

Gricean Maxims PSet

Once more, when completing academic work, focusing only on the correct solution, such as short responses or quick notes, can fall short for formal submissions. Professors and teaching assistants need to see your answers as well as the reasoning that led you there. This assignment encourages you to articulate your thought process clearly and coherently.

Imagine you are a University of Pennsylvania student submitting a formal problem set. Your task is not simply to solve each problem, but also to guide your audience through the steps of your thinking. Treat this as both a challenge to sharpen your critical reasoning skills and an opportunity to practice effective academic writing.

Guidelines for Completing the Problem Set

1. **Consider Your Audience:** Write for a professor or TA who is unfamiliar with your reasoning. Make your explanation clear and logical.
2. **Explain Your Process:** Clearly describe each step, including the reasoning behind your choices and assumptions.
3. **Write Clearly:** Use full sentences to articulate your thoughts. Avoid shorthand or fragmented notes.
4. **Organize Your Work:** Structure your responses with headings, bullet points, or numbered lists to enhance readability. Use tables where appropriate.
5. **Emphasize Key Insights:** Highlight critical steps, observations, or patterns. Use formatting like bold or underlining sparingly to focus attention.
6. **Address Alternatives:** If relevant, briefly discuss other approaches you considered and why you chose your final method.
7. **Summarize Your Conclusion:** End with a concise summary that links your reasoning to your final answer.
8. **Review Your Work:** Proofread for clarity, completeness, and professionalism. Include all steps, even those that seem obvious.

By following these guidelines, you will not only solve the problems but also develop polished, professional academic writing skills that will benefit you in both academic and professional settings.

Maxims

Even when we discuss it informally in class, logic remains focused on the literal semantic content of a sentence or an entire chapter. Yet, as Herbert Paul Grice famously suggested in 1975, a sentence that is uttered or a chapter that is read can lead to a range of inferences that might reasonably follow from the speaker's use of that sentence in a particular context. **The speaker may end up conveying (intentionally or unintentionally) more than what the sentence literally states.** Consider (6).

- (6) Baseline dialogue
- a. Vlad: How is Kirill getting along in his new job at the bank?
 - b. Tatiana: Oh, quite well, I think; he likes his colleagues, and he hasn't been to prison yet.

We can distinguish between what Tatiana's remark literally entails (that Kirill has not been to prison) and what it suggests (that he might have a tendency toward unlawful behavior or that he could be inept enough to harm the company). A **conversational implicature** is information that the speaker intends to convey but does not explicitly state. Each sentence generates an implicature, a trivial or a non-trivial one.

According to Grice, conversations take place in a context and must be interpreted in that same context. The only way to keep a discussion moving forward is to follow a set of fundamental communication principles that guarantee **efficient interaction**. These principles are known as Conversational Maxims and they operate under the broader Cooperative Principle.

(7) **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 (Grice 1975).
 - **Maxims of Quantity:**
 - * Make your contribution as informative as is required for the current purposes.
 - * Do not make your contribution more informative than is required.
 - **Maxims of Quality (Reliability):**
 - * Do not say what you believe to be false.
 - * Do not say that for which you lack adequate evidence.
 - **The Maxim of Relation:**
 - * Be relevant.¹
 - **Maxims of Manner:**
 - * Avoid obscurity of expression.
 - * Avoid ambiguity.
 - * Be brief (avoid unnecessary prolixity).
 - * Be orderly.

In principle, there are other maxims that are not “conversational” yet may still apply during exchanges (for example, aesthetic, social, or moral maxims like “Be polite”). We will not explore them further here.

In a straightforward case where everyone follows the maxims, working out implicatures (what a statement implies) is quite simple. Take the following example:

- (8) Trivial Cooperative-Principle-obeying dialogue
- a. Vlad: Why did Kirill skip class yesterday?
 - b. Masha: He was sick.
 - c. Vlad (to himself, *implicature*): *Kirill skipped class yesterday because he was sick.*

Vlad derives this implicature using a background assumption about the conversation: because of the Cooperative Principle (7), Masha must have **properly** given the **strongest** statement she believes is both **true** and **relevant**. Kirill’s illness must be directly relevant to why he skipped class (Relation), and Masha knows he was genuinely sick rather than pretending (Quality). It is the most significant factor among any possible reasons (Quantity), and there is no need for further detail about his condition (Quantity/Manner). This is the process behind the implicature in (8c).

Violating vs. Flouting

Things become more interesting when a speaker **violates** a particular maxim or even the cooperative principle itself, which they can certainly choose to do. In the simplest scenario, the Maxim of Relevance and the entire Cooperative Principle can both be violated:

- (9) Cooperative-Principle-violating dialogue
- a. Vlad: Why did Kirill skip class yesterday?
 - b. Masha: Purple Ferrari, wow!
 - c. Vlad (to himself, *implicature*): ???

Here, Masha effectively steps out of the conversation and chooses not to cooperate. She breaks the cooperative principle, especially the maxim of relevance, making her response almost impossible to interpret. We simply do not know her intended meaning.

On the other hand, the pressure to interpret an utterance within the boundaries of the cooperative principle is so strong that the listener often assumes the principle still holds, even when a maxim seems to be broken. In that situation, we say the maxim is **flouted**. This strategy of flouting a maxim accounts for a lot of humor and comedy.

¹In this context, the term “relation” means that the present utterance must be **related** to what was previously said in the discourse, what will be said next, or the current circumstances.

- (10) Cooperative-Principle-flouting dialogue
- a. Vlad: Why did Kirill skip class yesterday?
 - b. Masha: Purple Ferrari, wow!
 - c. Vlad (to himself, *implicature*): *Masha knows what happened, but doesn't want to reveal the real reason Kirill was absent.*

The calculation behind this implicature rests on the idea that, following the Cooperative Principle (7), Masha must have **properly** given the **strongest** statement she believes is both **true** and **relevant**. A purple Ferrari really does exist (Quality). Masha's remark was the most forceful statement she could have made in that context (Quantity). We do not need any further details about the purple Ferrari (Quantity/Manner). Since it seems relevant to the conversation, Masha's mention of it might be a way to sidestep a direct answer (flouting Relation).

Question 1 Examine the following conversational examples (11 through 15) and determine which maxims are violated. Provide an explanation. Assume that the speaker is deliberately undermining the cooperative principle, so these are true instances of violation.

- (11) a. Vlad: What should I do to get rid of this awful headache?
b. Masha: Take some medicine.
- (12) Dr. Kawashima received his Ph.D. in 1986, his B.A. in 1980, and his M.A. in 1982.
- (13) a. Vlad: Have you finished that term paper yet?
b. Masha: It's been raining a lot lately, hasn't it?
- (14) Some of the students arrived. In fact, all of them arrived.
- (15) Vlad and Masha live in the middle of a desert and Vlad insists on asking about the weather every morning.
a. Vlad: What's the weather like?
b. Masha: Oh, today it's snowing, as usual.

Question 2 Sam Bronfman, who was president of a movie production company that had filed for bankruptcy, was accused of perjury at the bankruptcy hearing. Below is the relevant exchange:

- (16) a. Lawyer: Do you have any bank accounts in Swiss banks, Mr. Bronfman?
b. Bronfman: No, sir.
c. Lawyer: Have you ever?
d. Bronfman: The company had an account there for about six months, in Zurich.

That was the end of the conversation. It later emerged that Mr. Bronfman had maintained a personal Swiss bank account for five years. He was initially found guilty of perjury, but this verdict was overturned. Drawing only on the Gricean Maxims, what line of defense did Mr. Bronfman successfully use?

Question 3 Now let us consider the idea of Gricean Letters of Recommendation. Think about what a typical academic recommendation letter should include, then read the following examples. What implicature arises in these cases? Explain how this interpretation emerges, based on the theory we have been developing.

- (17) Dear X:

I am delighted to recommend Tanya Kolomoyets for a position in your department. Tanya was my student for three years, and I can confirm that her handwriting is pristine and that she never once submitted homework late or showed up late to class. She is a real model of punctuality.

Sincerely, Y

(18) Dear X:

I am pleased to endorse Tanya Kolomojets' application to your department. She spent three years in my classes, and during that time I witnessed her outstanding dedication to her family, her knack for entertaining pranks, and her remarkable talent in both table tennis and badminton. She truly knows how to keep things lively.

Sincerely, Y

5.1.1 Scale

Question 4 Under the assumption that the cooperative principle and its maxims are followed, how is the implicature derived in this case (19)? Which maxim is primarily responsible?

- (19) a. Vlad: I ate most of the pizza.
b. Masha (to herself, *implicature*): *He didn't eat all of the pizza.*

Question 5 How many possible interpretations can be assigned to the sentence in (20)? What implicature does it convey, and how is that implication determined?

- (20) a. Vlad: Kirill didn't read all of the books.
b. Masha (to herself, *implicature*): _____

5.1.2 Manner

Question 6 It has often been noted that Grice's statement of the maxim of Manner appears to break its own rules, and some have speculated that this was intentional humor. Identify how the maxim contradicts itself and which two submaxims of Manner are being breached.