

## Grice's Conversational Maxims in Our Everyday Life

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**Abstract:** This article investigates Grice's conversational maxims. The study of politeness in modern linguistics is carried out in the framework of anthropological, ethnolinguistic, pragmatic, sociopsycholinguistic works. Different approaches explore politeness in language theory and practice, in relation to the normative framework of behavior, cultural-specific factors and the situation factor.

**Keywords:** conversational maxims, maxim of quality, maxim of quantity, maxim of relevance, maxim of manner, a rule of conduct.

Politeness makes people useful and attractive for others around them: it is very important both at work and in life. Politeness softens sharp situations, avoids conflicts, it also teaches how to behave and opens the way for respect and love. Politeness can be learned, but it is better if it is inborn. Politeness demands people to control one's speech and deeds.

For most people, politeness tends to be equivalent to manners and behaviour, but its conception varies across cultures; what is considered polite in one culture may be perceived as rude in another. As such, politeness can be realised through different means, with one of the most common of these being the use of language. And while a fair amount of research has focused on how EFL learners use politeness in English when compared to native speakers of English (see, for example, Salgado 2011), the way in which politeness is expressed in a bilingual setting has received much more limited attention. In this article, we focus on the linguistic realisation of politeness.

Grice's conversational maxims were created by the British philosopher H. Paul Grice in the 1970s. Grice's conversational maxims, also known as The Gricean Maxims, are based on Grice's Cooperative Principle, which aims to explain how people achieve effective communication in everyday situations.

Grice's conversational maxims – definition: Grice believed that meaningful dialogue was characterized by cooperation and based his Cooperative Principle theory on the assumption that participants in a conversation usually attempt to be truthful, informative, relevant, and clear in order to facilitate successful communication. Based on these assumptions, Grice divided his cooperative principle into four conversational maxims.

Grice's maxims for conversation – The 4 Conversational Maxims are the Maxim of Quality, the Maxim of Quantity, the Maxim of Relevance, and the Maxim of Manner.

Grice believed that anyone wishing to engage in meaningful communication would follow these maxims and would assume that others would also be following them.

**The Maxim of Quality** – Abiding by the Maxim of Quality means not telling a lie on purpose. When following this maxim during communication, you should: Only say things you believe to be true. Not say things that you cannot back up with evidence. "The capital of India is New Delhi."

Here the speaker believes that they are telling the truth to the best of their knowledge.

**The Maxim of Quantity** – When following the Maxim of Quantity, it is important to not withhold information during communication that would be necessary to keep the conversation going. However, it is also important not to bombard our listeners with too much irrelevant information. When abiding

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by this maxim during communication, you should: Make your contribution to the conversation as informative as required. Not contribute more informative than required.

Speaker A: “Do you know if Katie got on okay with her exams?”

Speaker B: “Yes, I do. She did really well and got an A!”

Here speaker B could have ended their reply after “yes, I do.” However, they shared all of the information they knew so as not to flout the Maxim of Quantity.

(Don't worry; we're going to cover flouting Maxims soon!)

**The Maxim of relevance** – Following the Maxim of relevance keeps conversations on track and helps prevent random conversations that lack continuity. This maxim also helps us to understand utterances in conversations that may not be initially obvious. When abiding by this maxim, you should: Only say things that are relevant to the conversation.

Speaker A: “Do you think Leo is dating someone new?”

Speaker B: “Well, he goes to Brighton most weekends.”

Due to the Maxim of Relevance, we can infer that there is a link between Leo dating someone and him going to Brighton, and speaker B isn't just randomly telling us about Leo's trips to Brighton.

**The Maxim of Manner** – The Maxim of Manner mainly refers to the choice of words you use. For example, when following this maxim, we should avoid using big or overly complex words that we know our listeners won't understand and should try our best to be concise and coherent. When abiding by the Maxim of Manner, you should: Avoid obscurity or ambiguity. Be brief and orderly. Try and be as clear as possible. “I'm writing an essay on metonymy. It's a type of figure of speech!”

Here the speaker knew that it was possible that the listener wouldn't know the term metonymy and decided to give a quick explanation.

Breaking Grice's 4 conversational maxims – examples. Grice's Maxims are statements that express a rule of conduct; However, these conducts are often broken during communication. Grice did not assume that everyone would constantly follow these maxims. Instead, he found it interesting when the maxims were not respected, namely by being either violated or flouted. Violating Grice's Maxims – When Grice's Maxims are violated, they have been broken surreptitiously (secretly) or covertly (undercover). This means that others involved in the conversation are unaware that a Maxim has been broken.

The most common maxims that get violated are the Maxim of Quality and the Maxim of Quantity. Maxim of Quality is violated when an individual purposely tells a lie. Maxim of quantity is violated when an individual secretly with holds information that someone else wants to know. Violating Grice's Maxims is more serious than flouting them, yet the severity of the violation can vary. For example, telling a lie in court is arguably worse than telling a little “white lie”.

Flouting Grice's Maxims is a lot more common than violating maxims and is usually considered more acceptable. When Grice's Maxims are being flouted, it should be apparent to all those concerned. Being ironic, using metaphors, pretending to mishear someone, and using a tone of voice that does not match the content of what you are saying are all examples of flouting Grice's Maxims.

Let's take a look at some of the different ways in which the maxims are often flouted. Maxim of Manner is flouted when speakers use many big words and technical jargon that they know their listeners won't understand. Maxim of relevance is flouted when someone pretends to mishear what has been said to change the conversation. Maxim of Quantity is flouted when someone does not answer a question in full, usually to be obtuse or even annoying. Maxim of Quality is flouted when someone is being ironic. (This is not an extensive list of all the ways Maxims can be flouted, just a few handy examples. Can you think of any other ways people flout Grice's Maxims?)



When individuals flout maxims, they usually expect the listener to understand the intended meaning. Maxims are even purposefully flouted at times by comedians and writers for comedic effect!

Here are a few discourse examples of Grice's Maxims being flouted.

Speaker A: "Do you know if there is any food in the fridge?"

Speaker B: "Yes, I do know."

Here the Maxim of Quantity has been flouted as speaker B is withholding information from speaker A. This example is a flout and not a violation because everyone in the conversation is aware that information is not being shared.

Zack: "Wow, this place is awesome. Where do they keep the Archies?"

Sheldon: "In the bedroom of ten-year-old girls, where they belong."

In this extract from *The Big Bang Theory*, Sheldon flouts the Maxim of Quality by giving an answer that both people know is not true. Here, the maxim has been flouted for comedic effect.

Speaker A: "I'm not sure about this new guy I'm seeing. He never messages me back, and I think he's talking to someone else."

Speaker B: "Sounds like a real keeper!"

Here the Maxim of Quality has been flouted. Speaker B is lying - they don't really think that the new guy is a real keeper - they are being ironic. Again, this is not a violation because everyone concerned knows that the truth isn't being told.

Speaker A: "Are you okay? You look upset."

Speaker B: "Uh ... I'm fine." (in a sad tone)

Here the Maxim of Quality has again been flouted as speaker B obviously isn't fine. Speaker B is expecting speaker A to infer something different from what is actually being said. Grice refers to this flout as an implicature. Conversational implicature refers to the extra meaning implied within discourse without necessarily being said aloud.

Grice's conversational maxims - key takeaways. Grice's conversational maxims were created by the British philosopher H. Paul Grice in the 1970s. Grice's 4 Conversational Maxims are: Maxim of Quality, Maxim of Quantity, Maxim of Relevance, and Maxim of Manner.

Grice believed that anyone wishing to engage in meaningful communication would follow these 4 Maxims and would assume that others would also be following them. Grice's Maxims are often broken and can either be violated or flouted. Grice's Maxims have been criticized for not considering cultural differences and for being overly ambiguous.

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