So What's Your Point? Relevancy in Conversation

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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.

Fortunately for the other 99% of conversations that add to the topic being explored. 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 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, we rigidly adhere to these maxims only under certain circumstances, like in conversation 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.

Informant: Last year they were adding a new lane onto the interstate.

The Relevance Maxim is in danger here. Does the Good Samaritan’s utterance about road construction have anything at all to do with seeing 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, relevancy is in the ear of the hearer.