

## Gricean Principles in a FL class

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### ABSTRACT:

*This paper introduces the maxims of cooperation – Gricean Principles – and their relevance in the FL classroom. The idea stems from the fact that this pragmatic theme underlies any verbal interaction in both its modes, spoken and written. It is argued that FL learners need both structural and pragmatic awareness. Being CP sensitive, a FL learner is likely to overcome much of the pragmatic failure which may lead to communication breakdown.*

**Keywords:** *Maxims of cooperation, CP, FL classroom, assumed shared knowledge conversational implicature, pragmatic failure, pragmatic awareness.*

### INTRODUCTION

It appears too often that if students are able to manage language *usage*, this ability is restricted as to allowing them to interact appropriately ie to manage *use*. Judging their fluency just on the basis of the organization of formal elements within or above the sentence seems incomplete since the major objective is to see their language use tied to social practices. Here the focus is on the degree to which these learners are able to produce/interpret language according to some social conditions.

### GRICEAN PRINCIPLES OR THE MAXIMS OF COOPERATION

Grice's Co-operative Principle (CP) stems from the fact that when people communicate, using language, they do observe a kind of cooperation. CP appears to be some kind of contract that people adhere to when communicating. Adhering to such a contract is likely to lead communicants to match up intended meaning and interpretation. Participants in a piece of communication may, according to Grice (1975) break such a contract when they use language non-conventionally. This may happen in case one of them ignores the appropriate use of the language used; or when one uses that language in a particular way which the other cannot decipher (the case of the figures of speech, idioms and the like).

Grice (ibid) also points out that even in such situations, communication will not stop definitely. Participants will carry on inferring the appropriate meaning until they reach an appropriate interpretation.

Under the head of CP, Grice (ibid) includes a set of maxims that are held to govern the whole business of communication. These maxims, according to Levinson (1983)

‘... specify what participants have to do in order to converse in a maximally efficient, rational, co-operative way: they should speak sincerely, relevantly and clearly, while providing sufficient information.’ (Levinson 1983: 102)

Grice's description of CP builds mainly on *assumed shared knowledge* between participants, who use such *conversational implicatures* (indirect inferences that participants proceed to when communicating) to complete the intended meaning conveyed by their respective utterances. Once participants engage in communication, everyone assumes that the other is coping with such a process of communication, with such a contract. Their coping is

based on an inferring process which keeps working until the addresser's intention and the addressee's interpretation come to convergence.

The process of inferring inherent to the CP can be said to be implied within a Speech Act-based enterprise, in that when language users engage in an illocutionary-act-defining process, they set for themselves some assumptions that they and their fellow-communicators are supposed to share. Moreover, it is this very process which requires of them all to proceed by inference.

'...Austin's account of speech acts naturally meshes in with Grice's account of communication; for both the determination of the illocutionary force of an utterance and implicated message it may be intended to convey depend on shared assumptions by the speaker and hearer (strictly on a set of assumptions which the speaker believes he and the hearer share). Thus it seems that the illocutionary force of an utterance can be seen as one part of the total message implicated.' (Kempson 1977: 72)

The maxims which fall under the CP (Grice 1975) are:

1- *The maxim of quality* (truthfulness):

*-Make your contribution one that is true. Say only what you believe to be true. Do not say what you believe to be false or what you lack adequate evidence.*

2- *The maxim of quantity* (informativeness):

*-Make your contribution as informative as possible. Say no more or no less than is required.*

3- *The maxim of relation* (relevance): Be relevant.

This maxim '*allows one to assign reference to the utterance in context*' (Thomas: 1983).

4- *The maxim of manner* (clearness):

*-Be clear and brief. Avoid disorder, ambiguity and prolixity* (How what is said is to be said).

Also, fall under this same maxim, cases where using language is so anarchical that it is difficult to be understood at all. The maxim of manner, therefore, relates to the *textual rhetoric* (Leech 1983)

In general terms, one could say that the way language should be used in communication reflects the degree of observing the Co-operative Principle by participants. This mutual creative endeavour that participants engage in requires in addition to conventions of the language code, conventions of use that they are assumed to share. In addition to the above maxims, other maxims are held responsible for the success or failure of communication, such as the *Tact* or *Politeness* maxims (Leech 1983). This consists, according to Leech (1977, 1983) essentially in '*giving credit to the other person (positive), and not causing offence to the other person (negative)*'. Observing the last maxim will avoid a great deal of cross-sociocultural misunderstanding between users of different languages

Peccei (1999) illustrates this point as follows:

‘Well, I really must get on with my work now’ (Peccei 1999: 60)  
Instead of saying ‘Go home’.

Leech (1983), also, goes as far as to suggest that FL language studies should incorporate those deeply held values within the target community that may constitute potential cultural ‘offences’.

‘But one thing that cannot be denied is that [pragmatic] principles introduce communicative values, such as truthfulness, into the study of language. Traditionally, linguists have avoided referring to such values, feeling that they undermine one’s claim for objectivity. But so long as the values we consider are ones we suppose, on empirical grounds, to be operative in society, rather than ones we impose on society, then there is no reason to exclude them from our inquiry.’ (Leech 1983: 9-10)

### CP IN FL CLASSROOM

Unlike L1 learners who acquire most of their language naturally, FL learners usually need some formal instruction to build up various aspects of the language under study, including extra-linguistic features. One such feature is that related to their ability to communicate appropriately, observing a set of rules that govern the whole business of communication.

Cases abound where FL students flout unknowingly the TL pragmatic principles, including the CP, despite their good knowledge of its grammar (syntax and semantics). A good ‘dose’ of such a pragmatic principle would do students a lot of ‘good’ to overcome such a problem.

It appears, then, that the relevance of such a principle in a teaching situation is vital. Not only does it help to engage students in a real process of inferring and hence interpreting, but also it gets them to be embedded in socio-cultural settings, so crucial for a pragmatic probing. Besides, House and Kasper (1981) hold that students should be alerted to such pragmatic differences so as to avoid cultural clashes.

‘It seems also to be advisable for the teacher to explicitly point out to the learner that politeness markers are an integral part of the foreign cultural system, and should neither be used nor interpreted by reference to the learner’s native system. More effective teaching of the behavioural component may minimize native cultural interference and prevent impolite, ineffective, or otherwise inappropriate behaviour on the part of the learner.’ (House and Kasper 1981: 184)

Being CP sensitive, polite or tactful, also, requires one, first, to make relevant choices from the language stock of knowledge (grammar). It so often happens that students of weak linguistic knowledge break such principles by making bad linguistic choices. They would choose, for instance, less polite formulas where polite ones are needed. The example given by Peccei (1999), quoted above, illustrates the case.

Our classrooms, unfortunately, do not provide, if at all, for enough CP sensitivity. They make, however, good learning settings for formal grammatical instruction. FL language classrooms have, in fact, proved to be convenient for developing learners’ grammatical more than their pragmatic awareness (Bardovi-Harlig 1999).

The idea is, according to Bardovi-Harlig (ibid), that ‘high levels of grammatical competence do not guarantee concomitant high levels of pragmatic competence’ (ibid: 686).

This being so, some strategies need be worked out towards building up FL students' pragmatic competence. This will cover such areas of pragmatic concern such as CP, speech acts, implicature, shared knowledge, presupposition and the like.

### CONCLUSION

For students to be appropriate, then, in their production and/or interpretation of an utterance means to adhere to a given set of regulating maxims that enable them to co-operate with other participants. These maxims (or principles) are not likely to be understood and appreciated unless students are trained through a set of specially devised classroom tasks aiming to build up the whole communicative competence with pragmatic competence making just one component among others.

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