Pragmatics of the 'Social Man' in Talk Exchanges

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Abstract

   Gricean pragmatics focuses on speaker-intended meaning as retrieved or reconstructed by the hearer. It explicates the retrieval or reconstruction as a 'rational' process, guided by Cooperative Principle and attendant maxims; that is, the speaker and hearer share a rational basis in the conduct of their verbal behaviour. The social agents who are actually carrying out socially constrained and socially consequential actions through verbal means are theorized into rational beings situated outside social concerns. This is a theoretical rationalization which obscures both the social origin of the principles and the social nature of the parties involved in any talk exchange.

   This paper will argue that an adequate framework for analyzing conversation needs to restore the 'social man' (using Halliday's term in counterpoint to Gricean 'rational man'). This restoration is to take account of both the rational *and* the social, normative aspects of conversation. This paper proposes to consider Grice's theory of conversation from the normative perspective, which may be meaningful when we use Grice's theory to analyze conversation that takes place in a social context. The paper explores these more theoretical issues in pragmatics through stylistic analysis of fictional interaction in African American novels. Particular reference is made to interactions involving the black protagonists in Richard Wright's novels *Native Son* and *Black Boy*. The analysis highlights the importance of *socially situated* people in the transmission of information.

Key Words: pragmatics; 'social man'; normative; African American novel; Richard Wright

1. Introduction

   The basis for Grice's Cooperative Principle and attendant maxims is rationality. Under the dominance of the model of rationality, conversation is explained merely in terms of information exchange without taking account of social factors. To begin with, Grice does not consider interpersonal factors (Davies, 2007: 2329). Conversation is conceptualized as in the classical communication model involving 'talking heads' addressing their listening counterparts (Mey, 2000: 233). As Brown and Levinson (1987) observe, 'the CP defines an "unmarked" or socially neutral (indeed asocial) presumptive framework for communication' (5). In Grice's account, conversation participants only have the property of rationality but people are not only rational beings but more essentially social beings. Grice's theory is not adequate, and not intended to be adequate, for explaining conversation, as Grice (1989) acknowledges: 'It is the rationality or irrationality of conversational conduct which I have been concerned to track down rather than any more general characterization of conversational adequacy. So we may expect principles of conversational rationality to abstract from the special character of conversational interests' (369).

   The work of politeness theorists demonstrates that politeness is as important, if not more important, a consideration as information transfer. Politeness considerations

can overrule the conversational maxims, including the quality maxim, as in white lies. In her pioneering work on politeness, Lakoff (1973) subsumes Grice's rules of conversation in rules of Politeness, as one kind of rule of Politeness. The point is that "in most informal conversations, actual communication of important ideas is secondary to merely reaffirming and strengthening relationships" (Lakoff, 1973: 298). Brown and Levinson (1987) work with a model of person endowed with two properties—rationality and face. Although they make no claim that 'rational face-bearing agents' are all what actual humans are, they find it inadequate to characterize humans by the single property of rationality.

A general agreement in pragmatics is that the informative function of language is never the only one operating in any discourse (Johansson and Suomela-Salmi, 2011: 78). The basic observation is that communication has both an informational and an interpersonal aspect (Enfield, 2009: 71-72; Locher and Watts, 2008: 78; Spencer–Oatey, 2000/2007:12). Grice has his focus solely on the informational aspect. The human aspect is abstracted totally into rationality. As they stand, Grice's maxims are in fact requirements for the 'information' to be provided. That explains why phatic utterances do not fulfill any of the maxims (Black, 2006: 24). The question arises: Why should the properties of information take foreground, not the people who actually provide the information? If we shift focus from information to people, we will find that the interconnectedness between people underlies the connectedness between their informational contributions, which is the focus of Grice's theory.

I propose to consider Grice's theory of conversation from the normative perspective, which may be meaningful when we use Grice's theory of conversation to analyze communication that takes place in a social context rather than a social vacuum.

2. The Normative Perspective
2.1 Normative View of Intention and Meaning

The Cooperative Principle and maxims are used for explicating conversational implicature. They need to be understood within Grice's more general theory of speaker meaning. Levinson (1983) points out that 'there is a connection of an important kind' (101). Neale (1992) also observes that 'there are important connections between the account of meaning and the account of conversational implicature that have not attracted the attention they deserve' (511). Grice wrote in a letter to his publisher, 'No treatment of Saying and Implying can afford to omit a study of the notion of Meaning which plainly underlies both these ideas' (Chapman, 2005:180). As a species of speaker meaning, conversational implicature is intended. Intention is the core notion for speaker meaning and conversational implicature.

Grice is criticized as offering an 'excessively privatized view of language' according to which 'the content of linguistic interaction is determined by the intentions these individuals form towards each other' (Pratt, 1996:183). While this criticism is justified if intention is viewed purely as a psychological notion, it does not apply to the normative view of intention, which takes in the role of society and convention. The normative conception of intention is there in Grice's account of meaning alongside the psychological conception of intention, and the psychological conception is based on a normative basis. Grice makes clear in 'Meaning':

> An utterer is *held to intend to* [emphasis added] convey what is normally conveyed (or normally intended to be conveyed), and we require a good reason for accepting that a particular use diverges from the general usage. Similarly in nonlinguistic cases: *we are presumed to intend the normal consequences of our*

actions [emphasis added]. (Grice, 1989:222)

Whatever the speaker's original intention is, he/she is held to intend to convey what is normally intended to be conveyed. Meaning is not a simple input and output relation between the speaker and the hearer. It is not simply that the speaker puts in his/her 'original intention' and the hearer recovers the speaker' 'original intention'. Speaker's intention, which determines speaker's meaning, is not so much a privately entertained intention as an intention attributed on a normative basis, for which the speaker is held responsible.

Both Sanders (2013) and Haugh (2013) adopt a normative view of speaker meaning. They both find the cognitive view of intention and thus speaker meaning inadequate. Sanders (2013) finds that in tying speaker meaning to speaker's communicative intention, researchers have generally taken speaker's communicative intention to refer to a particular speaker's actual, subjective intention. He argues that this conceptualization of communicative intention as a private cognitive state that belongs uniquely to individuals, that causes the particular speaker to produce that utterance, is unworkable. Speakers' communicative intentions cannot be purely psychological phenomena, to which few hearers would have access, making successful communication a rare exception. There must be a shared, impersonal basis for forming and recognizing speakers' communicative intentions. Sanders therefore proposes a duality of speaker meaning: on the one hand, there is the speaker's personal communicative intention and on the other, the communicative intention anyone from the speaker's and hearer's community would have in producing that utterance in that context, not just that speaker in particular, termed 'generic speaker meaning'. Generic speaker meaning is 'the meaning a particular speaker is *held accountable* for having intended, and is credited with having intended, whether or not the speaker actually intended it' (Sanders, 2013:116).

Haugh (2013) looks at speaker meaning in terms of its real-world, social consequences. Haugh proposes a deontic conceptualization of speaker meaning where the speaker is held accountable to the moral order for what he or she is taken to mean in interaction. Speaker meaning is thus a real-world, consequential concept for participants in interaction, encompassing moral or ethical concerns such as rights, obligations, responsibilities and so on. Intention is understood not as a cognitive notion but as a deontological notion where the focus is on what the speaker is committed to, or taken to be committed to, in interaction.

2.2 Habermas's Validity Claims

By 'validity claims', Habermas seeks to generalize the concept of validity beyond the truth of propositions (Habermas, 1984: 277). For Habermas, the act of utterance places the sentence not only in relation to external reality, but also to the internal reality of what a speaker would like to express before a public as his intentions, and the normative reality of what is intersubjectively recognized as a legitimate interpersonal relationship (Habermas, 1979: 27-28). Habermas (1979) proposes the concept of 'the validity basis of speech', meaning that 'anyone acting communicatively must, in performing any speech action, raise universal validity claims and suppose that they can be vindicated' (Habermas, 1979: 2). A speaker, insofar as he wants to participate in a process of reaching understanding, cannot avoid raising the validity claims of comprehensibility, truth, truthfulness and rightness. It means that in addition to the claim that what he utters is comprehensible, the speaker also claims that what he states is true, that his manifest expression of intentions is truthful and that his utterance

is right or appropriate in relation to a recognized normative context (Habermas, 1979: xix). Habermas (1979) proposes the name 'universal pragmatics' for the research program aimed at reconstructing the universal validity basis of speech. In essence, Habermas conceptualizes the speaker in relation to the following domains of reality: external nature, society, internal nature and language.

A very important difference between Habermas's validity claims and Grice's conversational maxims is that validity claims include normative rightness, which is certainly lacking in Grice. What is appropriate for a social context is decided against the norms of interpersonal relations and the social structure, in which power is an important factor. As Harris rightly observes, 'Habermas attempts to embed the study of language within a more general theory of social action and supplies, in his work, the social and political dimension of "universal pragmatics" which is missing in Grice' (1995: 118). The fundamental difference is that Grice's maxims are actually requirements for propositional information while Habermas seeks to generalize the concept of validity beyond the truth of propositions by the concept of validity claims.

3. Grice's Theory of Conversation from the Normative Perspective

To account for communication that takes place in the social world rather than in a social vacuum, I propose to consider Grice's theory of conversation from the normative perspective. The social world, as observed by Habermas (1979), is the totality of all interpersonal relations that are normatively regulated, that count as legitimate in a given society (67). As pointed out earlier, speakers are held accountable for what they intend or what they are taken to intend. I suggest that Grice's Cooperative Principle and attendant maxims can be seen as normative assumptions[1] held by conversing participants. Speakers are subject to the consequences of the observance and nonobservance of these normative assumptions. Notice that their observance will have consequences as well as their nonobservance. The consequences do not limit themselves to the communication underway but extend to the interpersonal relation between the participants and even further to social structure. Cooperation in this sense is not just a communicative behaviour but a social act. It follows that cooperation is socially conditional and socially consequential.

If the speaker can choose, the speaker is committed to the consequences of choosing to cooperate or not to cooperate. To take the quantity maxim as an example, people may choose to cooperate by observing the quantity maxim, not only for the efficiency of information exchange, but also for its significance to social relations. Grice uses 'opt out' for the choice not to cooperate, for example, when the speaker says 'my lips are sealed' (Grice, 1989: 30). We need to note that such a choice is not innocent. It has social consequences. It is more evident in situations of power asymmetry, where cooperation is defined by the more powerful party.

Let's look at an exchange from Richard Wright's novel *Black Boy*. It is a first-person narrative of a dialogue between the job interviewer, a white woman and the interviewee, a black boy:

"Do you want this job?" the woman asked.
"Yes, ma'am," I said, afraid to trust my own judgement.
"Now, boy, I want to ask you one question and I want you to tell me the truth," she said.
"Yes, ma'am," I said, all attention.
"Do you steal?" she asked me seriously.
I burst into a laugh, then checked myself.

"What's so damn funny about that?" she asked.

"Lady, if I was a thief, I'd never tell anybody."

"What do you mean?" she blazed with a red face.

I had made a mistake during my first five minutes in the white world. I hung my head.

"No, ma'am," I mumbled. "I don't steal."

She stared at me, trying to make up her mind.

"Now, look, we don't want a sassy nigger around here," she said.

"No, ma'am," I assured her. "I'm not sassy." (145-146)

The white woman's question 'Do you steal?' is marked, since it is asked with the obvious intention of being answered with 'no'. The woman will be content with an answer of 'no', no matter whether the boy is telling the truth or not. The question serves to elicit not so much truthful information, as the black boy unwittingly spells out, as a conformative attitude from the boy, an unquestioning acceptance of whites' racial stereotypes of blacks as simple-minded and thieving. That explains why the woman was annoyed with the boy's reasoning why he thought it was funny to learn whether somebody really stole by simply asking him. In saying that, the boy actually opts out of answering the question and provides an explanation in the form of a meta-pragmatic comment on the question, which means that the black boy challenges the white woman, and thus upsets the established power equilibrium between whites and blacks, making himself unwelcome to the white world, not only to the woman. That is to say, his conversational act of noncooperation has implications not only for their interpersonal relationship but more importantly for interracial relationship. In fear of the consequences of noncooperation, he quickly corrects himself. By saying 'I don't steal,' the only permissible response in this situation, he complies with the presupposition of the question and submits to its positioning of blacks in the roles of children and potential thieves. His final cooperation is dictated by the social circumstances he is in. He chooses to cooperate after weighing the consequences of noncooperation.

Grice's cooperative account does not have a role for the ability to cooperate, to observe the maxims. Sperber and Wilson (1995/2001) in their relevance account allow for abilities and preferences to the speaker. If we take account of both factors and the fact that what the speaker is held responsible for in communication is the intention he/she is attributed, we can say that the Cooperative Principle, in a normative perspective, requires that the speaker shows his/her *intention* to cooperate, to observe the maxims, if he/she is unable to cooperate fully by observing all the maxims relevant to the particular exchange. Speakers will try to show that they intend to be sincere/truthful, informative, connected, clear and intend hearers to so interpret them. That cooperation is socially conditional and socially consequential means that the speaker needs to balance ability against preference and balance preference against ability in conversation. Let me explain. The speaker's degree of cooperation is dependent on interpersonal relationship and the circumstances, and his/her ability to cooperate, if the speaker prefers to cooperate. Conceivably, there are cases when the speaker is able to cooperate in the desired way but prefers not to. If the speaker prefers to cooperate, he/she will give the impression[2] that his/her degree of cooperation is what he/she can manage within his/her ability depending on the specific circumstances.

Let's look at a dialogue from Richard Wright's novel *Black Boy*, in first person narration:

One morning I was roused by my uncle's voice calling gently but persistently. I

opened my eyes and saw the dim blob of his face peering from behind the jamb of the kitchen door.

"What time have you?" I thought he asked me, but I was not sure.

"Hunh?" I mumbled sleepily.

"What time have you got?" he repeated.

I lifted myself on my elbow and looked at my dollar watch, which lay on the chair at the bedside.

"Eighteen past five," I mumbled.

"Eighteen past five?" he asked.

"Yes, sir."

"Now, is that the right time?" he asked again.

I was tired, sleepy; I did not want to look at the watch again, but I was satisfied that, on the whole, I had given him the correct time.

"It's right," I said, snuggling back down into my pillow. "If it's a little slow or fast, it's not far wrong."

There was a short silence; I thought he had gone.

"What on earth do you mean, boy?" he asked in loud anger. (Wright, 1945/2006:156-157)

This is clearly a case of information exchange. The black boy observes the Cooperative Principle. What causes problem to this exchange is black boy's reply 'It's right. If it's a little slow or fast, it's not far wrong' to his uncle's question 'is that the right time?' In his reply, the black boy violates the second maxim of quantity by being more informative than is required in order to observe the maxim of quality. To make his contribution true, the boy provides extra information 'If it's a little slow or fast, it's not far wrong' which carries the implicature that he is not sure. In this exchange, the uncle expects full cooperation and conformity with the four maxims from the boy, since it is desirable and is supposed to be easily achieved. But the boy does not show that he tries to cooperate fully. Instead, he conveys through 'If it's a little slow or fast, it's not far wrong' that he does not intend to find out if it is right or not, that is, he does not intend to cooperate fully by making a small effort (giving another look at his watch). By saying so, the boy commits himself to the relationship consequentiality of expressing this intention.

Then let's reconsider Grice's frequently cited example:

A is writing a testimonial about a pupil who is a candidate for a philosophy job, and his letter reads as follows: "Dear Sir, Mr. X's command of English is excellent, and his attendance at tutorials has been regular. Yours, etc." (Gloss: A cannot be opting out, since if he wished to be uncooperative, why write at all? He cannot be unable, through ignorance, to say more, since the man is his pupil; moreover, he knows that more information than this is wanted. He must, therefore, be wishing to impart information that he is reluctant to write down. This supposition is tenable only if he thinks Mr. X is no good at philosophy. This, then, is what he is implicating. (Grice,1989:33)

Grice treats this example as a case of flouting the first maxim of quantity. It can also be analyzed this way. A knows that he is supposed to commend his pupil for a philosophy job, but he does not mention anything related to philosophy. The point is: he does not make his contribution of information relevant to the purpose. Given his familiarity with his pupil, he is not unable to follow the maxim of relation but rather chooses to flout it. Nevertheless, he tries to be cooperative, by contributing favorable information about his pupil. It will be obvious to the reader of his letter that he tries to be truthful and

informative as best he can. It can be said that he tries to be relevant by contributing some information remotely relevant to a philosophy job. By writing his letter this way, he implicates that he cannot be more relevant, as he does not possess any favorable information regarding X's ability for the philosophy job.

Let me try to summarize some of the ideas using the following figure:

Social Conditions	Social Consequences	Preference
Interpersonal Relation	Interpersonal Relation	Cooperation
Other Social Relations	Other Social Relations	or
Specific Circumstances	Speaker's Image	Noncooperation

Conversational cooperation is socially conditional and socially consequential. In conversation, the speaker's decision of cooperation or noncooperation is supposed to be made on the basis of social conditions as listed in the first column, and after weighing social consequences in the aspects listed in the second column. Interpersonal relation is the most directly involved parameter but as I have pointed out, there may be relations at other levels, for which I use 'other social relations'. 'Specific circumstances' are case specific circumstances. 'Speaker's image' concerns the speaker's presented qualities or attributes. The 'interpersonal relation' that appears in the first column and that in the second can be the same and can also be different. It means that interpersonal relation (other social relations as well) may be maintained, constructed or transformed during the conversation. Cooperation or noncooperation is categorized as 'preference'. It relates to how the CP is interpreted from the normative perspective. To reiterate,

> The Cooperative Principle, in a normative perspective, requires that the speaker shows his/her *intention* to cooperate, to observe the maxims, if he/she is unable to cooperate fully by observing all the maxims relevant to the particular exchange.

4. The First Maxim of Quality

In proposing the Cooperative Principle and maxims, Grice is concerned with the inference of conversational implicature. By virtue of the Quality maxim, Grice in fact is concerned with the hearer's assessment of the quality of information, which should be made after or together with the assessment of the speaker's attitude to the utterance he/she makes, whether he/she stands behind what he/she says. I propose to reinterpret the Quality maxim at the communicative level as propositional modality, applying to the relation between the speaker and the information, and interpersonal modality, applying to the relation between the speaker and the hearer. In other words, I use Habermas's truth claim and rightness claim to reinterpret Grice's Quality maxim, but with an extension of the truth claim. The speaker does not necessarily raise truth claim to what he/she says, as Habermas claims. To begin with, there is the possibility of irony. Grice accounts for irony as a flout of the quality maxim. My 'propositional modality' is intended to be broader, covering not only serious but ironic, jocular uses of language as well. Irony is then a special case of propositional modality, falling under the category of the reinterpreted Quality maxim, rather than a flout of the Quality maxim.

In social situations where communication does not so often occur alone as in Grice's idealized and simplified model, a real concern with whether the speaker is telling the truth is sorted out at the meta-communicative level. The quality maxim should be investigated at the meta-communicative level as well. Grice's Quality maxim does not stay at the same level as the other maxims. Grice (1989) says, 'the importance of at least the first maxim of Quality is such that it should not be included in a scheme

of the kind I am constructing; other maxims come into operation only on the assumption that this maxim of Quality is satisfied' (27). It is clear that Grice does not regard the quality maxim as on a par with other maxims. Grice suggests that the role of the quality maxim should be sought outside the scheme he is constructing. I want to suggest that the quality maxim should also be investigated at the meta-communicative level, where the hearer judges the speaker's sincerity. Sperber et al. (2010) point out that 'the major problem posed by communicated information has to do not with the competence of others, but with their interests and their honesty' and 'trust is obviously an essential aspect of human interaction' (360-361). As we know, Austin (1975) has listed sincerity as one of the felicity conditions for speech acts. Green (1996) translates the quality maxim into declarative form as: Agents will not deceive co-agents (91). For clarification, we can consider a familiar saying: 'Many a truth is spoken in jest.' The saying actually brings together the two different levels that have been discussed. The judgment or perception of jest is made within the communication itself but the judgment of truth is made at the meta-communicative level.

Let's look at an exchange from Richard Wright's novel *Native Son*, which involves Bigger, the black boy who killed a white woman, the Daltons' daughter, Jan Erlone, the innocent communist who is framed by Bigger as the criminal, Mr. Dalton, the girl's father, and Britten, the private detective who works for Dalton:

> "Listen, I've told you all I know," said Jan… "Unless you tell me what this joke's all about, I'm getting on back home. . . ."
> "Wait a minute," said Mr. Dalton.
> Mr. Dalton came forward a step, and fronted Jan.
> "You and I don't agree. Let's forget that. I want to know where my daughter is. . . ."
> "Is this a game?" asked Jan.
> "No; no. . . ." said Mr. Dalton. "I want to know. I'm worried. . . ."
> "I tell you, I don't know!"
> "Listen, Mr. Erlone. Mary's the only girl we've got. I don't want her to do anything rash. Tell her to come back. Or you bring her back."
> "Mr. Dalton, I'm telling you the truth. . . ."
> "Listen," Mr. Dalton said. "I'll make it all right with you. . . ."
> Jan's face reddened.
> "What do you mean?" he asked.
> "I'll make it worth your while. . . ."
> "You son. . . ." Jan stopped. He walked to the door.
> "Let 'im go," said Britten. "He can't get away. I'll phone and have 'im picked up. He knows more than he's telling. . . ."
> Jan paused in the doorway, looking at all three of them. Then he went out. . . .
> "You're telling us the truth about all this, aren't you, Bigger?" Mr. Dalton asked.
> "Yessuh."
> "He's all right," Britten said. ". . . I'll bet my right arm that goddamn Red's up to something!" (Wright, 1940:143-145)

In actual fact, Jan is cooperative in the exchange by saying as much as he knows is true. But he is judged to be uncooperative by his hearers. His meta-pragmatic assertion 'I'm telling you the truth' is not believed. The question is: who gets to define how much is enough? How is the notion of cooperation relevant to the participants? In this case, the sufficiency of information is inevitably defined by the questioning party. What is

relevant to them in judging Jan's contribution is the normative interpretation of cooperation I have put forward, that is, their calculation of Jan's intention or willingness to cooperate. They interpret Jan's inability to cooperate as his dispreference against cooperation. We can see that Mr. Dalton works towards making Jan willing to cooperate in 'You and I don't agree. Let's forget that. I want to know where my daughter is' and 'I'll make it worth your while.' Also worth noting are Jan's comments on the situation 'Unless you tell me what this joke's all about, I'm getting on back home' and 'Is this a game?' From these remarks, we can see that Jan tentatively defines the situation as 'joke' and 'game'. These are Jan's meta-communicative judgments of the exchange he is in. He suspects that his questioners do not bring him into communication for information as they claim but for something else. What is significant for Jan is his meta-communicative judgment of his questioners as insincere. The same goes with his questioners. We can see that this exchange is an interesting case of mutual distrust between two opposing parties played out at the communicative level as well as meta-communicative level.

5. Conclusion

As they stand, Grice's maxims are requirements for the 'information' to be provided. Thus, to cooperate in the Gricean sense is to be informative, truthfully, sufficiently, relevantly and clearly informative. The social agents who are actually carrying out socially constrained and socially consequential actions through verbal means are theorized into rational providers of information. What distinguishes pragmatics from traditional linguistics is the focus on the language-using humans (Mey, 1993/2001: 4). The user aspect has from the very beginning been the mainstay of pragmatics (Mey, 1993: 290). An important fact about the user is that 'the individual is situated in a social context, which means that she or he is empowered, as well as limited, by the conditions of her or his life' (Mey, 1993/2001: 214). The idea of a free agent, in free enterprise, deciding freely on means and ends is a fiction: the rationality is supra-individual, pre-set by society (1993/2001: 227). The task of pragmatics is to turn the attention of the linguists toward the greater context of society, toward a greater social consciousness of language use (Mey, 1993/2001: 311). As argued in this paper, pragmatics research should not neglect the 'social man' in the investigation of talk exchanges.

Notes:
1. If the Cooperative Principle and maxims are interpreted as normative assumptions, it follows that they are typical of a certain society at a certain time. As Robinson (2006) suggests, "in some sense culture is the repetition of certain norms and values, including conversational maxims. This repetition or continuity is probably the source of Grice's maxims" (187). It gets back to the question of the universality or cross-cultural applicability of Grice's theory, which will not be taken up here.
2. "Give the impression" means that there is the possibility of manipulation.

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