

Original Paper

The Application of Cooperative Principle in Interrogation

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Abstract

*Language is the fundamental medium through which individuals articulate thoughts, convey emotions, and engage in social interaction. Effective communication is essential in virtually all human activities, enabling participants to exchange messages and construct shared meanings. Successful communication occurs when speakers and listeners align their intentions, allowing messages to be transmitted clearly and understood accurately. Within the field of pragmatics, the Cooperative Principle (CP), introduced by philosopher H.P. Grice, offers a powerful framework for analyzing how conversational participants collaborate to achieve mutual understanding, often by adhering to or strategically violating established conversational norms. This paper explores the theoretical foundations of the Cooperative Principle and its four attendant maxims, *Quality*, *Quantity*, *Relation*, and *Manner*. It further examines their application within the specialized context of interrogation, where communication is inherently asymmetrical and goal-driven. By analyzing how interrogators and interviewees either follow or flout these maxims to assert control, elicit information, or resist disclosure, this study illuminates the intricate dynamics of power, deception, and pragmatics in investigative dialogues. The findings underscore the utility of Gricean pragmatics as an analytical tool for understanding strategic communication in high-stakes institutional settings.*

Keywords

Grice, Cooperative Principle, Interrogation

1. Introduction

The Cooperative Principle (CP), formulated by H.P. Grice, constitutes a cornerstone of pragmatic theory, explaining how interlocutors collaboratively produce meaningful conversation beyond the literal interpretation of utterances. Grice posited that participants in a dialogue generally adhere to an overarching principle of cooperation, manifested through four conversational maxims: *Quality*

(truthfulness), Quantity (informativeness), Relation (relevance), and Manner (clarity). Conversational meaning often arises not only from observing these maxims but also from deliberate violations, which generate implied meanings known as conversational implicatures. While initially applied to ordinary conversation, the CP has proven invaluable for analyzing discourse in institutional contexts where goals, power relations, and constraints differ markedly from everyday interaction. Interrogation represents one such context—a structured, adversarial form of communication aimed at discovering truth, extracting confessions, or gathering intelligence. This paper investigates how the Cooperative Principle operates within interrogations, exploring both cooperative and manipulative uses of the maxims by all parties. Through this analysis, the discussion reveals how pragmatic theory can shed light on the strategic and often conflictual nature of interrogation discourse, offering insights into the linguistic mechanisms of persuasion, evasion, and control.

2. Herbert Paul Grice

Herbert Paul Grice, was a British-educated philosopher of language, who spent the final two decades of his career in the United States. Grice's work on the nature of meaning has influenced the philosophical study of semantics. His theory of implicature is among the most important and influential contribution to contemporary pragmatics. From 1950s, Herbert Paul Grice began to focus on the theory of conversational implicature. But it was through the William James lectures he delivered at Harvard in 1967 that this theory first became known to the public. Part of the lectures was published in 1975 under the title of *Logic and Conversation*, on which we base our present introduction. Grice posited a general set of rules which contribute to ordinary conversation were generally expected to follow. He named it the Cooperative Principle and formulated as follows: Make your contribution such as it required, at the stage where it occurs, by the accepted purpose or direction of the talk exchange in which you engaged. In social science generally and linguistics specially, the Cooperative Principle describes how people interact with one another. Grice believes that there is some regularity in people's conversation. Our talk exchanges do not normally consist of a succession of connected remarks, and would not be relational if they did. They are characteristically, to some degree at least, cooperative efforts; and each participant recognizes in them, to some extent, a common purpose or set of purpose, or at least a mutually accepted direction. But, in conversation what we say would not be our real meaning. Speakers may express his idea indirectly instead of speaking out directly for various reasons. Put more simply, people who obey the cooperative principle in their language will make sure that what they say in a conversation furthers the purpose of that conversation. Listeners and speakers must speak cooperatively and mutually accept one another to be understood in a particular way. Cooperative Principle describes how effective communication in conversation is achieved in common social situation (Langacker, 1987).

3. Four Maxims of Cooperative Principle

Cooperation Principle can be divided into four maxims, called the Gricean maxims, which was proposed by Grice from the pragmatics of natural language. The Gricean maxims explain the link between utterance and what is understood from them. The maxim is based on his cooperative principle, which states—Make your contribution such as it required, at the stage where it occurs, by the accepted purpose or direction of the talk exchange in which you engaged. CP describes how effective communication in conversation is achieved in common social situation and divided into four maxims of quality, quantity, relation and manner. However, Grice assumes that people do not always follow the four maxims in their conversation. On the contrary, Grice found that people could imply hidden meaning when these maxims are violated.

① Maxim of Quality

The Maxim of Quality governs the fundamental expectation of truthfulness in communication. It posits that participants in a conversation will endeavor to make their contributions truthful, refraining from stating what they believe to be false or for which they lack adequate evidence. Adherence to this maxim establishes a baseline of trust and sincerity, allowing the exchange of information to proceed on a reliable foundation. When a speaker deliberately flouts this maxim—as in the case of sarcasm, hyperbole, or outright deceit—the listener is compelled to look beyond the literal falsehood to infer the speaker's genuine attitude or intended meaning, thereby generating a conversational implicature. Thus, the Maxim of Quality is not merely a rule against lying, but a crucial mechanism that enables listeners to distinguish factual assertion from figurative or indirect expression.

② Maxim of Quantity

The Maxim of Quantity concerns the appropriate amount of information offered in a conversational contribution. It requires a speaker to make their contribution as informative as is required for the current purposes of the exchange, while simultaneously avoiding excessive, unnecessary information. A cooperative speaker strives to find this balance: providing too little information creates obscurity and may suggest evasiveness, while providing too much can be overwhelming, tedious, or suspiciously defensive. Violations of this maxim are a primary source of implicature. A notably brief response may imply reluctance, ignorance, or hostility, whereas an unusually detailed explanation might signal an attempt to over-persuade, distract, or conceal a more pertinent fact. The maxim, therefore, ensures communicative efficiency and guides interpretations of a speaker's willingness to be fully cooperative.

③ Maxim of Relation

The Maxim of Relation, often considered the most intuitive, is the directive to be relevant. It operates on the powerful assumption that a speaker's utterance will connect meaningfully to the immediate topic and shared goals of the dialogue. Listeners instinctively interpret any statement under the presumption of its relevance. Consequently, when an utterance appears superficially unrelated or tangential, the listener does not dismiss it but actively engages in interpretive work to construct a plausible relevant connection. This search for relevance is a fundamental engine for generating implicature, enabling speakers to hint,

change the subject subtly, or imply connections without stating them directly. The entire coherence of a conversation relies on the mutual adherence to, and strategic exploitation of, this principle of relevance.

④Maxim of Manner

The Maxim of Manner uniquely regulates not the content of what is said, but the form or manner in which it is expressed. Its superordinate goal is clarity, broken down into the injunctions to avoid obscurity and ambiguity, to be brief, and to be orderly. While the other maxims deal with what information is conveyed, this maxim governs how effectively it is packaged and delivered. Adherence promotes understanding and efficiency. Deliberate violations, however, such as the use of jargon, ambiguous phrasing, disorganized narratives, or unnecessary circumlocution, are rarely accidental. They often serve as strategic tools to obscure the truth, evade a direct answer, create plausible deniability, or signal discomfort. Analyzing breaches of the Maxim of Manner provides critical insight into a speaker's strategic intentions and the potential presence of unstated subtext.

4. The Application of Cooperative Principle in Interrogation

4.1 *The Application of Cooperative Principle in Interrogation*

Interrogation is an interpersonal activity between investigators and suspects, and the realization of the objective of interrogation depends largely on the conversational activity of verbal interaction between the two sides of the interrogation. The application of speech plays an important role in the interrogation. Interrogation session is the result of the nature of the case, the conversational ability of the investigator, the psychology and attitude of the suspect, the facts and evidence of the case mastered by the investigator and the interrogation strategy. This paper analyzes interrogation conversations from the perspective of cooperation principle, discusses interrogation strategies, pragmatic strategies and practice patterns of interrogation conversations conveyed by interrogation conversations, and proposes interrogation conversation strategies based on cooperation principle, in order to provide a new perspective and theoretical guidance for the practical application and research of interrogation language, and provide references for interrogation practices (Hazout, 2004: 393).

4.2 *The Maxim of Quantity in Interrogation*

The quantitative principle of interrogation sessions requires that the words spoken between investigators and criminal suspects should contain the information necessary for the purpose of conversation, and the words spoken should not contain more information than necessary. Interrogation is a serious law enforcement activity, and interrogation conversation is normative, a colloquial, interactive and dynamic language in the legal process. The record formed by the interrogation session as evidence, that is, the confession and defense of the criminal suspect and the defendant, will directly have legal effect, so as to accuse the criminal suspect, requiring the interrogation session content to describe the criminal facts such as the means of committing the crime, time, place, etc., carefully and accurately, with complete elements, and in line with the relevant legal concept system of the suspected crime. This requires that interrogation sessions conform to the principle of quantity, and the words said between investigators and criminal

suspects should contain information necessary for the purpose of conversation, and should not contain more information than necessary (Wang Kefei, 2008: 9). To solidify the evidence and break the case. For example, as shown in the following example, in the stage of questioning basic questions and informing power at the initial stage of interrogation, investigators need to inquire basic information about criminal suspects, such as name, age, occupation, ethnicity, etc. Most of the conversations at this time follow the “quantity criterion”, the content of the questioning is relatively fixed, the procedure is obvious, and most of the suspects adopt a cooperative attitude. This part of the conversation is mostly composed of short sentences, and the structure of the question and answer is relatively simple. This kind of questions can enhance the investigators' understanding of the suspects, ease the tense atmosphere at the beginning of the interrogation, and examine their attitude and psychological state of interrogation.

Example 1:

问：多大了？

答：二十。

问：你当时住的哪里？

答：xx 小区二号楼二单元。

问：户籍地是 xx 吗？

答：是的。

问：根据相关法律规定，如实供述自己的案件事实可以从轻处理，你是否明白？

答：明白。

问：根据相关法律规定，你有权申请办案人员回避，是否申请？就是你认识我们吗？

答：不认识。

问：你是否患有重大疾病？

答：没有。

问：你之前是否被公安机关处理过？

答：处理过。

问：怎么处理的？

答：调解，私了过。

问：干什么工作的？

答：货车司机。

问：母亲叫什么名字。

答：王 xx。

问：干什么的？

答：在家。

问：电话？

答：xxxxxx。

4.3 *The Maxim of Quality in Interrogation*

The maxim of quality in interrogation requires investigators and suspects not to say what they know to be false, not to say what the evidence is insufficient. For suspects, quality standards require them to tell the truth about the facts of the case.

The guidelines require them to be truthful in what they say and not to use fraudulent and illegal methods of interrogation. However, it should be made clear that the interrogation language of investigators is a kind of strategy-applied discourse, and its semantic structure reflects the interrogation strategy of investigators. In the process of interrogation, the two sides of the investigation are often in opposing positions, and the whole interrogation process is full of antagonism and game, so it is unrealistic for the investigation agency to expect the criminal suspect to make a truthful confession. In order to successfully obtain the effective confession of criminal suspects, investigators sometimes choose to use targeted pragmatic strategies according to the characteristics and contextual factors of criminal suspects. However, this kind of pragmatic strategy is different from deception. Within the scope permitted by law, the core still conforms to the principle of quality, and the purpose is to prompt the criminal suspect to make a truthful confession.

Example 2

问：签了以后知道这个事情是什么事儿了吗？不就洗钱吗？啊（提高音量）不就是洗钱吗？那你这会儿银行已经和你说过了，你有那个证，你还在那给我打马虎眼有什么用？啊？从那一年开始，中国人民银行需要他们每个办卡的都需要签这个东西，这个东西是干嘛的，做证据明白吗？还不知道。

答：沉默。

问：你做了吗？为什么干这事儿？不就是来钱快吗？不就是缺钱吗？你们光知道玩挣不到钱，不就为了挣点钱，花钱嘛，对吧？来钱比你们那快吧，比管父母要来的快吧？

答：沉默。

问：为什么干这个？为什么给别人转钱？

答：（小声嘀咕）

问：说啥？

答：挣钱多

4.4 *The Maxim of Relation in Interrogation*

The maxim of relation in interrogation, that is, to see whether the speech information provided by the speaker in the interrogation can promote their own or the listener's conversational purpose. Interrogation conversations often revolve around the purpose of the interrogation. In addition to the simple associations of direct responses in interrogation conversations, there are also indirect associations that need to be understood in conjunction with background knowledge. Relevance criterion combines verbal communication with cognitive activities. As a communicative activity, the key to the success of interrogation is to see whether the cognitive environment of the two sides of the interrogation can reflect each other and each other, and the best correlation in communication is to achieve sufficient contextual

effects through effective processing. During the interrogation, the communication between the two sides is often based on the common background information. The two sides of the interrogation either understand the meaning of the words directly through direct correlation, or deduce the meaning of the other side's words through indirect correlation.

For example, the use of vague language in the communication process can simplify the complicated, trivial, inconvenient and meaningless information involved in the interrogation, and carry out information transmission at a lower cost, increase the amount of information in the conversation, improve the communication efficiency, protect sensitive information, and convey the interrogator's strategic intention in a concise and comprehensive manner. The "best connection" helps both sides of the investigation to achieve the desired contextual effect of the conversation.

Example 3

问：不合法的钱对吧，这钱是干什么用的？

答：这真不知道。

问：说实话。

答：因为我当时问过别人，没人和我说嘛。

问：没人和你说过你会用卡吗，这钱是干什么用的？

答：他们和我说一直用卡转钱。

问：能好好说就好好说。

答：我还没有那些女的转的多。

问：我知道在你那里，怎么让你用呢？绑定手机银行？

答：不知道，这我真不知道。

问：那你肯定给他了呀？

答：就是我把卡给他之后，我自个儿就在这个屋里，401 或 402。

问：你把银行卡的密码都告诉给他们了是吧？

答：对。

问：你告诉王某了还是王某把你领到酒店后，你告诉其中的一个工作人员？

答：我没用过这卡，办好了就没弄过了，那卡刚一办就给他们拿走了，在那之后，我就在 402 坐着，他们在 401 弄，弄完之后把卡给我，我直接弄到桌里面了，因为对我来说这卡没法用。

问：你将银行卡提供给王某了是吗？

答：嗯应该说是，可以说是他。

4.5 The Maxim of Manner in Interrogation

The maxim of manner in interrogation requires investigators to use plain, clear, concise, and well-organized language. The interrogation session has normative characteristics. As a litigation legal document, the key details of the case such as time, place, person, tool and other elements of the case need to be clearly and accurately stated in order to enhance the effectiveness of evidence. At the same time, the conversational language of interrogation has the characteristics of flexibility, and the language means and expression modes are flexible and rich, such as the use of rhetoric, parallelism, irony, metaphor, etc.,

which adds the persuasiveness and appeal of the interrogation language, and shows the language art of the investigators and the control of all aspects of the interrogation situation. As we all know, criminal suspects have different levels of culture and intelligence, and may have deviation or even inability to understand the content of the power to inform before trial and the professional terms involved in the interrogation process.

Rather than blindly pursuing language accuracy and making words difficult to understand by using a large number of technical terms, interrogators can express themselves flexibly according to the context, which will be more conducive to the development of interrogation work.

Example 4

问：转钱是吧，转的是不合法的钱是吧，不合法的钱是什么不合法的钱，是干什么的？

答：国外赌场的。

问：网络犯罪的是吧？

答：虚拟的那种东西。

问：就是网络犯罪的钱是吧？

答：对。

问：不是正规的钱你为什么跑过来干这个？

答：他们说正经的活儿

问：他们说正经的活儿。答应你给多少钱呢？

答：来的时候说是 5 天领 3000 多。

5. Conclusion

This paper has explored the application of Grice's Cooperative Principle within the specialized communicative context of interrogation. As a structured, goal-driven, and asymmetrical interaction, interrogation provides a unique setting in which the four conversational maxims—Quantity, Quality, Relation, and Manner—are strategically adhered to or deliberately flouted by both interrogators and interviewees. The analysis demonstrates that while interrogators often rely on the maxims to construct clear, relevant, and controlled questioning frameworks, they may also strategically violate certain maxims to exert psychological pressure, test consistency, or elicit concealed information. Conversely, suspects may manipulate these maxims to evade direct answers, obscure truth, or resist disclosure, generating implicatures that reflect underlying power dynamics and communicative strategies.

The findings affirm that the Cooperative Principle serves as a potent analytical lens for understanding interrogation discourse, revealing how pragmatic cooperation and conflict coexist in high-stakes institutional dialogues. By examining real interrogation excerpts, this study illustrates how deviations from the maxims—whether through omission, ambiguity, irrelevance, or tactical untruthfulness—function as meaningful communicative acts rather than mere conversational failures. Ultimately, this inquiry underscores the value of Gricean pragmatics in deciphering the intricate interplay of language, power, and strategy in legal and investigative settings, offering both theoretical insights and practical

implications for the conduct and analysis of interrogation practices.

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