nicholas to ask him something about his life. Further, Nicholas feels comfortable enough with Margot to use language that could be found offensive by some people.

What Margot and Nicholas are doing,

then, is more than information exchange.

They're also building and maintaining their friendship.

In fact, Margot might not really care whether Nicholas had soccer practice; she could be asking about his day just to keep the lines of communication open, to let him know that those things he finds important are by proxy important to her as well.

In contrast, the Mac Fan is not interested in hearing about the Good Samaritan's day. The information seeker is looking for answers, answers that are directly relevant to the topic, answers that succinctly answer the question, answers that don't leave out any important information, answers that cleave to the absolute truth.

For conversations, I think it's safe to claim that the hearer is the one who judges the extent to which a speaker's utterance is cooperative. If the speaker is going on and on, or if the speaker is trying to change the subject, then the hearer might not like it. The hearer might, on the other hand, go along for the conversational ride. Making assumptions about a speaker's intention is the way we communicate. To borrow from an old saying, relevance is in the car of the hearer.

So What's Your Point?—Relevancy in Conversation

Every rare once in a while, I find myself caught in a conversation where the person I'm talking to goes off on a tangent. And I don't mean a little aside. I mean a "What the hell are you talking about!" tangent.

Luckily, for the other 99% of conversations, there are some general guidelines for engagement that help us avoid making mistakes like this one. H. Paul Grice, a language philosopher, is the scholar credited with first writing about these rules in a widespread way. Grice theorized that participants in conversation operate by an overarching approach that we now call *The Cooperative Principle*.

Grice articulated what he saw as the important aspects of cooperation by stating that we should make our contributions to conversations meaningful, relevant, and timely, and we should also be of a mind for letting others participate. It's important to state here that the word "cooperative" does not mean "able to play nice." Rather, it means that interlocutors tend to play by approximately the same set of rules when they get involved in a conversation.

Take for example a non-linguistic instance

enough. Don't say too much.

The Maxim of Quality. This rule counts on our tendencies toward honesty. Be truthful. Don't intentionally mislead your interlocutors.

The Maxim of Manner. We follow this rule to be clear in our speech. We create utterances that don't cloud the issue. One of my high school teachers taught her students an aphorism: "Say what you mean and mean what you say."

The Maxim of Relevance. Probably the most aptly named maxim in the Cooperative Principle, the Relevance Maxim says "stay on topic." Interlocutors generally make contributions to the conversations that add to the topic being explored.

As it turns out though, we rigidly adhere to these maxims only under certain circumstances, like in information exchange. Imagine driving in a city for the first time. You get lost and stop to ask directions.

Driver: We're looking for the concert hall. We're going to see Fleetwood Mac.
Informer: Last year they were adding a new lane onto the interstate.