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)
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.

Example 1

- 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”.

Do you have the time?  Yes, it’s 9:30.

One finds this normal. Why?

Because the Maxim is observed
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.

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.

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”.
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.

Further reading


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