WHAT IS GOVERNING OUR COMMUNICATION?

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1. Introduction

In this paper, I would like to investigate standards in communication in the existing literature and argue that a cognitive-based concept called Relevance theory is the most appropriate one in that only this concept covers data adequately. First, I will present the co-operative principle and its maxims advocated by Grice (1975). Then, I will analyse exchanges and point out the inadequacies of Gricean maxims. Second, I will show that the idea of mutual knowledge (Shiffer 1972) is inappropriate in explaining utterance interpretation which will necessarily lead us to a cognitive-based idea of mutual manifestness. In section 4, I will discuss the issue of the notion of ‘truth’ as there are so many cases in which utterances are not produced as true propositions. Finally, I will show how Relevance-based ideas will explain utterance-interpretation, including the explanation of the classic issues; problems of solving indexical indeterminacy, ambiguity, elipses, and the implicit meaning of utterances etc.

2. Co-operative principle

According to Grice (1989: 26), “Our talk exchanges are characteristically, to some degree at least, co-operative efforts...” and he formulates what he calls, the Co-operative principle and its maxims.

The Co-operative principle

Make your conversational contribution such as required, at the stage at which it occurs, by the accepted purpose or direction of the talk exchange in which you are engaged (Grice 1989: 26).

Maxims of Quantity: 1. Make your contribution as informative as required.

2. Do not make your contribution more informative than is required.

Maxims of Quality: 1. Do not say what you believe to be false.

2. Do not say that for which you lack adequate evidence.

Maxims of Relation: Be relevant.

Maxims of manner: 1. Avoid obscurity of expression.

2. Avoid ambiguity.

3. Be brief

4. Be orderly

Let us show how these maxims explain the following exchanges.


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(2)A: Can she swim well? B: Oh, she is a fish.
(3)A: Is she back home? B: I saw a red Toyota in the garage.
(4) (Family dining in a restaurant) A: What shall we get for dessert? B: Fruit. Not CHOCOLATE CAKE.

The hearer of (1)B assumes that B is being co-operative. The apparent infringement of the maxim of quantity i.e. not being informative enough, will lead the hearer A to infer that B does not in fact know the exact name of the town, but at her best B is being informative. In (2) the speaker B is obviously violating the maxim of quality, i.e. truthfulness, since (2)B is a metaphor. However, on the assumption of co-operation, the hearer A, according to Grice (1975), infers a proposition which is logically related to the proposition given by (2)B: i.e. a simile that she is like a fish.

In (3), B's answer to A's question does not seem to bear any relevance. However, the assumption of the maxim of relation will lead the hearer A to infer that if a red Toyota is in the garage, the person in question is most likely to be back home as she drives a red Toyota. That way, B answers the question A asks. In (4)B where B spells out 'chocolate cake', the speaker is violating the maxim of manner, not being clear of what she is saying. However, the hearer A can easily infer B's intention that B does not want the word 'chocolate cake' to be heard by the children at present. The hearing of 'chocolate' will excite the children too much.

The conversational maxims are claimed to be used to boost inference on A's i.e. the hearer's part in search for relevant implicatures in the above examples: in (1) that B does not know where exactly Susan lives, in (2) that she swims like a fish, in (3) that she is most likely to be back home and in (4) that B does not want the word 'chocolate cake' to be heard by the children. The utterances (1)-(4)B could give rise to different interpretations when different contexts are given, and maxims might be observed differently to explain the different interpretations.

For example, (1)B can be an informative answer to A if A is just curious about Susan's accent. In this case, the implicature that B does not know where exactly Susan lives is not the relevant answer that the hearer recovers. The relevant answer is the proposition expressed by the utterance, i.e. that Susan lives somewhere north of England. In the former, the quantity maxim is used to infer the implicature. In the latter, however, is the quantity maxim used at all to recover the propositional content?

In (2)B, is the inferred simile based on the maxim of quality, the only implicature the hearer is supposed to infer? If so, why did not the speaker B utter the simile instead of the metaphor? Intuitively, there is a difference between a metaphor and a simile. It is often perceived that a metaphor is a more powerful means of expression than a simile. That is, a metaphor seems to communicate a wider range of implicatures (weak and strong) than a simile. Relevant implicatures are that she swims very well, that she is very comfortable in water, that she spends hours in water etc. rather than that she has gills, that she is a cold-blooded animal etc. those that are also associated with a fish. It seems as if the maxim of relevance is observed to give rise to these relevant implicatures. The maxim of quality i.e. truthfulness does not seem to explain these aspects of a metaphor.

In (3)B, apart from the maxim of relevance, the maxim of quality must be observed by the speaker B, since the speaker has not seen the person in question at home but just seen a red Toyota in the garage which is most likely hers. So the speaker B is not
definitely saying something for which she lacks adequate evidence. In this example, the maxim of relation leads the hearer to infer the relevant implicature that she is most likely at home. The maxim of quality, on the other hand, does not give rise to an implicature such that the speaker does not know, the kind that (1)B could give rise to. So maxims are not always used to boost the hearer's inference for relevant implicatures.

In (4)B the maxim of manner is used to lead the hearer to infer the implicature that the speaker B does not want the word 'chocolate cake' to be heard by the children. However, this implicature is not the point of the utterance (4)B. The point of the utterance is that the speaker B wants to get fruit for dessert but not chocolate cake. In (1)-(3)B, the derived implicatures might be the points of these utterances. That is, the implicature that the speaker does not know where exactly Susan lives, is the answer to A's question in (1). In (2), kinds of implicatures that yes, she swims very well, that yes, she is very comfortable in water, that yes, she spends hours in water and so on, are the strongly communicated implicatures. In (3) the implicature that she is most likely to be home, is the answer to A's question.

In the next section, I will introduce a notion 'mutual manifestness' (Sperber & Wilson 1995: 41-60) and show 'mutual knowledge' is not prerequisite for communication to be successful. When we observe actual communication, it becomes evident that 'mutual knowledge' is not assumed at all.

3. Mutual manifestness and human communication

The speaker and the hearer have their physical environments, and abilities to recognize the environments. As a result, we can talk about their cognitive environments. However, the physical environments that their minds process are not the same, nor are their cognitive abilities for processing the environments. Despite these differences, there is an intersection of the speaker and the hearer's cognitive environments (e.g. they are physically present in the same place), and they are aware of the shared cognitive environment. In this mutual cognitive environment of the speaker and the hearer, all 'manifest' information is mutually manifest information to the speaker and the hearer.

Being manifest is not same as being known. That is, if something is known, its truth is presumed. However, manifest information does not have to be true. It can be information that is not yet entertained but potentially inferable. For example, the information that my mother and the Japanese prime minister never had breakfast has never come to my mind until I have thought about it just now. However, it can be said that it has been manifest in my mind as it is inferable information. So obviously, 'being manifest' is a much weaker notion than 'being assumed' or 'being known'. In order for 'mutual knowledge' to be cognitively established, the truth of (6) relies on the truth of (5), and the truth of (7) relies on the truth of (6) and so on. This is cognitively impossible as this is an infinite regress.

(5) The speaker and the hearer know that P. (P = proposition)
(6) The speaker and the hearer know that the speaker and the hearer know that P.
(7) The speaker and the hearer know that the speaker and the hearer know that the speaker and the hearer know that P.

Instead we have the following in which the truth of (9) does not rely on the truth of (8), nor does the truth of (10) rely on (9) and so on, as there is no truth-based relation among the assumptions (8)-(10).
(8) It is mutually manifest that P.
(9) It is mutually manifest that it is mutually manifest that P.
(10) It is mutually manifest that it is mutually manifest that it is mutually manifest that P.

(adapted from Sperber & Wilson 1995: 42)

Now I will show that 'mutual manifestness' is an adequate notion to describe human communication. Let us consider (11) which is uttered as a BMW has just passed.

(11) I'm going to buy a BMW of that type.

In this utterance, the speaker does not make sure that the hearer has also noticed a BMW which passed a second before. Nor does the speaker make sure that the hearer noticed that the speaker had noticed a BMW. What is needed is the speaker's certain degree of confidence that the hearer has also noticed that the passed car was a BMW. There was no mutual knowledge of a BMW at the time of utterance. In other words, it is enough that the passed BMW was 'mutually manifest', not 'mutually known'. The hearer might have thought that the passed car was a VOLVO but the utterance (11) made a BMW manifest to the hearer.

There are many more examples which do not assume 'mutual knowledge' of certain information.

(12) A: Do you like Rugby? B: I'm from New Zealand.
(13) A: What time is it now? B: Newspaper is just delivered.
(14) A: Do you like Thomas. B: I don't like politicians.

The speaker of (12)-(14) B does not make sure that the hearer knows the information given in (15)-(17). However, she has some confidence that her utterances (12)-(14) B will guide the hearer to access (15)-(17), and whether the hearer believes their truth is not a concern to the speaker. All that is important is that (15)-(17) will be mutually manifest to the speaker and the hearer at the time of processing (12)-(14) B.

(15) New Zealanders love Rugby.
(16) Newspaper is delivered at a certain time everyday.
(17) Thomas is a politician.

Having looked at the utterances above, we can say that the speaker and the hearer do not share equal responsibilities for communication to be successful. The speaker is leading the role in the sense that she directs the hearer to certain interpretation with some confidence that the hearer can be led that way. The hearer, believing that the speaker is trust-worthy and not misleading him, searches for relevant interpretation. In the sections that follow, I will discuss the notions of truthfulness and then, relevance since, as observed in metaphors such as (2) B, people are not always observing the maxim of quality, but rather searching for relevant interpretations.

4. The notion of truthfullness

Many people might believe that we talk truthfully. Many of us believe that the maxim of truthfulness is a norm of conversation as represented by the Gricean maxims of quality. Anything that does not conform to this norm is considered to be a special case as, for example, metaphors and ironies are often so considered. However, this does not seem