

Cooperation and Face in Theory & Use

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Abstract

Cooperation and Face-saving are in theory both essential to the success of a conversation. In actual use they may contradict one another and their respective maxims may also contradict each other. This paper tries to prove, despite these contradictions, the cooperative and politeness principles are still valid.

Keywords

Cooperation; Face; Polite.

1. Introduction

Ever since the day cooperation theory and face theory were proposed disputes and doubts never stopped. In this essay the two theories will be discussed and the exploitation and violation of them will also be discussed to find out the feasibility and validity of these two theories.

2. Grice's Cooperative Principles

Grice(1975,p.45) maintains that the overriding principle in conversation is one he calls cooperative principle: "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." you must therefore act in conversation in accord with a general principle that you are mutually engaged with your listener or listeners in an activity that is of benefit to all, that benefit being mutual understanding.

Grice lists four maxims that follow from the cooperative principle: quantity, quality, relation, and manner. The maxim of quantity requires you to make your contribution as informative as is required. The maxim of quality requires you not to say what you believe to be false or that for which you lack adequate evidence. Relation is the simple injunction: be relevant. Manner requires you to avoid obscurity of expression and ambiguity, and to be brief and orderly. This principle and these maxims characterize ideal exchanges. Such exchanges would also observe certain other principles too, such as "Be polite".

According to Grice, we are able to converse with one another because we recognize common goals in conversation and specific ways of achieving these goals. In any conversation, only certain kinds of "moves" are possible at any particular time because of these constraints that operate to govern exchanges. These constraints limit speakers to what they can say and listeners to what they can infer. For example to the question "Where are you from?" nobody without any mental problem or hearing problem will answer "Today is Friday." The answers may vary but they must all refer to the same thing. The answer may be "I come from China." "China" "The country with the greatest population." "Japan's greatest opponent." Only similar answers are acceptable. And during a job interview no mentally sound interviewee will say to the interviewer "Your tie is nice."

3. Brown and Levinson's Face-saving Theory

They define politeness as redressive action taken to counter-balance the disruptive effect of Face-saving acts, which is also called Face-saving theory. This theory rests on three basic notions: face, face-threatening acts and politeness strategies. According to Brown and Levinson, politeness strategies are developed in order to save the hearers' "face." Face refers to the respect that an individual has for him or herself, and maintaining that "self-esteem" in public or in private situations. Usually you try to avoid embarrassing the other person, or making them feel uncomfortable. Face Threatening Acts (FTA's) are acts that infringe on the hearers' need to maintain his/her self esteem, and be respected. Politeness strategies are developed for the main purpose of dealing with these FTA's. What would you do if you saw a cup of pens on your teacher's desk, and you wanted to use one, would you

say, "Ooh, I want to use one of those!"

say, "So, is it O.K. if I use one of those pens?"

say, "I'm sorry to bother you but, I just wanted to ask you if I could use one of those pens?" Indirectly say, "Hmm, I sure could use a blue pen right now."

There are four types of politeness strategies, described by Brown and Levinson, that sum up human "politeness" behavior: Bald On Record, Negative Politeness, Positive Politeness, and Off-Record-indirect strategy.

If you answered A, you used what is called the Bald On-Record strategy which provides no effort to minimize threats to your teachers' "face." If you answered B, you used the Positive Politeness strategy. In this situation you recognize that your teacher has a desire to be respected. It also confirms that the relationship is friendly and expresses group reciprocity. If you answered C, you used the Negative Politeness strategy which similar to Positive Politeness in that you recognize that they want to be respected however, you also assume that you are in some way imposing on them. Some other examples would be to say, "I don't want to bother you but..." or "I was wondering if ..." If you answered D, you used Off-Record indirect strategies. The main purpose is to take some of the pressure off you. You are trying not to directly impose by asking for a pen. Instead you would rather it be offered to you once the teacher realizes you need one, and you are looking to find one. A great example of this strategy is something that almost everyone has done or will do when you have, on purpose, decided not to return someone's phone call, therefore you say, "I tried to call a hundred times, but there was never any answer."

4. The Exploitation and Violation of These Principles

I remember when I was in middle, in the exams there used to be such questions: Can you write down the ----? Sometimes the four great Chinese inventions. I used to think these are shit questions. Since you ask me if I can do it. Of course the teacher will give no mark to my answer: "yes I can. "Or "no I can not." Though I think they should because I have answered the question as required. Now I understand my answer violated the maxim of quantity because it did not give the information the teacher wanted though their intention was coded in the question but not stated explicitly. According to Brown and Levinson's Face-saving theory Negative Politeness strategy is used here to be polite, to save my negative face, but this makes it complicated and made me indignant and angry. So politeness strategy may sometimes not be really polite.

Actually in life for the reason of politeness and some other vital interest this maxim of quality is also often violated. If a girl asks me what I think of her hairstyle I will definitely say it looks good. In exams I often repeat time and time again "Capitalism will die, socialism will replace capitalism" "The goal of Chinese communist party is to serve the people" "The officials in

government are servants to the people” Though I believed and still believe they are false I chose not to challenge my teacher and everything went on smoothly.

The exploitation of the maxim of relation is popular on formal occasions when the question is not what the respondent wants to answer. Next is a dialogue between a journalist and Jiangyu the spokeswoman of Foreign Affairs Ministry.

Q: Because of the interference of the Olympic torch relay in Paris, some people on the Internet have called on Chinese people to boycott French goods, especially Carrefour, a French supermarket. Does China support this boycott?

Jiang Yu answered: Recently, some Chinese people have expressed their own opinions and emotions, which are all due to reasons. The French side should think deeply and reflect better. I believe these Chinese citizens will express their reasonable demands according to law.

We can see that the journalist’s answer is not answered and the maxim of relation is violated. We can say that Jiangyu is a bad conversationalist. But we prefer to believe she with her high status has her own reason to violate the maxim. Whether she answers ‘yes’ or ‘no’ there would be bad results. Both the journalist’s question and Jiangyu’s answer is a potential threat to another’s face, more exactly positive face. Neither of them is polite though not so bad as to be impolite. Neither of them minds this. Their duty, their job entitles them to ask and answer this way without incurring any criticism.

Reporter: In the past few days, there have been some large-scale demonstrations in support of China in Canada and other countries. Have Chinese embassies abroad played any role in these activities?

Jiang Yu: I don't know what these demonstrations are, but we have seen a lot of them. Do you mean some overseas Chinese who oppose separatist acts, western interference in China's internal affairs and vicious attacks to discredit China? I think they express their own voice of justice. Are those activities still organized by the Chinese government?

Instead of answering the journalist’s question as the journalist wanted her to do Jiangyu proposed another question and redirected the question. This obviously violates the maxim of manner and presents face to no one.

5. Analysis of the Value and the Violation of These Principles

Of course, everyday speech often occurs in less than ideal circumstances. Grice points out that speakers do not always follow the maxims he has described, and as a result they may implicate something rather different from what they actually say. They may exploit, violate, or opt out of one of the maxims, or two of the maxims may clash in a particular instance. Grice offers the following examples (pp.51-3). In the first set he says no maxim is violated, for B’s response in each case is an adequate response to A’s remark:

A. I am out of petrol.

B. There is a garage round the corner.

A. Smith doesn't seem to have a girlfriend these days.

B. He has been paying a lot of visits to New York lately.

He gives further examples, however, in which there is a deliberate exploitation of a maxim. For example, a testimonial letter praising a candidate’s minor qualities and entirely ignoring those that might be relevant to the position for which the candidate is being considered flouts the maxim of quantity, just as protesting your innocence too strongly. Other examples are ironic, metaphoric, or hyperbolic in nature: “You are a fine friend” said to someone who has just let you down; “you are the cream in my coffee”; and “Every nice girl loves a sailor”. What we do in understanding an utterance is to ask ourselves just what is appropriate in terms of these maxims in a particular set of circumstances. We assess the literal content of the utterance and

try to achieve some kind of fit between it and the maxims. Consequently, the answer to the question, "Why is X telling me this in this way?" is part of reaching a decision about what exactly X is telling me. To use one of Grice's examples (p.55) if, instead of Smith saying to you that Miss X sang "Home sweet Home", he says Miss X produced a series of sounds that corresponds closely with the score of "Home Sweet Home" you will observe that Smith's failure to be brief helps damn Miss X's performance.

The theory of implicature explains how, when A says something to B, B will understand A's remarks in a certain way because B will recognize that A said more than was required or gave a seemingly irrelevant reply, or deliberately obfuscated the issue. B will have to figure out the way in which A's utterance is to be fitted into their ongoing exchange, and B's operating assumption will be that the utterance is coherent, that the sense can be made of it, and that the principles necessary to do so are available. The task is not an unprincipled one: Grice's maxims provide the necessary interpretive framework within which to establish the relevance of utterances to each other.

However, when we try to apply a set of principles, no matter what kind they are, to show how utterances work when sequenced into what we call conversations, we run into a variety of difficulties. Ordinary casual conversation is possibly the most common of all language activities. We are talking constantly to one another about this or that. Sometimes the person addressed is an intimate friend, at some other times a more casual acquaintance, and at still other times a complete stranger. But we still manage conversation. Because it is such a commonplace activity we tend not to think of conversation from the point of view of how it is organized; how particular conversations work is beneath our conscious awareness unless we are one of those who have tried to improve our conversational ability by taking courses in self-improvement or by reading certain books on the topic. Such courses and books have their own focus: they tend to concentrate on the subject matter of talk, on correct pronunciation, diction and grammar, and on matters of personal taste and behavior. They very rarely tell us anything very informative about how we actually manage conversations, i.e., What makes a particular conversation work. A commonplace activity is one that occurs frequently and is easily recognizable. It must also conform to certain principles which we may or may not be able to state explicitly. Many activities are commonplace by this definition: eating, sleeping, going to work, passing one another in the street, shopping and of course conversing to cite a few. We also recognize that some people are more successful than others in dealing with the commonplace aspects of life. So far as conversation is concerned, we recognize that some people are better conversationalists than others, but at the same time we may find it difficult to say what makes some people better and some people worse. In addition, most of us are sensitive to bizarre conversational behavior in others, but we may not always be able to say why a particular piece of speaking strikes us as odd. It is only by attempting to state explicitly the principles that appear to operate in conversations that we can explain these various judgments and reactions.

Above all, conversation is a cooperative activity in the Gricean sense, one that depends on speakers and listeners sharing a set of assumptions about what is happening. If anything went wrong in conversation nothing would happen. The whole activity would be entirely unpredictable and there would be too much uncertainty to make conversations either worthwhile or pleasant. Not anything goes; indeed, many things do not occur and can't occur because they would violate the unconscious agreement that holds between speakers and listeners that only certain kinds of things will happen in a normal conversation and that both speakers and listeners will hold to that agreement. Conversation makes use of the cooperative principle; speakers and listeners are guided by considerations of quantity, quality and so on, and the process of implicature which allows them to figure out relationships between the said

and the unsaid. Grice's principles, therefore, form a fundamental part of any understanding of conversation as a cooperative activity.

Conversation is cooperative also in the sense that listeners and speakers tend to accept each other for what they claim to be: that is, they accept the face the other offers. That face may vary according to circumstances, for at one time the face you offer me may be that of a "close friend" on another occasion a "teacher" and on a third occasion a "young man" but it is a face I will generally accept. I will judge you against the face you are presenting, and it is very likely we will both agree that you are at a particular moment presenting a certain face to me and I am presenting a certain face to you. We will be involved in what Goffman (1955) has called face-work, the work of presenting faces to each other, protecting your own face, and protecting the other's face. We will be playing out a little drama together and cooperating to see that nothing mars the performance. That is the norm.

Of course, one party may violate that norm. I can refuse to accept you for what you claim to be, deny your right to the face you are attempting to present, and even challenge about it. I may also view your face as inappropriate or insincere, but say nothing, reserving my judgements about your demeanor and words to myself. The second course of action is the more usual; challenging someone about the face he or she is presenting is generally avoided, and those who make a regular practice of it quickly find themselves unwelcome almost everywhere-even to each other. Conversation therefore involves a considerable amount of role-playing: we choose a role for ourselves in each conversation, discover the role or roles the other or the others are playing, and then proceed to construct a little dramatic encounter, much of which involves respecting others' faces. All the world is a stage and we are all players. The people who know best how to present face win out in the all walks of life especially in state organs. In history He Shen in Qing dynasty is a person who was an expert on presenting face though another way of saying it is flattering. He knew how to present face to the emperor and won his favor and finally his own political future and awards. In recent history Chen Yi our beloved general who did not present face to our beloved Chairman Mao was oppressed and prosecuted by the latter. So the study of presenting face is important to a man who wants to achieve something.

We do get some help in trying to decide what face another is presenting to us and what role is being attempted, but it requires us to have certain skills. As Laver and Trudgill(1979,p.28) observe, " Being a listener to speech is not unlike being a detective. The listener not only has to establish what it was that was said, but also has to construct, from an assortment of clues, the affective state of the speaker and a profile of his identity." The last two phrases, "the affective state of the speaker" and " a profile of his identity" are much similar to "face" here for they are concerned with what the speaker is trying to communicate about himself or herself on a particular occasion. Laver and Trudgill add that, " Fortunately, the listener's task is made a little easier by the fact that the vocal clues marking the individual physical, psychological, and social characteristics of the speaker are numerous." In other words, there is likely to be a variety of linguistic clues to help the listener. Obviously, listeners will vary in their ability to detect such clues, just as speakers vary in their ability to present or maintain faces. But generally and essentially most people at mosts times try to make their word pleasant and to be polite. The exceptions prove the law.

6. Conclusion

So despite the violation of cooperative principles and Face-saving stratigies under certain conditions, they are still valuable for guiding people in their conversing for better life. But the dispute is not yer settled and further research is necessary and to be expected.

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