The Cooperative Principle

Human face-to-face communication is full of exchanges that may appear, at first sight, rather unrelated, such as the following three examples:

(6)  A  Can you tell me the time?  
     B  Well, the milkman has come.  
     (Levinson 1994:83)

(7)  A  I do think Mrs. Jenkins is an old windbag, don’t you?  
     B  Huh, lovely weather for March, isn’t it?  
     (Levinson 1994:111)

(8)  A  Where’s Bill?  
     B  There’s a yellow VW outside Sue’s house.  
     (Levinson 1994:102)

How can we interpret these exchanges? In his ground-breaking lecture “Logic and Conversation” (1975), Herbert P. Grice presents a basic principle that governs human interaction: the so-called Cooperative Principle (CP):

Make your conversational contribution such as is required, at the stage at which it occurs, by the accepted purpose or direction of the talk exchange in which you are engaged.

(Grice 1975:45)

From this principle, four maxims are derived:

The Maxim of Quantity
1. Make your contribution as informative as is required for the current purpose of the exchange.
2. Do not make your contribution more informative than is required.

The Maxim of Quality
Try to make your contribution one that is true, specifically:
1. Do not say anything that you believe to be false.
2. Do not say anything for which you lack adequate evidence.
The Maxim of Relation
Make your contribution relevant.

The Maxim of Manner
Be perspicuous (= be clear). More specifically:
1. Avoid obscurity.
2. Avoid ambiguity.
3. Be brief.
4. Be orderly.

(adapted from Grice 1975:45-46)

When one or more of these maxims are not being observed, as it is the case in examples (6) to (8) above, this gives rise to conversational implicatures. Conversational implicatures are not part of the conventional meaning of what is said. Their interpretation is context-dependent. If somebody violates (or flouts) one or more of the Maxims of Conversation, we are alerted to look for additional information that might help to make the utterance in question meaningful, provided that we have reason to believe that the person who is uttering it is acting rationally and intentionally. Finding such additional information is also known as inferring.

For instance, in example (6), B does not observe the Maxim of Relation. Well, the milkman has come is, at first sight, not a relevant answer to the question Can you tell me the time? However, we are able to bridge the gap between what is said and what is meant by interpreting B's answer as a cooperative attempt of giving A at least some helpful hint if not the exact time. Apparently, B does not know the exact time but knows that A knows the time at which the milkman usually comes and will interpret B's utterance accordingly. This is what we can infer from B's reply.

Example (7) is another example for the violation of the Maxim of Relation. B's reply Huh, lovely weather for March, isn't it? bears no obvious relevance to A's remark I do think Mrs. Jenkins is an old windbag, don't you? But it may implicate a warning for A, who is backbiting Mrs Jenkins and possibly about to go on with it. Alarmed by B's irrelevant remark, A can infer that B's utterance might mean something like Watch out, her nephew's standing right behind you.

Occasionally, more than one maxim is violated at the same time. This is the case in example (8). When B answers There's a yellow
VW outside Sue’s house to A’s question Where’s Bill?, he or she flouts both the Maxim of Quantity and the Maxim of Relation. But his or her answer is at the same time co-operative and effort-saving. Obviously, B knows that A knows that Bill owns a yellow VW. If the yellow VW outside Sue’s house is his, Bill may well be in Sue’s house. But B avoids such a lengthy reply by simply producing an utterance that enables A to infer what B does not say explicitly.

All in all, these examples show that finding out about speakers’ communicative intentions plays an important role for our interpretation of utterances. At the same time, human communication is also about making things happen in the real world. Such aspects of meaning in interaction are discussed in speech act theory.

### 7.4 Speech Acts

**Utterances as Actions**

Take the simple utterance It’s cold in here. What does it mean? Who could say it to whom in what situation? At first sight, this is a statement about the temperature in a particular room. However, this is not always the communicative intention with which this declarative sentence is uttered. Most people who say It’s cold in here to another person will want this person to do something about the cold. In this case It’s cold in here may mean Could you please close the window? or Could you please turn on the heating? or Could you please lend me one of your famous hand-knitted sweaters? In short, the utterance may serve as a polite request for some appropriate action in order to make the speaker more comfortable. Depending on the relationship between the participants of the conversation, it could also be used as a command.

As we have seen, utterances can be used to perform actions. **Actions performed via utterances**, such as requesting, threatening, or thanking, are based on speech acts. The systematic study of speech acts is based on speech act theory. Speech act theory has its roots in thoughts formulated by John L. Austin in *How to Do Things with Words* (1962) and John R. Searle in *Speech Acts. An Essay in the Philosophy of Language* (1969).

All actions performed by utterances can be divided into three related acts: the **locutionary act**, the **illocutionary act**, and the **perlocutionary act**. The **locutionary act** is the physical act of pro-
roducing understandable language that may be regarded as meaningful within a given context. Consider the indirect request *Do you know where I left my textbook?*

What we intend to do by producing an utterance is called the illocutionary act, i.e., in this case the intention of asking for information.

The cognitive or emotional effect an illocutionary act has on an addressee or addressees in reality is called the perlocutionary act (or perlocutionary effect).

As you can see in Fig. 7.5 - 7.7, the locutionary and the illocutionary act are within our control, whereas the perlocutionary act is not. In these examples, the first speaker’s illocutionary act of requesting succeeds because the speaker has managed to produce
an utterance that is suitable to convey her communicative intention, even though the perlocutionary effect is negative. This communicative intention is often called the *ilocutionary force*.

Generally, linguists distinguish between several main types of speech acts, to describe what humans may do by performing these acts. We use *representatives* (or *assertives*) to make statements about the world (*Germany is a country in Europe*); *directives* like requests or commands to get others to perform certain actions, e.g. to do us a favour, or to answer our questions (*Please send me an e-mail*); *commissives* like promises or threats to inform others about our future actions (*I will write to you every day*); *expressives* like greetings, thanks and congratulations to express our feelings (*Hi!, Thank you! or Happy birthday!*); and *declarations* for actions that are performed by pronouncing the appropriate formula, e.g. marrying a couple or baptising somebody.

![Speech Act Types](image)

*Speech Act types – an overview*

There are certain preconditions that need to be fulfilled if a speech act is to succeed. These preconditions are called *felicity conditions*. Accordingly, speech acts can be *felicitous* or *infelicitous*. For instance, for a felicitous request, the following criteria must be fulfilled:

**Fig. 7.9**

*Felicity conditions for requests*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Content</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Future act (A) to be performed by the hearer (H).</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Preparatory conditions</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>H is able to do A.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The speaker (S) believes that H is able to do A.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>It is not obvious to both S and H that H will do A in the normal course of events of her or his own accord.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Sincerity condition
S wants H to do A.

Essential condition
Counts as an attempt to get H to do A.

(based on Searle 1969:66-67)

The felicity conditions of commands are similar to those of requests. Additionally, commands have the preparatory condition that the speaker must be in a position of authority over the hearer. In this case, the preparatory condition of non-obviousness becomes less relevant.

Declarations are only felicitous if the speaker is actually in a position that entitles her or him to perform the desired action, and that the formula used actually counts as performing the action within a particular culture. For instance, you cannot baptise or marry others unless you have the authority to do so because of your profession. Additionally, you have to utter the relevant formula for baptising or marrying. Jenny Thomas (1995:43) cites a newspaper report about a Muslim actor in Pakistan who unintentionally divorced his wife while playing a movie character who divorced his movie wife by pronouncing the corresponding phrase Talaq 'I divorce you' the ritual three times required for a divorce. As his real spouse played the movie wife and the religious authorities insisted that the actor's words could not be withdrawn, even though they were uttered in a work of art, the divorce became valid.

Linguists distinguish between direct speech acts and indirect speech acts. Direct speech acts are associated with corresponding basic sentence types (cf. section 5.2). For instance, declarative sentences are commonly used for representative (or assertive) speech acts. Interrogative sentences are commonly used for questions (which are often interpreted as subtypes of directive speech acts, because they can be seen as requests for information). Imperative sentences are associated with directive speech acts, and exclamative sentences are used for expressive speech acts:
Indirect speech acts are speech acts that depart from this pattern. For instance, declarative sentences may be used as indirect directives, either in order to avoid giving orders, as in the above-mentioned utterance It’s cold in here for Close the window, or, in some social contexts, to intensify the force of a command, as in the following example from Feelgood:

As you have seen in Sections 7.1 to 7.4, pragmatics examines how we can interpret and produce utterances to identify and create meaning in social contexts. However, most of the examples used so far were made up by linguists or playwrights. If that makes you suspicious because you wonder whether people really talk and act this way, you may benefit from the methods of conversation analysis.

7.5 Conversation Analysis

At the end of the 1960s, a group of sociologists developed a growing interest in gathering and analyzing authentic language data. This led to a new discipline called Conversation Analysis (CA). Conversation Analysis concentrates on data from everyday life,