



An Animated and Narrated Glossary of
Terms used in Linguistics
presents

Maxim of Quantity



Definition

When engaged in conversation, the Maxim of Quantity requires you to

1. Make your contribution as informative as is required (for the purpose of the exchanges).
2. Do not make your contribution more informative than is required.



H.P. Grice (1975)

H.P. Grice



Basic Idea

- The Maxim of Quantity relates to the **amount of information** provided in **conversations**.
- It is one of the four conversational maxims that make up the **Cooperative Principle**.
- Grice proposes this maxim as an explanation for a certain kind of regularity in conversational behavior with respect to the **amount** of information provided in each turn of a conversation.

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Example 1

Do you have the time?

Yes, it's 9:30.

One finds this normal. Why?

Because the Maxim is observed

- Given the purpose of the conversation, the man contributes **only as much information** as is required.
 - not excessive like “it's 9:30 at night, Greenwich Mean Time, 20 May 2009, ...”
 - Not inadequate like, “it's night time”.

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Example 2

Liz, can I have John's number?

Yes.

Despite her positive answer, we find Liz's behavior weird. Why?

Because the Maxim is violated.

Less information is provided than is required.

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Flouting a Maxim

Liz, can I have John's number?

Yes.

In a case such as this, one might infer that Liz doesn't have the number with her and will supply it later.

WHY?

Because we do not expect the Maxim to be violated, the apparent violation must be motivated.

Deliberate and apparent violation of maxims is called "flouting".

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Implicatures

Liz, can I have
John's number?

Yes.

Inferences obtained from
flouting of maxims are called
implicatures.



Liz may be implicating that

- *Your love rival is near, I'll tell you later* OR
- *I really don't want to give it to you because John doesn't like you; he likes me*

Note: Implicatures do not have to be necessarily true, since the inferences are guessed at rather than derived by formal logic.

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Further reading

- Davis, Wayne (2009) Implicature. In Edward N. Zalta (ed.) *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, Winter 2008 edition. Retrieved 15 March 2009 from <http://plato.stanford.edu/archives/win2008/entries/implicature/>
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- Tserdanelis, Georgios and Wai Yi Peggy Wong (eds.) (2004) *Language Files: Materials for an Introduction of Language and Linguistics*, 9th edition, File 8.4. The Ohio State University Press.
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- Yule, George (1996) *Pragmatics*, Chapter 5. Oxford University Press.

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香港浸會大學
HONG KONG BAPTIST UNIVERSITY

The End

Wee, Lian-Hee and Winnie H.Y. Cheung (2009)
An animated and narrated glossary of terms used in Linguistics.
Hong Kong Baptist University. <http://www.hkbu.edu.hk/library>