The universality of conversational postulates

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ABSTRACT

Grice's analysis of conversational maxims and implicatures is examined in the light of Malagasy language and ways of speaking. A cultural contrast in primary assumptions is described. Grician analysis retains usefulness but within the perspective of a comparative typology in which locally valid systems may differ strikingly in what is marked and unmarked. An ethnographic base and ethnological comparison are required. The situation somewhat resembles the situation with regard to grammatical categories addressed by Boas (1911) and Sapir (1921). (Conversational postulates, ways of speaking; English (US), Malagasy (Madagascar)). (DH)

CONVERSATIONAL MAXIM AND CONVERSATIONAL IMPLICATURE

In the past several years, linguists interested in the interpretation of whole utterances have made use of a number of concepts developed by philosophers -- concepts such as speech act, illocutionary force and performative. More recently, some linguists (Gordon & Lakoff 1971; Lakoff 1973; Heringer 1972, among others) have shown interest in philosophical ideas concerning the organization of conversation. In particular, there has been a great deal of discussion centering around ideas of Paul Grice as set forth in lectures entitled 'Logic and conversation' (1968). In developing such notions, philosophers likely reflect on conversational conduct as it operates in their own society. The qualification is not explicit however, and principles of conversational procedure are presented as universal in application. In this paper, we examine the validity of this assumption, focusing on the work of Grice, in particular on his notion of conversational maxim and conversational implicature. We shall examine these concepts in regard to a non-western society, that of the plateaus area of Madagascar.[1]

In Lecture 2 of 'Logic and conversation', Grice presents the idea that certain inferences we make from utterances arise from our expectations concerning everyday conversational behavior. There is a certain code of behavior we expect interlocutors to follow. We expect them to conform to certain *conversational*

[1] From June 1969 to September 1970 I carried out anthropological fieldwork in a small village in Vakinankaratra, Madagascar. This research was supported by NIMH Research Fellowship (ITO. MA 43716–01) and Field Research Training Grant (IFOL MH 12049–01).

maxims. One such maxim is 'Be relevant'. That is, interlocutors are expected to make their utterances relevant to the topic or direction of the conversation at hand. When interlocutor A makes a comment or asks a question, he expects his conversational partner to attend to that remark and respond in a relevant manner, and he makes certain inferences based on this expectation. For example, if A says, 'The football match is canceled', and B responds, 'There is an energy crisis', A, assuming that B is following normal conversational practice and has addressed his remark to the topic proposed, may interpret B's utterance as providing a reason why the football match is canceled. Another way of putting this is to say that in the wake of A's utterance, B's utterance implies that the energy crisis is in some way related to the canceling of the football match. Implications based on our expectation of normal conversational conduct are referred to as *conversational implicatures* in Grice's analysis. They contrast with implications based on the truth conditions of utterances. That is, the notion, *conversationally implies*, is contrasted with the notion, *logically implies*. We say that certain utterances *logically imply* another just in case the truth of these utterances guarantees the truth of the other. For example, if an utterance A: 'All public events require an admissions fee' is true and an utterance B: 'Football matches are public events' is true, then Q: 'Football matches require an admissions fee' is true. That is, A and B logically imply Q. The implication does not depend on conversational procedure.

One characteristic of logical implication as used in standard logic (not various modal logics) is that it is not culture-dependent or situation dependent. The implication holds wherever individuals agree on the conventional meanings of the logical words (e.g. *all, not, some, and, if-then*, etc.) The same cannot be said for conversational implicatures. It is an empirical question as to whether in all societies and in all situations, independent observers agree on the conversational implicature of a given utterance, since the implicature depends on how the utterer is expected to behave with respect to conversational maxims, and these may vary situationally and cross-culturally.

Conversational Maxim: be informative

In this section, let us focus on one particular maxim suggested by Grice as basic to the exchange of utterances in conversation. Grice suggests that participants in a conversation are expected to make their utterances as informative as required by the exchange at hand. The maxim as it stands is not helpful, for it can never be violated. The constraint 'required by the exchange' can be stretched to justify the kind or amount of information in each given case. For example, a speaker may provide information that intentionally confuses or misleads the hearer, but one could include the speaker's intention to deceive as part of the definition of the exchange. The speaker, conforming to the requirements of the exchange so defined, would not be violating the maxim: 'Be informative'. Likewise, one can

build into the definition of the situation, intentions of speakers to provide no information or to subtly allude to certain information (Albert 1964). The speaker in each case would be conforming to the requirements of the exchange as defined by himself or by social convention.

When Grice later illustrates the maxim (Lecture 2: 15), he presents a more precise interpretation: Interlocutors are expected to meet the informational needs of their interactional partner(s). That is, if a speaker has access to the information required by the hearer, then he is expected to communicate that information to the hearer. This is in part what it means to 'cooperate' (Lecture 2: 7) in talk. The maxim leads one to expect that when one interlocutor requests specific information, the conversational partner will provide that information insofar as able. The verbal response to such a request may conversationally imply what the utterer knows about the material requested. Thus, for example, if speaker A asks, 'Where is your mother?' and B responds, 'She is either in the house or at the market', then B's utterance conversationally implies that he does not know specifically where his mother is located. He knows only that she is located in one of two places. If speaker B in fact does know in which of the two locations one could find his mother, he has misled the co-present interlocutor and so violated the maxim.

Almost as soon as one presents this interpretation, members of this society can offer cases in which interlocutors do not abide by the maxim. One does not conform to the maxim if to do so would be indiscrete, impolite, unethical and so on. Grice argues that these maxims are appropriate to conversations in which 'a maximally effective exchange of information' is the desired intention of interlocutors (Lecture 2: 9). Further, he argues that this intention underlies most talk-exchanges and is basic to cooperative interactions: '...talkers will in general (ceteris paribus and in the absence of indications to the contrary) proceed in the manner which these principles prescribe' (Lecture 2: 10). That is, unless the context indicates otherwise, interlocutors normally assume that the maxims are being followed.

In testing the maxim 'Be informative' cross-culturally, we do not expect to find that in some societies the maxim always holds and in some societies the maxim never holds. It is improbable, for example, that there is some society in which being informative is categorically inappropriate. Differences between societies, if there are any, are more likely to be differences in specification of domains in which the maxim is expected to hold and differences in the degree to which members are expected to conform to this maxim. In some societies, meeting the informational needs of a conversational partner may be relatively unmarked or routine behavior. In other societies, meeting another's informational needs may be relatively unexpected or marked behavior. Let us consider the way in which this principle operates in a Malagasy society, first, with respect to its markedness and, secondly, with respect to its domains of application.

CONVERSATIONAL PRACTICE IN MADAGASCAR

To what extent does the maxim 'Be informative' hold for interlocutors in Malagasy society? Despite certain clashes with other maxims, are members generally expected to satisfy the informational needs of co-conversationalists? No. Interlocutors regularly violate this maxim. They regularly provide less information than is required by their conversational partner, even though they have access to the necessary information. If A asks B, 'Where is your mother?' and B responds, 'She is either in the house or at the market', B's utterance is not usually taken to imply that B is unable to provide more specific information needed by the hearer. The implicature is not made, because the expectation that speakers will satisfy informational needs is not a basic norm.

There are two reasons for this. The first is related to *the status of new information in this society*. New information is a rare commodity. Villages are composed of groups of kinsmen whose genealogical backgrounds and family lives are public knowledge. Their day-to-day activities are shaped to a large extent by the yearly agricultural cycle. Almost every activity of a personal nature (bathing, play, courtship, etc.) takes place under public gaze. Information that is not already available to the public is highly sought after. If one manages to gain access to 'new' information, one is reluctant to reveal it. As long as it is known that one has that information and others do not, one has some prestige over them.

When one member of the community requests specific information from another, the addressee is usually reluctant to part with that information for this reason. It is unlikely, therefore, that the informational needs of the requestor will be immediately satisfied. In fact, interlocutors are generally aware of the reluctance to depart with requested information. They *expect* the response of the addressee to be less than satisfactory. Normally, if the information requested is not immediately provided, the two interlocutors enter into a series of exchanges whereby the one tries to eke out the new information from the other.

A second and perhaps more significant motivation for revealing less information than would satisfy the addressee is *the fear of committing oneself explicitly to some particular claim*. Individuals regularly *avoid* making explicit statements about beliefs and activities. They do not want to be responsible for the information communicated. For example, if someone asks, 'Who broke the cup?', most speakers would not like to be the one to specify the culprit. Such a statement may have unforeseen unpleasant consequences for him and his family, and he alone would have to shoulder the *tsiny* (the 'guilt') for uttering such a claim. Only if the individual is assured that his statement will not bring *tsiny* will a major accusation be made. For example, one elder told me:

Even if someone was caught in the act of doing something wrong, then you cannot directly point at this person to dishonor him directly. You must use special expressions or go about it in a roundabout way. But, if by chance there

are people who demand that this wrongdoer be pointed out directly, then the speaker must say directly in his talk who the person is. But because he must speak directly, then the speaker must ask the people to lift all *tsiny* from him. If there is someone in the audience who wants to know more, who doesn't understand, then he may respond during a break in the talk: 'It is not clear to us, sir. It is hard to distinguish the domestic cat from the wild cat. They are the same whether calico or yellow or grey. And if it is the wild cat who steals the chicken but the domestic cat gets its tail cut off. So point directly to the wild cat.'

Future Events

It is not only to past events that individuals are reluctant to make explicit reference. There is a clear tendency to avoid making a specific commitment to some future event. Thus, if a member of household X asks a member of household Y when the turning of the ancestral bones is to take place, he will likely get an answer such as 'I am not certain' or 'In a bit' or 'Around September' but no precise date will be specified even if such a date has been set. Individuals do not wish to commit themselves publicly to a precise date until they are absolutely certain the event will take place at that time. They may suffer tremendous loss of face if the event does not take place as specified. They will be guilty of premature or faulty judgment. Consequently, those outside the family are told only at the last moment details of time and place of the event.

This same fear of committing oneself to some future event taking place leads one to hold back certain information when warning, advising and giving directions. Thus if speaker A asks speaker B 'How does one open this door?', speaker B may respond with the instruction 'If one doesn't open it from the inside, the door won't open'. That is, speaker B tells speaker A that if he doesn't do X, then Y will not take place. He is not making the stronger commitment and stating that if A *does* do X, then Y will take place: If you open it from the inside, the door will open. Again the speaker is unwilling to commit himself to the stronger statement, as he cannot guarantee that the action will take place as instructed. He makes a weaker statement using the double negative 'If not X, then not Y'. The double negative is used in response to many questions seeking information. Thus, when I once asked an elderly woman when I might find her brother at home, she gave me this answer, 'If you don't come after five, you won't find him'. She was not willing to guarantee that if I did come after five, I would find him. She simply told me what would lead to my not finding this man. In both of these situations, the speaker has not made his contribution sufficiently informative to meet the purposes of the interlocutor.

Personal Reference

The hesitation to make explicit statements concerning the actions and beliefs

of individuals affects a wide range of speech behaviors. One finds, for example, that speakers regularly avoid identifying an individual in their utterances. Many villagers feel that in identifying an individual, they may bring his identity to the attention of unfriendly forces. Someone in the world of the living or dead may overhear the utterance and take note of the individual referenced. Something unpleasant may befall the individual as a consequence of this specification. The *tsiny* would rest with the utterer. Consequently, terms of personal reference that specify individuals as distinct from other members of the community are avoided in favor of terms that do not make this distinction. For example, speakers generally avoid referring to individuals by their personal name given to them at birth. This practice is a virtual taboo in the case where the individual referenced is a child. It is felt, for example, that such a practice can lead to malevolent ancestral forces taking the child away from the living. Every effort is therefore made to obscure the identity of the child and, to make it as unattractive to these ancestral forces as possible. Normally, after an official Malagasy name is given to the child, a second name is given as well. This name is usually a term referring to some unpleasant item – for example, a small child may be called 'Garbage Girl' or 'Garbage Boy', 'Dung Heap', 'Dwarf', 'Dog Face', 'Red Face' and so on. Furthermore, this name is usually shared by a number of children. When a speaker refers to a child as 'Dwarf', he could be talking about any of several children. The addressee is to identify the referent from other cues. In highly missionized areas and in areas where children regularly attend school, a third name is given. This name is a French Christian name – Suzanne, Jean, Marie, Philippe and so on. This name, however, operates in much the same way that the Malagasy nickname does. Like the nickname, the French name is usually adopted by several children in a village. Thus, a village could have half a dozen boys named Jean and several girls with the name Marie. When one speaks of individuals using these names, one is not marking out one individual as distinct from others. The sensitivity towards one's personal name decreases as one grows older. However, even when one is an adult, one does not like one's name to be casually handled. There remains a strong feeling that unfavorable events that befall an individual are associated with the meddling of malevolent forces. It is not unusual for an adult to change his name following some unpleasant circumstance. In fact, in the past, name-changing was a frequent occurrence (six or seven times in a lifetime). At present there exists a national law that limits to three the number of name changes per person.

If one avoids the use of personal names, what are the preferred alternatives of personal reference? One alternative is to refer to the individual by some generalized animate noun. A noun referring to some social category of which the referent is a member is used. For example, members of a village may refer to one another as *olona* (person), *zazavavy* (girl), *zazalahy* (boy), *ray aman-dreny* (elder), and so on. Thus, a mother once asked her son *Mbola mator y ve ny*

olona? ('Is the person still sleeping?') in reference to her husband. And a mother once asked her daughter to fetch *ny kulatin'ny olona* ('the person's pants'), where 'the person' referred to the daughter's sister. Likewise, a young boy once said to me, *Misy zazavavy ho avy* ('There is a girl who is coming') and 'girl' referred to the boy's sister.

Such use of personal reference is clearly distinct from the use of personal reference in our society.[2] When someone in American society says 'There is a girl coming' or 'I see a girl' or 'I see a person', the hearer infers that the speaker is not intimately associated with the referent. In fact, Grice cites precisely this usage as an example of a conversational implicature that may hold in all contexts. He states 'Anyone who uses a sentence of the form "X is meeting a woman this evening" would normally implicate that the person to be met was someone other than X's wife, mother, sister, or perhaps even close platonic friend...The implicature is present because the speaker has failed to be specific in a way in which he might have been expected to be specific, with the consequence that it is likely to be assumed that he is not in a position to be specific' (22/23). In this society we ordinarily distinguish in speech individuals with whom we have an intimate relationship from others with whom we do not share this kind of relationship. We expect speakers to note in their utterance intimate relationships such as kin ties, friendship ties and so on. We infer from the absence of such specification that such ties do not hold between speaker and referent. The same cannot be said of speakers and hearers in Malagasy society. When someone in a Malagasy village says, 'I see a person', those listening do not infer that the speaker is not closely associated with the referent. Such a format is simply a conventionalized mode of personal reference. It is a way of referring to an individual without bringing harm to him or shame to the speaker himself.

This difference in conversational implicature is seen in the other Malagasy alternatives of personal reference as well. For example, a second mode of personal reference that is preferred is the use of agent nouns. Thus, a speaker may refer to a closely associated person as 'cow watcher' or 'house builder' or 'teacher' or 'student', etc. A woman could refer to her husband as 'cow watcher', as in the utterance, 'The cow watcher is coming'. Or a young boy could refer to his father as a 'house builder' as in the utterance 'The house builder is hungry'. Normally, in our society speakers do not refer to intimate relationships in this manner. If a young child were to utter this same sentence in our society, we would infer that no special relationship held between speaker and referent, or that some private joke or expressive point was involved, beyond reference.

Another preferred mode of personal reference is the use of the indefinite pronoun 'someone'. No lexical item corresponding to this term actually exists in

[2] The phrase 'our society' will be used as a loose cover term for middle-class academic society of Europe and the United States.

Malagasy. The indefinite is implied but not specified in the utterance. For example the utterance, *Misy mitady* translates literally as 'There is looking'. However, it is understood in the sense of 'There is someone looking'. Again the suppressed indefinite is used to refer to those intimately related to the speaker as well as to those remotely known to the speaker. Thus, a speaker may be speaking of his brother or wife or close friend in the utterance above. In our society, however, a speaker who says 'There is someone looking' implicates that he does not know who that someone is.

Personal Reference and Grammatical Voice

It is clear from these examples that speakers regularly mask the exact identity of individuals in their utterances. At best, identity is implied, rather than made explicit. (Sapir's term 'person-implication' could be extended to such usage (1915 [1949: 179]). If they must specify an individual, they do so in the least specific sense. In fact, if at all possible, they try to omit any reference to individuals in their utterances. The deletion is made possible by a careful selection of verb voice. In Malagasy, there exist three voices in which a speaker may couch his utterance. Like Indo-European languages, Malagasy has an active voice in which the performer of an action is the subject of the sentence. For example:

(1) *Nanasa ny vilia tamin'ny savony iBozy.*[3]
    washed the dishes with the soap Bozy
    (Bozy washed the dishes with the soap.)

Secondly, like Indo-European languages, Malagasy has a passive voice in which the object of the active sentence is made the superficial subject: For example, it is possible to take the direct object *ny vilia* ('the dishes') and make it the subject of a passive sentence:

(2) *Nosasan-iBozy tamin'ny savony ny vilia.*
    Washed-by-Bozy with the soap the dishes.
    (The dishes were washed by Bozy with the soap).

Furthermore, in the passive voice, it is possible to delete the personal agent of the action entirely; for example,

(3) *Nosasana tamin'ny savony ny vilia.*
    Washed with the soap the dishes.
    (The dishes were washed with the soap.)

Given the prevalent attitude towards personal reference, it is not surprising that passive sentences are preferred over the active form. Passive sentences allow

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3] Underlining indicates subject of sentence.

the speaker to omit certain critical information, namely individual agents of actions. Active sentences do not provide this option.

The option of deleting the personal agent is available in yet another voice, the circumstantial. In this voice, some circumstance of the action taking place is made the superficial subject. For example, the time or place of an action, the instrument with which an action is carried out – any such complement may be made the subject. Thus in (3) above, it is possible to take the instrument with which the action is carried out, *ny savony* ('the soap') and make it the subject of a circumstantial sentence:

(4) *Nanasan'iBazy ny vilia ny savony.*
    Washed-with-by-Bozy the dishes the soap.
    (The soap was washed-with the dishes by Bozy)

It is possible to restate this sentence with the personal agent deleted:

(5) *Nanasana ny vilia ny savony.*
    Washed-with the dishes the soap
    (The soap was washed-with the dishes.)

Whenever speakers wish to avoid specifying individual agents of actions and whenever it is grammatically possible, the passive and circumstantial voices are used.

This preference for passive and circumstantial forms is not well understood by local Europeans. Most grammars of Malagasy written for Europeans begin with an explanation of the active voice. Somewhere around the middle follows a description of the passive form. The last pages may make mention of the circumstantial voice. Many of the grammars are written by Europeans who have assumed that the active voice plays the same role in Malagasy as it does in Indo-European languages. Consequently many European residents learn only the active sentence form. Malagasy villagers who come into contact with these Europeans find their speech offensive and much too direct. European speech is generally stereotyped as brusque and impolite. It is clear that in many cases Malagasy speakers provide less information than a European speaker would provide. If a European knows the name of an individual or time or place an event is to take place, he normally specifies this in his utterance. A Malagasy speaker normally does not specify these things. The expectations of interlocutors, then, differ in the two societies. And consequently, conversational implicatures differ in these societies.

SITUATIONAL CONSTRAINTS ON THE MAXIM

It would be misleading to conclude that the maxim 'Be informative' does not operate at all in a Malagasy community. We would not be justified in proposing

the contrary maxim 'Be uninformative' as a local axiom. Members of this speech community do not regularly expect that interlocutors will withhold necessary information. Rather, it is simply that they do not have the contrary expectation that in general interlocutors will satisfy one another's informational needs.

One can point to certain features of the speech situation that do influence the direction of one's expectation. The expectation that a speaker will observe such a norm varies according to context. Three dimensions of the speech situation influence adherence to or abandonment of the maxim:

(1) *The significance of the information communicated.* A speaker is more likely to withhold information when that information is significant than when it is not significant. Significance has to do first with the independent access of the hearer to the information. Information which the hearer can easily obtain independent of the speaker is not significant. For example, a pot of rice cooking on a fire is open to inspection by any member of the community. Information relevant to its cooking can easily be obtained and hence such information is not significant. Its relative insignificance means that it is likely to be discussed openly and explicitly. If someone asks, 'Is the rice cooked?', a straightforward response is likely to be provided. That is, it is likely that members of the community will follow the maxim 'Be informative'.

Information to which the hearer has no independent access becomes thereby more significant. For example, if only two members of a village of fifty inhabitants go to market one day, then those two alone have information relating to market events that day. Possessing significant information, they may well be reluctant to impart details to those who do not have it. If some member of the community asks a returning villager, 'What's new at the market?', he is likely to get an informationally unsatisfactory response. For example, one is likely to respond 'There is nothing new' or 'There were many people' (n.b. there are always many people at the market). In this context, then, the maxim is likely to be disregarded.

A second dimension of significance has to do with the consequences of imparting information. If imparting certain information may incur unpleasant consequences for speaker or referent, then that information is significant. For example, any information whose communication may bring *tsiny* ('guilt') to the speaker and *henatra* ('shame') to the speaker's family is significant *information*. Information relating to the misdeeds of individuals falls into this category. Consequently, speakers are generally reluctant to speak openly on such a topic. If certain information is not likely to lead to unpleasant consequences, then that information can be considered relatively insignificant. When communicating this latter kind of information, interlocutors tend to be more open and specific. When the utterance precludes the possibility of *tsiny*, then the speaker is more likely to satisfy the informational needs of the addressee.

(2) *The interpersonal relationship obtaining between interlocutors.* Speakers are more likely to satisfy the informational needs of the hearer if speaker and hearer stand in some socially close relationship with one another than if they are not familiar with each other. Those who are close kinsmen and neighbors (*havana*) are more likely to provide explicit information to one another than would distant (*havan-davitra*) or strangers (*vahiny*). Thus, for example, a *havana* of the kinsmen speaker is more likely to satisfy the question, 'Where is your mother?' than someone who stands in a *vahiny* relation to the speaker. (This is not to say that it is likely that the *havana* will answer explicitly, only that the probability of his doing so is greater than if the addressee were a *vahiny*.) *Havana* are tied by a network of moral and social bonds. They are ritually and economically obligated to one another in a way *vahiny* are not (Bloch 1971). It is felt that *havana* can be more trusted than *vahiny*. Thus, there is a feeling of mutual mistrust among villages in regional cooperative enterprises, because these organizations include *vahiny* as well as *havana*. For this reason among others, such cooperative enterprises have not been successful. One verbal expression of the attitude is the reluctance of an interlocutor to meet the informational needs of a co-present *vahiny*. Speakers are reluctant to specify details of agents and activities, because they are not certain what the hearer will do with the information. The speaker cannot guarantee that the hearer will not use the information to damage the reputations of speaker or referent. This difference in attitude influences the use of personal reference terminology. Interlocutors are more likely to use terms that distinguish individuals (e.g. personal names) if speaker, addressee and referent stand in a *havana* relationship than if a *vahiny* relationship obtains between any two. The tendency to mask the identity of the referent (general animate nouns, agent nouns, indefinite pronouns) increases as the social distance between interlocutors (and referent) increases. Speakers are careful that they do not bring the identity of an individual to the attention of those they mistrust.

(3) *The sex of the speaker.* The conversational principle 'Make your contribution informative' is more likely to be upheld by women than by men. Women are more likely to satisfy the informational needs of hearers. They are more likely to reveal details of events of the past or future. This behavior is not, however, well regarded by members of the speech community. Both men and women say that women have a *lavalela* ('a long tonue'). This long tongue may reveal things which should not have been revealed. Statements which women make may offend others and bring shame and loss of face to the family. In general, women are not trusted to communicate information in formal social situations. They are never recruited as principal spokesmen to represent the family on ritual occasions. These occasions require careful speech, speech which will not offend or bring *tsiny* ('guilt') to the family. Men pride themselves on

eir ability to speak cautiously and inoffensively. They feel that they alone can
speechmakers.

The status of speechmaker is highly regarded in the community. Men who are
od speechmakers are considered *tena ray-amn-dreny* (high elders, knowledge-
le individuals). Men, then, strive to achieve this position. To be recruited, a
in must use language in the manner demanded of oratorical situations. That is,
must use language that does not injure the reputation of any individual.
Women are excluded from this respected position, and their style of speaking
not motivated by the possibility that they might qualify for it. In this sense,
ey have less to lose by speaking explicitly and offensively. In fact, they often
ve something to gain by speaking in a less than ideal manner. They are able to
ike accusations (e.g. to answer the question, 'Who broke the cup?'), to gossip,
criticize others. In short, they are able to gain considerable power from the
:t that they are able to hold others accountable for their actions.
In Malagasy society, then, the same utterance may have different conversa-
nal implicatures, depending on whether the speaker is a man or a woman. For
imple, in response to an information question 'When are you going to market?',
esponse such as 'Either today or tomorrow' may be interpreted differently,
pending on the sex of the speaker (as well as other features of the non-linguistic
vironment). If it is a woman, the response may conversationally implicate
it the speaker does not have further knowledge of the matter at hand, for a
man may be expected to answer the question fully if they have the information
sired. This is not the case with men.

INCIPLES, MAXIMS, AND GOOD ETHNOGRAPHY

iving pursued the operation of one Gricean maxim in one society, we can see
it assessing its status is no easy matter. We have seen, for example, that
ether a Malagasy conforms to the maxim 'Be informative' or not depends on
tain socially relevant features of the interactional setting. Grice, among others
ikoff 1973; Atlas & Levinson 1973) has noted the possibility that a maxim
y not be adhered to in certain contexts in our society (Lecture 2: 12). It may,
fact, be the case that the situational constraints suggested for Malagasy
iety affect the maxim in Western societies as well. For example, the constraint
significant information' applies to both societies. In our society, speakers tend
: to satisfy the informational needs of addressees if so doing bears unpleasant
isequences for them. Further, the constraint of 'speaker–hearer relationship'
pears relevant here. Whether or not one is expected to 'Be informative' varies
irmously with the social roles of interlocutors. Many professional roles (e.g.
yers, priests, press agents), for example, demand that the occupiers of these
:s 'Be discreet' rather than 'Be informative' in certain cases.
The specific situational constraints operating in our society need serious

investigation. Without such a set of constraints proposed for this society, it
becomes extremely difficult to assess the cross-cultural operation of Grice's
maxims. To be sure, we cannot imagine that the efficient exchange of information
is not required to some extent in all societies. *The interesting point of comparison
lies in the extent to which such exchanges are characteristic and/or desirable.*

Using two of the constraints suggested above, we can make some headway
towards such a comparison. For example, while 'significant information'
influences the speaker in our society and in Malagasy society, the scope of signifi-
cance varies. In Madagascar, the relative accessibility of information is critical
to assessing significance. As noted, information which is not easily available to
the hearer is significant. Given that most communication involves eliciting
information whose content is not known to hearers, much of the communication
in a Malagasy community is characterized by speakers' reluctance to impart
information. In many talk-exchanges, Malagasy interlocutors are simply
uninformative. While relative accessibility is a factor affecting the imparting of
information in our society, it is not as pervasive as in Malagasy society. We may
be reluctant to impart information that is 'confidential' or 'secret' or 'privileged',
but we do regularly impart information that our hearer is not aware of and/or
has little access to.

Grice tantalizes the ethnographer with the possibility of an etic grid for
conversation. However, no ethnographer can be happy with the paradigm as
expressed in 'Logic and conversation'. The conversational maxims are not
presented as working hypotheses but as social facts: 'It is just a well-recognized
empirical fact that people do behave in these ways, they have learnt to do so in
childhood and have not lost the habit of doing so' (Lecture 2: 10). Serious
research into conversational practice has only recently gotten underway. At
best we have restricted analyses of certain dimensions of conversation (illo-
cutionary force, sequencing, situated meaning, etc.). It is difficult for those with
experience in the analysis of conversation to accept Grice's proposal by fiat.

But Grice does offer a framework in which the conversational principles of
different speech communities can be compared. We can, in theory, take any one
maxim and note when it does and does not hold. The motivation for its use or
abuse may reveal values and orientations that separate one society from another
and that separate social groups (e.g. men, women, kinsmen, strangers) within a
single society.

More importantly, Grice's work orients us to pursue the stronger goal of
assessing universal conversational principles. Many of those carrying out re-
search in language use are ethnographers. Their work by tradition attends to
speech interaction in a particular ethnographic area. The value of Grice's
proposal is that it provides a point of departure for ethnographers who wish to
integrate their observations, and to propose stronger hypotheses related to
general principles of conversation.

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