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**TOWARDS A SOCIO-COGNITIVE  
ACCOUNT OF FLOUTING AND  
FLOUT-BASED MEANING**



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Ann Jorid Klungervik Greenall  
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## Chapter 1:

# INTRODUCTION

The beginning of the story of Paul Grice's theory of the Cooperative Principle almost has an air of subversiveness about it; *Logic and Conversation*, the paper containing this famous theory, is supposed to have circulated underground for the longest period of time before the author himself, one late night at a party in 1973 at a conference in Austin, Texas, having imbibed a few more drinks than he should have, finally agreed to have it published.<sup>1</sup> Perhaps this bears evidence to a tacit understanding regarding the kind of effect his theory was going to have, for the encounter between his paper and the research community indeed caused a veritable explosion. The present story is about the effects of this explosion and about how they now, more than

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<sup>1</sup> This information, recounted by George Lakoff who was actually there and even had a part in the event, was circulated on the web (via the mailing list FUNKNET) in the late autumn of 1997.

thirty years later, may have begun to ebb away; but more than that, it is about *why* they have begun to ebb away, and about what it will take to jolt this tremendously potent set of ideas back to life.

Returning to the *original* story, most of it should be old news to those well-travelled within pragmatics, but it may nevertheless be well worth repeating: the perceived theoretical kernel of the Cooperative Principle (CP) – the notion of implicature – quickly established itself as one of the most important items on the agenda of the then still fresh and impressionable field of pragmatics. Research on implicature branched off in a number of different directions: philosophers became intent on turning the CP into a theory of meaning built around the notion of rationality, language scientists tried to adapt it to fit the rigid formal structures of semantic theory, cognitivists used it as inspiration for cognitive theories of language and meaning, social pragmaticians investigated aspects of the theory in relation to society, and last but not least, a large number of empirically oriented researchers from a number of different fields (for instance literary studies, AI, forensic linguistics, gender studies, conversation analysis, translation studies, psychology, even neurobiology) took Grice's framework (most often with a social pragmatics twist) with them as a toolbox in various kinds of fieldwork, often using what they found in the field to make various kinds of statements regarding the CP.

Throughout the decades of its existence, a widespread consensus regarding the importance and influence of the CP has strangely unproblematically coexisted with frequent declarations of its fruitlessness (see, e.g., Givón 1983:154), or demise (see, e.g., Davis 1998). Up until the late 1980s, those in agreement that Gricean theory was 'it', could largely rest assured that observable fact supported their view of the *status quo*: research activity was booming. Today, however, the picture has changed, at least as far as the CP as *theoretical* effort is concerned. Not much current activity and interest in the theory can be detected among rationalist philosophers, and although there is still a good deal of activity in the linguist-formalist camp, this line of research, rather than claiming a space at the very heart of pragmatics

as it once did, has marginalized itself more and more in its struggle to keep head above water in the difficult task of accommodating into strict formalizing regimes currently pressing notions such as, for instance, context. The cognitive branch of Gricean research, launched by Sperber & Wilson in 1986 under the name of *relevance theory*, continues, of course, to exert great influence on the field, but from the very outset it took leave so thoroughly of concepts which together formed the essence of the Gricean effort (for instance the concept of *maxim*), that it must in some ways be considered to be a completely different project altogether. And finally, Geoffrey Leech's (1983) principles-of-pragmatics approach, which revolved around the notion that Grice's maxims belong within a larger scheme of maxims and principles also at work in societies, had its growth so thoroughly stunted by heavy criticism and even ridicule on the part of those who could only see *ad hocness* in the large, general picture Leech was (wittingly or unwittingly) beginning to paint, that it never really regained its foothold. With all of this theoretical failure, no wonder that the 'Gricean empirists' have tended to stick with the 'old', sketchy Grice (often with a Leechian, add-a-maxim approach). The Gricean empirists, incidentally, represent perhaps the only branch of genuinely Gricean research which can be said to be still flourishing, but in living its life under the shadow of the heavy criticism of Grice's original, unfinished framework (and under the shadow of the criticism against Leech), and on the margins of the field of pragmatics; and in constituting no concerted theoretical effort, the significance of this branch remains obscure.

In the light of these facts, the big question is this: why did the CP, this bud of a theory which held so much promise, never really amount to anything theoretically, in the sense of developing into a unifying epistemology with a clear anchorage in the most valuable insights provided in the original framework on the one hand, and a fruitful hand-in-hand relationship with accruing empirical evidence on the other? One of the basic answers to this question, I believe, is contained within the fact that both Grice as well as his post-decessors have relied

on a set of background assumptions regarding communicators, language and communication which is largely Cartesian, subjectivist, individualist, or, in a word, *monological* (Linell 1996:7:18). The monological paradigm tends to project onto the theories within its grip the ideas that the communication participant is a self-contained entity which is essentially isolated and only incidentally social, that language is a function of the individual's inborn rationality or his or her cognitive faculties, and that communication is merely incidental to the ability to think in terms of language, and the ability to speak. The result of this projection, then, is, among other things, a choice of focus within Gricean theories on some of the least fruitful aspects of the CP, for instance, the idea of the connection between (an inborn) rationality and meaning; the idea, adopted within formal semantics, that there should be a standardized relationship between the observance of certain maxims and one form of conversational implicature (*generalized conversational implicature* (Grice 1989:37ff)) which can be studied in isolation from considerations of speaker and context; and the idea (implicit in Grice, if present at all) that the 'reasoning process' which the hearer performs upon receiving a message, is essentially private and determined by inborn faculties. The lack of fruitfulness of these ideas is, of course, due to the fact that they have fallen more and more out of tune with accumulating empirical evidence, evidence which has "shown discourse to be *social* in nature" (Linell 1996:7:7). Thus, theories built around them have lost considerable momentum, with a subsequent return of the empirists to the original source (to the extent that they were ever willing to let go of the 'real' Grice).<sup>2</sup>

A single-minded focus on the least fruitful aspects of the CP has, naturally, entailed a *lack* of attention to its *more fruitful* potentials. What I have in mind is of course the concept of *flouting*, described by

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<sup>2</sup> A more rare, *theoretical* return to the original source can be found in Gundel et al. (1990, 1993). Note, however, that in this case, the recourse is not due to some sort of dissatisfaction with theories in the wake of Grice, but rather to a satisfaction that Grice's original formulation is "adequate for explicating the facts at issue" (1993:295).

Grice as one of four ways in which the speaker may fail to fulfil a maxim:

He [the speaker] may *flout* a maxim; that is, he may blatantly fail to fulfill it. On the assumption that the speaker is able to fulfill the maxim and to do so without violating another maxim (because of a clash), is not opting out, and is not, in view of the blatancy of his performance, trying to mislead, the hearer is faced with a minor problem: How can his saying what he did say be reconciled with the supposition that he is observing the overall Cooperative Principle? This situation is one that characteristically gives rise to a conversational implicature; and when a conversational implicature is generated in this way, I shall say that a maxim is being exploited. (1989:30)

The lack of any serious theoretical attention to this phenomenon is indeed conspicuous considering that Grice here testifies to the fact that flouting is that which characteristically gives rise to a conversational implicature, a claim which, to my knowledge, has not been contested by any of his critics, and one which signals that the notion of flouting should in fact constitute the key hypothesis in any process of theorizing around implicature. The basic explanation of this lack of attention is probably quite simple: monological theory does not go together well with a notion which depends, as flouting does, so utterly on the idea of *sharedness*. Not only does the relative success of a flout depend on whether or not speakers and hearers both have knowledge of the maxim breached (plus knowledge as regards when it does and does not apply) in order to be able to communicate and detect the breach, it also depends heavily on the possibility of the participants to have quite extensive insight into each others' interpretative contexts, an insight which can only be seen as possible if we assume that context (in the sense of the totality of an individual's interpretative resources) is socially constructed in communicative interaction between members of speech communities, that is, if it is *socio-cognitive*. The notion of flouting thus points towards a non-monological potential in Grice's theory, one which, to my knowledge, has so far not been exploited.

In sum, then, we seem to be faced with the problem of a stagnation in current Gricean research. At the same time, there seems to be a large, unexplored potential in Grice's theory which points towards a completely different paradigm than the one which has so far

constituted the platform for Gricean studies, one with a more profound social orientation. What I have in mind is the *dialogically based socio-cognitive approach*, emanating from the Bakhtin Circle with M. M. Bakhtin and V. N. Voloshinov as the main representatives, and represented by, among others, Rommetveit (1992) and Linell (1996:7). In an introduction to a state-of-the-art collection of articles Wold (1992) describes the approach thus:

The dialogically based, social-cognitive approach reflects an insistence on the necessity to study language use, a conception of the world as multidimensional and always only partially understood, and Man as a social being in search of meaning with individual minds embedded in a cultural collectivity. Linguistic meaning is conceived as open and dynamic, and constituted in the dialogic process of communication. It is not to be seen as formal and static representations. Concepts like dialogue, intersubjectivity, intentionality, perspective taking, “attunement to the attunement of the other”, temporarily shared social realities, fixation of perspectives and meaning potentials are all frequently used . . . The tension between language as a conventionalized system and specific acts of real communication is a recurrent topic. (1-2)

With this description as a backdrop, the general question underlying the present work is this: what happens if we try to explore Grice’s theory from within this alternative paradigm? The tentative answer and working hypothesis is that Grice again becomes theoretically productive, with results that, on the one hand, are founded on and keep their ties back to many of Grice’s most important insights, and on the other, are not, like monological theory, at odds with current empirical evidence. Thus, the current *voyage* is in a certain sense a good old fashioned ‘rescue operation’ (see, e.g., Leech 1983:80f, and Thomas 1994a:4f), but rather than trying, as has been the tendency so far, to rescue Grice ‘as is’ for the purpose of preserving monological beliefs (or, in other words, for the purpose of suppressing the theory’s non-monological potential), I here try to rescue Grice *from* monologism and a fate of slow suffocation within a paradigm which has a harder and harder time striking sparks in encounters with perceived fact.

In turning this abstract task into a concrete aim, I have chosen to focus on the notion of flouting, for the reasons listed above (i.e. the centrality of this notion in the CP, the neglect of it in subsequent

theorizing, and last but not least, because of its dependency on precisely a socio-cognitively oriented approach in order to find its explanation). Or, in other words, the concrete aim of this work is to outline a socio-cognitive direction for an account of flouting and flout-based meaning. In doing so, I round up the major theoretical building blocks of such an account, performing on all of them in turn the operation of extracting them from the monological and inserting them into the dialogical paradigm.

The most crucial building blocks for the purpose of developing an account of flouting and flout-based meaning are the following:

- *Interpretational drive*
- *The entity breached*
- *Context*
- *The act of flouting*
- *The interpretational process and its products*

Chapters 2 and 3 both revolve around the essential notion of *interpretational drive*. It is a common assumption that indirect meaning demands more effort in interpretation than other, more straightforward kinds of meaning. Thus, one might presume, some form of additional interpretational drive will therefore be needed in cases of flouting. In Chapter 2 I show that Grice's (implicit) claim that the hearer is prompted in such cases by an assumption that the speaker is being cooperative and is observing the breached maxim on a different level is incorrect, since there exist examples of maxim breach where this assumption logically cannot be made, but where new meaning is nevertheless both intended and detectable. I then suggest an alternative explanation, namely that the interpretational drive primarily at work in the case of flouts is identical to the interpretational drive which is at work in the interpretation of utterances in general, namely *reciprocal response-readiness*, which is a spontaneous mutual orientation and urge to communicate, stemming from the existence of certain existential conditions with which we are met when we are born. This drive, it is claimed, is in principle strong

and dynamic enough to account for the interpretation of both non-flouts and flouts. In the second part of the chapter, I suggest, however, that this conceptual shift from cooperation to reciprocal response-readiness does not mean that the notion of cooperation does not have a place in an account of flouting and flout-based meaning: cooperation being more fundamental than non-cooperation, the notion of cooperation should always be expected to play an important role generally in pragmatic theorizing. More specifically, in Gricean theory, cooperation can be seen to play an important role in enhancing basic interpretational drive.

Chapter 3 continues the exploration of the notion of basic interpretational drive. Here, I go more deeply into the Gricean tradition with respect to how it views the communication participant and what motivates him or her to communicate. I show that the traditional, monological idea of the intrinsically *rational* communication participant leads to a view of participants being basically motivated by *self-interest*, which, it is claimed, corresponds poorly with, for instance, the existence of certain types of clearly other-oriented discourse. In the second part of the chapter I return to the notion of reciprocal response-readiness, developing it further by incorporating the Bakhtinian notion of *answerability*. It is furthermore shown how reciprocal response-readiness functions experientially, by building up a felt tension which can only be released by (communicative) action. Finally, phatic communication is discussed as the most clear-cut example of this tension at work, a tension which in prototypical situations, because there is no easy release in the form of agenda-derived conventions, may be allowed to accumulate.

In Chapter 4, I move on to the entities which are breached in the act of flouting. In Grice these are the famous *maxims* (1989:26f):

**QUANTITY:**

Make your contribution as informative as is required (for the current purposes of the exchange).

Do not make your contribution more informative than is required.



**QUALITY** (Supermaxim: Try to make your contribution one that is true):

Do not say that which you believe to be false.

Do not say that for which you lack adequate evidence.

**RELATION:**

Be relevant.

**MANNER** (Supermaxim: Be perspicuous):

Avoid obscurity of expression.

Avoid ambiguity.

Be brief (avoid unnecessary prolixity).

Be orderly.

The main claim made in Chapter 4 is that Grice's maxims are part of a large array of floutable, socio-culturally variable *intersubjective constraints on interaction*. I criticize the monological tendency in linguistic and cognitivist circles to see maxims as inborn entities, a view which, among other things, has led to constant attempts at reducing the number of such entities, in order to retain credibility. I trace the ancestry of the present work in the issue of maxims back to Leech's (1983) social-pragmatics, 'proliferationist' approach, but with the important caveat that I do not agree with the monological background assumptions which can be detected even in this work, or with its 'enumeration policy'. Rather than trying to isolate and enumerate individual maxims, I claim, it is far preferable to try to get to the bottom of the question of what it is that distinguishes this kind of entity from others. The most important distinguishing feature of intersubjective constraints on interaction (including maxims) is then shown to be their normativity, which entails *floutability*. The chapter ends with a demonstration of the socio-cultural variability of such constraints, where different constraints are shown to be in operation at different times, in different cultures and in different *activity types* (the term is borrowed from Levinson 1992<sup>3</sup>).

Chapter 5 is devoted to the much neglected, though crucial theoretical building block of *context*. In it, I show how context – defined as the full

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<sup>3</sup> An earlier version of this paper appeared in 1979.

potential of interpretative resources available to an individual at any one moment – is thoroughly socio-cognitive, in the sense that social (communicative) interaction shapes interpretations of stimuli, interpretations which become that which inhabits individuals' cognitions (Voloshinov 1973). Furthermore, I show how context is managed by individuals by means of two basic human biological endowments, viz. the ability to form and remember gestalts or *frames*, and the ability to focus on some things to the exclusion of others in moment-to-moment experience, leading to the development of socio-cognitive *relevance structures* (Schutz & Luckmann 1973). Schutz & Luckmann's various forms of relevance are outlined, and the idea is introduced that the act of flouting provides one form of Schutz & Luckmannian relevance, viz. *imposed thematic relevance*. That which holds imposed thematic relevance attracts the attention of individuals, Schutz & Luckmann claim, because it represents frame-break; that is, it introduces something unfamiliar in the midst of something familiar. Flouting, it is claimed here, is and does exactly the same thing. Schutz & Luckmann's relevance is then argued to be preferable as a point of departure for a 'relevance theory' than that of Sperber & Wilson (1995), and finally, the theoretical division of labour between Schutz & Luckmann's notion of relevance and that of a maxim of Relation is discussed, as is the idea that *grounding theory* (e.g., Hopper 1979a, 1979b), might provide some important contributions to an understanding of the notion that there should exist certain conventional strategies available for speakers for the fulfilment of the maxim of Relation.

In the last chapter, Chapter 6, I address the notion of flouting and flout-based meaning directly. The idea that the act of flouting provides imposed thematic relevance becomes the point of departure for discussing why speakers flout, and for discussing further why, and in addition how, hearers interpret them. The fact that flouting is frame-breaking, that is, thematically relevant, means, it is claimed, that one of its basic functions is to attract attention beyond normal levels. A second, related basic function is that of involving the hearer in more

active meaning construction (since thematic relevance, or *unusualness*, a more general and more widely used label, is well known for stimulating *increased interpretational activity*). Flouting is thus an important creative force in communication and an important provider of general communicative energy. In the second part of the chapter, previous models and model sketches of hearer interpretation of flout-based meaning are criticized for their view of the interpretative process as an act-by-act procedure and of their single-minded focus on implicature. The hearer's process, it is claimed, is a dynamic and dialogical one, characterized by a constant back-and-forth movement between processual elements. The *product* of this process (traditionally, the implicature) is one or more hypotheses, which are subject to negotiation in the communication situation. The process does, however, also have other products, in the form of contextual elements made available to the interpreting communication participant *during* the process. These elements, it is claimed, may influence the ongoing communication just as much as the end-product, which demonstrates the importance of looking at the interpretative process not merely as a 'fast track to implicature', but as an end in itself.

## Chapter 2 :

### WHAT DOES COOPERATION HAVE TO DO WITH IT?

The first major building block of the theoretical apparatus surrounding the notion of flouts is that of *interpretational drive*: what on earth is it that makes hearers willing to make the effort in the face of the fact that indirect meaning is a more – in many cases much more – demanding interpretational task than other, more straightforward interpretational tasks?

In the original theory, the function of providing extra interpretational drive is taken care of by one aspect of Grice's special brand of *cooperation*, that is, a willingness on the part of a hearer to believe that the speaker is observing the conversational maxims on some level, which works in the following way: the speaker breaches a maxim, the hearer notes the breach, the hearer believes the speaker has not 'really' breached the maxim, which, then, prompts him to go on a search for meaning which will provide evidence for observance.

My first aim in this chapter is to show that such a search in many cases will be unfruitful, which makes it unlikely that the hypothesis that *The speaker is observing the maxims* should be the only, or even the major source of interpretational drive in the case of flouts. The major source of interpretational drive in the case of flouts is rather to be found, it is claimed, in the basic interpretational inclination on which *all* interpretation depends, namely in the all-pervasive *reciprocal response-readiness*, defined as a mutual, socio-existential responsiveness to the surrounding social world which is due, among other things, to the dialogical mode of existence of individuals: being is a form of becoming; thus the self is a necessarily active entity which responds to the world in the form of interpreting it.

What role, then, if any, is left for the notion of *cooperation* to play in an account of flouting and flout-based meaning? This is the focus of the remainder of the chapter, where I first of all show that reciprocal response-readiness, in constituting a universal drive for meaning, actually *motivates* cooperation in all its senses, because cooperation always enhances the chances of *achieving* meaning. Thus, cooperation will be, as it observably is, common, if not all-pervasive, which on the one hand explains why we come to rely on and expect cooperation from our conversation partners to the extent that the assumption that the speaker is cooperative becomes an important secondary source of interpretational drive, and on the other why cooperation is more essential than its counterpart non-cooperation, and thus why it should, in any account of language and communication, receive theoretical primacy over non-cooperation.

For such an important notion, the notion of cooperation has received surprisingly little attention in its own right. It has mostly been taken for granted, in one of two ways: either, debates have taken Grice's far-from-resolved notion as a point of departure, or they have leant too heavily on an everyday interpretation of the word cooperation. In addition, very few have made their positions clear, and thus, people have been talking at cross-purposes, irrespective of whether they have defended or criticized the notion. The last part of this chapter presents

a tentative four-way analysis of the concept of cooperation for the purpose of providing a possible starting point for a more thorough analysis of cooperation, and also for the purpose of showing how people have been talking at cross-purposes, in order to fend off critics' claims that, because 'people do not cooperate', Grice's scheme must be deemed invalid.

#### GRICEAN COOPERATION AS INTERPRETATIONAL DRIVE

Flouts involve, roughly speaking, (at least) two layers of meaning, one closely connected with the core meanings of the individual words or expressions employed in the utterance and their combinations, and another which is less closely connected with these meanings, and which has to be worked out with the help of more peripheral *context* (see Chapter 5). Thus, it has been claimed, flouts must be seen to be somehow more difficult to interpret and to involve more effort in interpretation than more straightforward meaning (Blass 1990:50ff, Giora 1995:23, Thomas 1995:120, Wilson & Sperber 1981:165f, Zuñiga 1995:368).<sup>1</sup> Therefore, it would seem, an account of flouting and flout-based meaning needs to provide an adequate explanation of what it is that makes the hearer go ahead and interpret flouts in spite of these facts.

Grice's own explanation, as mentioned, involves the notion of cooperation. The first question that needs answering, then, is what *is* cooperation, in Grice's sense? What is it reasonable to assume that Grice might have been aiming at when he decided to use this term, a term which gave name to a theory which came to define an entire era of research within language study?

The answer is, I believe, twofold, and is most easily given by reference to Grice's famous "general pattern for the working out of a

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<sup>1</sup> It is also, incidentally, quite likely that flouts are more difficult to *produce* and thus also involve more effort at the *speaker* end, than more straightforward utterances. See McCawley (1978).

conversational implicature” (1989:31), which is a rough and ready model of how he envisaged the hearer’s reasoning process:

He [the speaker] has said that *p*; there is no reason to suppose that he is not observing the maxims, or at least the Cooperative Principle; he could not be doing this unless he thought that *q*; he knows (and knows that I know that he knows) that I can see that the supposition that he thinks that *q* is required; he has done nothing to stop me thinking that *q*; he intends me to think, or is at least willing to allow me to think, that *q*; and so he has implicated that *q*. (31)

What this schema offers, is both a description of cooperation, and an illustration of cooperation at work. On the one hand, there is *speaker-cooperation*: the speaker is supposed to cooperate in the form of observing the maxims (“on at least some level” (Levinson 1983:103), that is, either on the surface level, or at the level of the implicature). On the other, however, there is *hearer-cooperation*, that is, a willingness to assume that others are observing the maxims (on some level) (which is, of course, the kind of cooperation we are talking about when we are talking about interpretational drive). These two aspects taken together could be called *maxim-related cooperation*.

Clearly, however, Grice’s notion of cooperation is about more than just maxim-related cooperation. This is evident from the following formulation in the above quote: ‘there is no reason to suppose that he [the speaker] is not observing the maxims, or at least the Cooperative Principle’. On the face of it, this is quite a paradoxical statement, because it creates an opposition (cf. ‘or at least’) between two statements which in effect mean the same thing: observing the maxims *is* observing the overall Cooperative Principle, at least by virtue of the latter’s formulation. “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 1989:26) merely states again that the maxims should be observed, because what the maxims do is spell out *ways* of making your contribution such as is required. This is just one of a multitude of examples showing that Grice’s original formulations often cannot be taken literally. The CP in its original formulation is merely a sketch, and thus nit-picking over apparent paradoxes like this one, and over

the ways in which things are said in general, would generally be a waste of time (cf. Thomas 1994b:2). Grice had, however, *visions* and *aims* that rise through this surface level, and what the present work is about is to try to grasp some of these, develop them further, and transcend them where necessary. As regards cooperation, for example, it is, I believe, fair to say that the above formulation, plus something Grice wrote at a later point, that is, “what is implicated is what it is required that one assume a speaker to think in order to preserve the assumption that he is observing the Cooperative Principle (*and perhaps some conversational maxims as well*)” (1989:86) (my emphasis), clearly reveal that he aimed for his ‘overall Cooperative Principle’ to ultimately be about *more* than just maxim-related cooperation.

What this was supposed to be is not quite clear, but it is perhaps reasonable to believe that he, like so many of his successors, relied on an everyday notion of cooperation (one which also, incidentally, has both a speaker and a hearer side: the speaker’s being generally cooperative and the hearer’s being willing to assume that the speaker has tried to be generally cooperative). Very few Gricean notions have been as hotly debated as that of cooperation, and it is basically this, unspecified, aspect of his notion which has been the cause of the most devastating blows. Not because Grice left it unspecified, but rather because it has been allowed to remain unspecified: a lack of discussion of the nature of cooperation and the lack of a commonly accepted analysis of it lead to a lack of consensus regarding whether or not communicators actually cooperate, a question whose splitting effect nearly managed to tear to pieces the ground under the CP.

I will be returning to the latter problem later in this chapter; it is now time to address the central question in this section, namely the one regarding what role the two main aspects of what I shall call *Gricean cooperation* – maxim-related cooperation and everyday, general cooperativity – are seen to play in the hearer’s interpretation of flouts. Again, the answer is to be found in the general pattern for the working out of a conversational implicature. According to this pattern, the



speaker has said that *p*, which – it is implied – means that he has been in some sense (and at least temporarily) uncooperative. This means that the hearer is faced with the task of interpreting an utterance which is less straightforwardly interpretable than other utterances. And why would he choose to do that? According to the pattern, he would do so because he is – as he generally is – willing to keep up a belief that the speaker *means* to be observing the maxims and/or to be generally cooperative, if not at the surface level, then at least on some other, deeper level. Thus, in the Gricean scheme, the basic interpretational driving force is seen to be the hearer's version of both aspects of Gricean cooperation.

#### **The non-necessity of an assumption of Gricean cooperation**

Upon closer scrutiny, however, it will be found that Grice's implicit assumption – that the hearer's inclination to cooperate in terms of Gricean cooperation is his basic interpretational drive – does not hold water. Interpretational drive does *not* depend crucially on a faith in the speaker's maxim observance on some level, or on a faith in the speaker's general cooperativity (if I may keep appealing, for a little while longer, to the reader's intuitive understanding of *everyday cooperation*), simply because interpretation can be shown to flow steadily onwards, regardless of whether or not hearers' expectations – be they about maxim observance, general cooperativity, or other things – are fulfilled.

Let me provide some examples. For comparative purposes, let us first look at a representative of what has been considered the normal, or typical, case of flout interpretation, that is, a case where the hearer's interpretation process can be seen to conform easily to Grice's pattern. (Note that in such cases, the process will also be seen to contain a presumption of *maxim-related cooperation* rather than a presumption of general cooperativity; that is, the hearer will be seen to work on the assumption that “what appears to be a violation . . . of a conversational maxim is only a seeming, not a real violation; the spirit, though perhaps not the letter, of the maxim is respected” (Grice

1989:370)). In such seemingly normal, typical cases, the product of the process, the implicature, which is reached, according to Grice, as a direct result of the hearer's desire to believe that the speaker in reality has observed the seemingly breached maxim, constitutes evidence that the maxim has indeed been observed.

The following is an example of such a typical case, involving a breach of Grice's first maxim of Quantity (Make your contribution as informative as is required):

A utters, with a fall-rise intonation, *Those socks are brown!* (in a context where *brown* is generally assumed to be a terribly ugly colour for a pair of socks), intending to convey to B (and probably succeeding in conveying to B) something like *Those socks are terribly ugly*.

In this example, the utterance breaches the first maxim of Quantity because it offers nothing new: it is mutually assumed by both participants that the socks that B is in the course of putting on, are of the colour brown. Thus, B has been presented with an utterance which, at least initially and momentarily, must be considered as no less than absurd. Clutching on to his belief, however, that the speaker means to observe the maxims (even though he actually has loud and clear evidence of the contrary (Bird 1979:151)) B goes on a quest for an assumption which will *make A's* utterance informative. And he finds it: *Those socks are terribly ugly* is perhaps even *more* information than B needs(!). This interpretation, then, constitutes evidence that B was right in assuming that A did not breach the maxim after all.

The question is, however, whether this example really is so typical. Because there also exist cases of flout interpretation where it would be completely counter-intuitive to postulate that assumptions regarding maxim observance or general cooperativity play any role at all. Still, we would not hesitate to call the interpreted occurrence a *flout*, since a maxim has been breached, and there is an identifiable (weak or strong) intention to convey some underlying meaning. Consider, for instance, the following example, borrowed from Grice (1989:37):

Miss X produced a series of sounds corresponding closely to the score of Home Sweet Home

Here, we have a breach of a maxim (one of the maxims of Manner, according to Grice; that is, Be brief), along with a relatively easily identifiable intention to communicate something between the lines (something along the lines of *Miss X's performance was no good*). In other words, we have an instance of a flout. One thing, however, distinguishes this from the typical example above, viz. that if we want to postulate, like we did in that example, that the hearer's search for the implicature *Miss X's performance was no good* is fuelled by his faith that the speaker is observing the maxim on some other level, we here have to say, in fact, that the hearer's search is fuelled by his desire to find some meaning which, by comparison with the audible or visible utterance, is *brief*. And although one *might* say that the postulated implicature<sup>2</sup> is indeed somewhat less prolix than the vehicle utterance, and hence that it *could* be proclaimed evidence that the speaker did not breach the maxim Be brief after all, this nevertheless smacks somewhat of the ridiculous. Because somehow it seems a tad unlikely that the speaker should be interested in making the hearer construct a hypothesis to the effect that the speaker is 'being brief after all'. And it seems equally unlikely that the hearer should waste his time trying to construct one. For reasons not entirely clear to me, the concern with brevity seems likely to stop being a concern with both speaker and hearer after the breach of the maxim has done the job of causing the hearer to question the lack of straightforwardness of the utterance. Both speaker and hearer seem much more likely to be more concerned with conveying meaning and interpreting meaning.

Although this might not be a clear-cut example of what I have in mind, it should at least begin to arouse some suspicion regarding the viability of the assumption of maxim-observance as interpretational drive. It is, however, possible to find more clear-cut examples. The following, for instance, are examples where maxim-related cooperation logically just *cannot* be assumed. Consider, for instance,

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<sup>2</sup> Which may not even be the correct implicature, if such a notion (*correct implicature*) is indeed warranted; see discussion on p. 257ff.

the following, which like the first, typical and unproblematic example, (arguably) involves a breach of the first maxim of Quantity:

A: What time is it?

B: (No reply)

Often, a breach of the first maxim of Quantity involves giving some, but not enough information, or some *other* information than that which is required; but here we see a situation where absolutely no information is (explicitly) given, which must be considered quite an extreme version of not being as informative as is required. *Being* as informative as is required in this situation simply means giving A the time. If this were a typical case, A should, by virtue of B's utterance and the context, have been able to work out what time it is, thus having her faith that B is being 'maxim-relatedly' cooperative confirmed. But here, no amount of interpretation will enable A to figure out from B's 'reply' what time it is. Thus, there exists no implicature which will be able to furnish A with evidence that B has observed the maxim on a different level. A will probably realize this quite quickly. Still, however, she is more than likely to go on a quest to find *some* meaning to apply to B's utterance.

The reason why A should choose to do that could of course be that she opts for the 'second route', thinking that B is being 'generally cooperative' in an everyday sense, using this, rather than her belief in the speaker's maxim-related cooperativity, as her good reason to make the effort. This, however, is highly counter-intuitive. In this situation, A will rather probably instantly feel that B is extremely *uncooperative*, extremely *unhelpful*. Notice, however, how this, too, even if "violations of conversational maxims will always . . . challenge the audience's readiness to cooperate" (Brönniman 1998:89), seems to be somehow deeply immaterial to the act of interpretation. In fact, there is, I believe, reason to believe that A will try even harder in this than in many other cases to make sense out of the received reply. Intuitively, the air will, in such a case, be full of potent meaning, driving A's interpretational activity through the roof, so to speak.

The above example could of course be argued to rather be a breach of some sort of politeness maxim (or one of several politeness maxims) (see Leech 1983, Grice 1989:28). But even if this were to be the correct analytical point of departure (quite likely, the same utterance can constitute a breach of several different maxims (we could call it *multiple breach*), and who is to say which breach is the correct analytical point of departure?), the same problem would arise again: no amount of interpretation would enable the hearer to restore his faith in the speaker's Gricean cooperativity. No matter how deeply A interprets, B cannot be made out to be either polite, or generally cooperative. In fact, breaches of the politeness maxim seem to be typical in this respect. It is rather hard to be impolite on one level and polite and cooperative on a different level (although examples can be found; *banter*, for instance, could at least be said to be 'cruel to be kind': being rude to express solidarity is if not impoliteness for the sake of being polite then at least impoliteness for the sake of being *cooperative* in the sense of playing one's part in a carefully choreographed social enactment). Nevertheless, breaches of politeness are quite common (take, for instance, cases of abrupt changes of topic, e.g., in order to convey to someone that the person talked about has entered the room), and hearers' interpretational willingness still does not seem to be adversely affected.

It could be claimed that examples like these, where the hearer's expectations regarding Gricean cooperativity are in some way let down, are few and far between and hence should not be allowed to play a role in a counter-argument. Because if they are indeed not common, one could say that what provides the hearer with interpretational drive is nevertheless the belief that the speaker is being cooperative in a Gricean sense, because the faith in cooperation probably generates a surplus of motivation sufficient to cover the few exceptions there are to be found. There is, however, reason to believe that these examples are *not* few and far between but in fact quite common, and the fact that the assumption of cooperation cannot be made in the case of breach of politeness maxims is precisely one

important indication: politeness, as well as its social regulation in the form of maxims governing it, is a very pervasive phenomenon indeed. This, then, means that there is no basis for claiming that it is surplus motivation which does the job, and that something besides Gricean cooperativity has to be postulated as that which furnishes the hearer with interpretational drive.

The claim made here is that the drive which fuels the interpretation of flouts is the same drive which in fact fuels *all* interpretation at a basic level, including *all* interpretation of utterances and hence *all* searches for implicature. This drive is a deeply rooted *response-readiness* to the world in general, a response-readiness which, in the case of the social world, becomes *reciprocal*.

### **Reciprocal response-readiness**

Being, according to the philosopher M. M. Bakhtin, is an ongoing event. The nature of existence is that of being somehow unfinished and open-ended, *yet-to-be*. If this ceases to be the case, says Bakhtin, it is because we are dead (or otherwise 'not living'):

If I am consummated and my life is consummated, I am no longer capable of living and acting. For in order to live and act, I need to be unconsummated, I need to be open for myself – at least in all the essential moments constituting my life, I have to be, for myself, someone who is axiologically yet-to-be, someone who does not coincide with his already existing makeup. (1990:13)

This necessarily unfinished nature of the self, which entails that being is a form of becoming, in turn entails that the self is profoundly active, in that becoming (as opposed to passive being) means constant change and development, neither of which are given, and therefore require constant self-activity. Thus,

my entire life as a whole can be considered as a single complex act or deed that I perform: I act, i.e., perform acts, with my whole life, and every particular act and lived-experience is a constituent moment of my life – of the continuous performing of acts. (1993:3)

Its essentially active nature entails that when encountered by the surrounding outer world (the objects to be interpreted and the actions and utterances of others), the self, rather than being passively filled up by this world, 'stands at the door' to meet it, to welcome it, so to speak

(Holquist 1990a:47ff). And this meeting takes the form of a *response* to the outer world and its “riot of inchoate potential messages” (Holquist 1990a:47), a response which can be seen to consist of two deeply intertwined stages. First, there is the initial, ‘inner’ response to the world, namely the (preliminary) *interpretation* (one which despite its inner nature is not an act performed in isolation: in my consciousness, all kinds of *voices* from the outside will always speak alongside my own (see Bakhtin 1981:259ff)). Secondly, there is the (potential) accompanying outer, overt response, that is, the intrusive act, an act extending into the outer world (for example, the chopping down of a tree that looks as if it is dying, or the running to get help after seeing someone getting caught by an avalanche). In other words, the deeply rooted *response-readiness* to the world in general encompasses both receptive and initiative aspects, although the focus in the present work will mostly be on the former.

The encounter between the self and the outer world when the latter is in the form of an other represents a special case which on the one hand enhances original response-readiness, and on the other makes it deserving of the label *reciprocal*. The reason for this is to be found in Bakhtin’s version of the *reciprocity principle*.

Bakhtin’s point of departure in depicting the reciprocal relationship between self and other is – seemingly paradoxically – the difference in perspective that reigns between the two. All ‘selves’ are situated, according to Bakhtin, in a unique temporal-spatial slot. I am therefore deemed to see different things from you. Even if we try all we can to make our perspectives coincide (for instance, by adjusting the spatial positioning of our bodies), there is no way in which we can ever totally eradicate the perspectival differences between us: I will always have an *excess of seeing* (Bakhtin 1990:22ff) in relation to you, and vice versa. “As we gaze at each other”, Bakhtin says, “two different worlds are reflected in the pupils of our eyes” (23).

Now this potentially mutually alienating fact you and I actually turn to our advantage, according to Bakhtin. Initially, there is an enormous difference between the way I perceive myself, and the way I perceive

you, or anyone else for that matter. Roughly speaking, I perceive myself incompletely and vaguely; I can, for instance, from my point of view merely get a few occasional glimpses of my own exterior (except, of course, if I look in a mirror; but see Bakhtin 1990:32ff). And if I try to visualize this exterior, see it before my inner eye, this “requires a special and unusual effort” (29), an effort which if successful will cause us to be “struck by the peculiar *emptiness*, *ghostliness*, and an eerie, frightening *solitariness* of this outward image of ourselves” (30). You, on the other hand, I perceive with much greater clarity. When I look at you, I perceive you as a delimited whole with a beginning and an end, with definite boundaries. It goes without saying that in a situation like this, I need what you have and you need what I have. I need your excess of seeing to create a wholeness out of my basically incomplete self-perception, and you need mine, for the same reason. And now it is easy to see the emerging contours of the Bakhtinian brand of reciprocity: since we both depend on each other to fill in our self-perceptions, to make ourselves whole in our own eyes, there will be a natural *mutual orientation* towards each other, a deeply-rooted turning to the other for the filling of this existential void. Moreover, to do the job, this cannot, of course, be a passive kind of orientation; in order for us to profit from each other’s excess of seeing, we have to somehow communicate it to one another. It is this fact that enhances the original response-readiness. And it is of course the profound mutuality of this process which entitles it to the label *reciprocal* response-readiness.

### **Socialized interpretational drive**

Reciprocal response-readiness is the force that lies behind the observed phenomenon that we always seem “very reluctant indeed to condemn a response in a conversation to unintelligibility or total lack of connection” (Bird 1979:150).<sup>3</sup> It is a deep, basic drive, a motivational

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<sup>3</sup> Some amusing examples of this phenomenon can be found at <http://www.kissthisguy.com/menus/alpha.song.html>. The creators of these webpages have picked up on the fact that rock and pop lyrics are often totally unintelligible to the (trained or untrained) ear, and thus that amusing misunderstandings will occur precisely because hearers will go to such great lengths to make sense out of the words.



undertow which fuels all kinds of action; receptive and productive, non-verbal and verbal.

The fact that there is such a thing as reciprocal response-readiness does not, however, mean that there do not exist other sources of interpretational drive, which may superimpose themselves on reciprocal response-readiness. One great such source is learned, more or less specific assumptions regarding why it would be a good idea to attend to and interpret what other communicators say (and write) (a subclass of so-called *motivational relevance* (Chapter 5, p. 192f)). Some of the most encompassing and most general of these assumptions have been recorded in different contexts in the literature, for instance, the assumption that discourse will be coherent (Brown & Yule 1983:199, Herman 1994:220f, Hobbs 1979:67), the assumption that the speaker has some (recognizable) illocutionary intent (Bach & Harnish 1979:7), the assumption that one may safely believe in the speaker's good will (Kiefer 1979:63), and, last but not least, the major assumption from which all of these assumptions can be seen to derive, namely that speakers will generally be cooperative. These assumptions contribute to interpretational drive by furnishing us with good reasons to interpret someone's utterance, cooperation being such a good reason in virtue of the fact that a cooperative utterance is one which is designed especially to be understood and hence one which will normally be reasonably easily understandable.

Reciprocal response-readiness, as has been shown, has its roots in our shared existential makeup. Socialized interpretational drive is, as the name suggests, a result of processes of experience and socialization. Thus, the latter is bound to be more fragile than the former. This manifests itself, among other things, in the fact that the assumption that maxims are generally observed in all cases is put under pressure *temporarily* in the case of flouts, by virtue of the breach alone. This fact has given occasion to questions of the following kind:

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Here is one example, from the musical *Grease* (*The One that I Want*), where the original lyrics, *I got chills/they're multiplyin'/and I'm losin' control*, to one hearer became *I got shoes/they're made of plywood/and I'm losin' the bows*.

it seems puzzling, on Grice's account of superficial violation coupled with a deeper observance of CP, that a crucial feature of the machinery should be that there is no reason to suppose that the speaker is not observing the maxims. For if what gets the operation going is the recognition of a *prima facie* inconsistency with the maxims, then it seems that the audience must have some reason to suppose that the speaker is not observing them. (Bird 1979:151)

Bird's question is roughly this: why should the interpretational kick-off consist in a belief that the maxims are observed when there is actually blatant evidence, in the situation, that the speaker is precisely *not* observing the maxims? Bird's question is, of course, warranted, and there is indeed nothing in Grice's original writings which answers it explicitly. This does not mean, however, that there is therefore no satisfactory Gricean answer. We can look at it in the following way: first of all, at least adult hearers will have accumulated enough experience of breach on one level/non-breach on a different level that this in most cases already will have gained the shape of a drive-inducing assumption (for instance of the form *Speakers very often breach maxims on one level but observe them on another*). However, even if this assumption did not exist in the communicative repertoire of a given participant, interpretation would nevertheless in most cases take place, because reciprocal response-readiness always stands ready to re-assume the full motivational burden if necessary, acting as a motivational bridge until the assumption that the maxim is observed can be restored, and the assumption-system again may come into the picture to enhance the interpretational inclination. As we have seen, however, there are many cases where this assumption cannot be restored at all, cases where, rather than temporarily, the cooperativity assumption may crumble for good under the weight of evidence going counter to the idea that the speaker is being cooperative. As was also pointed out earlier, however, there will nevertheless be interpretation or attempts at interpretation, even the next time around<sup>4</sup> And again,

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<sup>4</sup> Although repeated offence may often be accompanied by some damning indictment against the producer of the utterance(s) in question; see Goffman (1983): "when . . . [the] "normal" ways of saying one thing and intending another . . . do not plausibly account for what is in the mind of the individual in question, then a second interpretative step must be taken, and another order of explanation must be sought. To wit: that the individual is temporarily incompetent owing, for example, to tiredness, preoccupation, inebriation, or narcosis. Or, if not this, then unhappily that he or she is strange, odd, peculiar, in a word, nutty" (26).

this will be due to reciprocal response-readiness re-assuming the full motivational burden. Being basic, reciprocal response-readiness always acts as a safety net when other sources of interpretational drive fail.

## COOPERATION

What I have done so far, is to re-define the role of Gricean cooperation in Gricean explanation. We have seen that Gricean cooperation, when it plays a role in pulling the hearer into interpretative processes, always merely plays an ancillary role vis-à-vis the main interpretational drive, that is, reciprocal response-readiness. Having thus clarified its proper role, it is now possible to take a fresh, Gricean look at cooperation, without being encumbered by the problem of the tremendous explanatory centrality that has been assigned to this notion in Gricean schemes in the past.

But why, one might ask, do we need to bother about cooperation at all if it is no longer a central notion? The answer to this question is quite obvious: I show in this section how cooperation, by virtue of its intimate connection with reciprocal response-readiness, is more basic than non-cooperation, which means that it should always be assigned a prominent place in pragmatic and interactional theories. This basicness of cooperation is furthermore shown to be behind the fact that just because cooperation plays a different role in Gricean explanation than has been previously assumed, this does not mean that the role that it plays is an unimportant one.

A second incentive, however, for spending some more time with the notion of cooperation revolves around the previously mentioned fact that out of all the controversies surrounding Grice's CP, the one revolving around the notion of cooperation has been the most heated one. As I pointed out, the field has almost come close to self-destructing on account of this issue, which would indeed be a sad thing, since the discussion raged on rather wobbly ground: in talking about cooperation, as shall be seen, nobody has in fact been talking

about the same thing. The reason why the dispute would have such a devastating effect has to do, of course, with the fact that cooperation is placed centre stage in Grice's theory, because this meant that a rejection of the idea that people cooperate also entailed a rejection of Grice's CP in its entirety. Having seen, however, that the notion of cooperation is not as central as has been assumed within the CP anyway (at least with respect to an account of flouting and flout-based meaning), then this conclusion is, of course, no longer warranted. Still, however, because of the previously mentioned centrality of a notion of cooperation, I nevertheless offer a tentative analysis in the following, using it, among other things, to show the precise ways in which researchers in the field have been talking at cross-purposes, in an attempt at disarming this crippling discussion once and for all.

### **The nature of cooperation**

This ambitious heading conceals a far less ambitious aim: far from proceeding to unveil *all* the mysteries regarding cooperation, I shall, after having separated the two notions of reciprocal response-readiness and (Gricean) cooperation-as-interpretational-drive, confine myself to showing that there is more than likely also an intrinsic *connection* between them which, on the one hand, explains why an assumption of cooperation would be more basic as socialized interpretational drive than any other assumption (which makes more understandable Grice's choice of the notion of cooperation as his key concept), and on the other why cooperation – henceforth to be understood as coordinated (*improvised* or *choreographed*) activity<sup>5</sup> among two or more participants towards the achievement of a (more or less tangible, more or less strictly defined) social goal<sup>6</sup> – is more

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<sup>5</sup> *Activity* is here to be taken in a very wide sense, including both psychological and physiological activity.

<sup>6</sup> In using the term *goal* in the present context I share the concerns of Fairclough (1985), as expressed in the following quote: “[speaker-goal models] imply that what speakers do in interaction is under their conscious control, and are at odds with the claim that naturalization [i.e., ideology that has been transformed into ‘common sense’] and opacity of determinants and effects are basic features of discourse. I have no doubt that this will be a contentious view of speaker-goal models; it will be objected that I am using ‘goal’ in its ordinary language sense of ‘conscious objectives’ . . . rather than in the technical sense . . . of “a state which regulates the behaviour of an individual” (Leech

basic within human communicative interaction than non-cooperation.

The connection between reciprocal response-readiness and cooperation is quite simple: it is easily shown that the former in its essence breeds the latter. In a previous section, I described how reciprocal response-readiness is a phenomenon which is explicable partly by reference to the notion of being as a form of becoming and partly by reference to individuals' need for the excess of seeing of the other. The point here is that both engender a quest for *meaning*: one needs to make sense of oneself to be able to use oneself as a tool for making sense of the world at large, which is, both on the level of being as ongoing event and on more superficial levels, the most all-encompassing human project there is (cf. Holquist 1990a:47ff). And here we are at the heart of the present matter, for it is undoubtedly the case that the process of creating meaning (for instance interpreting), although it does not depend on it, at least benefits greatly from a certain measure of cooperation. It is, for example, far easier to understand what someone says if the utterance is shaped in a cooperative fashion, i.e. in an easily interpretable way (something which is most often achieved by relating understandably to commonly accepted behavioural guidelines such as, for instance, maxims). On a larger scale, it is also far easier to create an evolving discourse arena for fruitful negotiation of meaning if we cooperate in enhancing the accessibility of messages. And since we, as human beings, share this deeply-rooted goal of creating meaning, or making sense, we tend more often than not to extend these 'favours' to one another, perhaps simply because by helping others in their enterprise, we also invariably help ourselves. This is the reason why in experience, cooperation will weigh more heavily than non-cooperation (cf. Beaken 1996:29, and Cappella 1995), and that in cases of, for instance, flouting, the assumption that the other will be cooperative is

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(1983:40))" (756). Like Fairclough, I am using the term *goal* in its Leechian 'technical sense' (in the sense of a state which regulates the behaviour of an individual), but with additional emphasis on the cultural sharedness, intersubjectivity and negotiability of such states.

warranted more often than not, and thus will often survive, even in times of doubt caused by much counter-evidence.

It goes without saying that all of this does not mean that there do not exist cases of non-cooperation (see, e.g., Israeli 1997:593). As Linell (1996:7) points out, it is important to

strike a balance between, on the one hand, intersubjectivity and joint accomplishment, coordination and cooperation, reciprocity and mutuality as conceptually basic to the analysis of interaction and communication, and, on the other hand, the presence of complementarity and asymmetries, partial sharedness, fragmentation, individual agency and competitive goals in communication. (7)

Linell's desire to strike a balance between cooperation and competition is motivated by his observation that there is "an idealistic current in dialogistic thinking which tends to overstate and misunderstand the impact of the first-mentioned strand of this polarity" (1996:7:7). As we shall see later in this chapter, it could be said to be the perception of such an idealistic current *outside* dialogism which is the reason for some of the avid criticism directed at the CP.

### **Forms and levels of cooperation**

Making sense is of course only one among a number of social goals which human beings cooperate to fulfil. As many researchers have discovered, however, it is nevertheless fruitful to distinguish between cooperation in the fulfilment of the social goal of making sense (that is, a "willingness and ability to collaborate in the production of coherent discourse" (Gumperz 1990:434), which I will call *sense-making cooperation*, (henceforth *s-cooperation*))<sup>7</sup> and cooperation in order to fulfil any other social goal,<sup>8</sup> for instance, making a table (which I will call *across-the-board cooperation*, (henceforth *a-cooperation*)). I also introduce a distinction between *levels* of cooperation, which has to do, roughly speaking, with the intensity with which cooperation is performed.

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<sup>7</sup> Cf. the notion of *recipient design* in conversation analysis (see Werth 1981:129ff).

<sup>8</sup> Cf. Thomas' (1994b:3ff) distinction between *linguistic* vs. *social* goals, where the choice of terminology does not properly reflect the fact that a linguistic goal is a social goal, too.

### Sense-making vs. across-the-board cooperation

Social interaction is prior to and encompasses linguistic interaction (Schutz & Luckmann 1973).<sup>9</sup> Hence, a-cooperation is prior to and encompasses s-cooperation. Singling out s-cooperation for scrutiny is, however, nevertheless warranted, not least because the social goal of making sense (and here I am talking especially about making sense of *utterances*) seems to have a *special status* among the social goals. This first of all has to do with reciprocal response-readiness: I mentioned before that the need for the other's excess of seeing means that we will normally turn to other human beings and the products of their acts more eagerly than to other phenomena. This tendency certainly heightens the status of the social goal of making sense. Secondly, however, the s-goal is instrumental to (almost all) a-goals: a table may, of course, be made by two or more people without communication (for instance, in a production line), but only if the necessary moves have already been routinized, something which presupposes a prior communicative process where a common understanding of the meaning and function of the different elements of the process has been established.

Other cases of s-goals being instrumental to a-goals may specifically involve the management of Grice's maxims. Maxim *violation* (Grice 1989:30), for instance, is in the following example a means of avoiding conflict when the overall a-goal is to establish rapport: if asked by one's future mother-in-law, whom one is meeting for the first time, about one's opinion of the family dog (a vicious creature with greasy fur and bad breath), one is quite likely to reply *Oh, it's lovely!* Thereby, one violates the first maxim of Quality, but at least one has avoided jeopardizing the relationship with a human being with whom one will presumably have quite a lot to do in the future. Furthermore, *flouting* can be used as a means of achieving the a-goal of avoiding a face-threat: telling one's best friend to *Open the window!* is probably not such a good idea; saying it in a more roundabout way is better (*This*

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<sup>9</sup> See, for instance, Cook-Gumperz (1975) for evidence that children learn certain basic principles of general interaction before those of linguistic interaction.

*place is so warm, I'm sweating*).<sup>10</sup> Although this strategy might not be as efficient in fulfilling your a-goal of getting the window open as a more straightforward strategy would be (indirectness is notorious for giving the hearer an easy way out), it is definitely efficient in fulfilling one's a-goal of not offending a friend, which is, after all, a far more important goal in the long run. Finally, *opting out* of the CP (Grice 1989:30) can also be used to further a-goals. Opting out of the first maxim of Quality, for example, like in Grice's classical example ("*I cannot say more; my lips are sealed*" (30)), could for example be an attempt on the part of the speaker to project herself as someone who does not reveal secrets – as a trustworthy person – hence furthering the personal (but nevertheless deeply social) goal of becoming well liked.

These examples furthermore show that, even though, as I started out saying, the s-goal might have a special status among the social goals, there is nevertheless an intrinsic dependency between s-goals and a-goals (as there would be, assuming, as I do, that an s-goal is a subtype of a-goal). This is why it could be hypothesized that reciprocal response-readiness (via the meaning-creation activity it stimulates) not only breeds s-cooperation as argued in the previous section, but also a-cooperation: if nothing else, one would expect that the reciprocal-response-readiness-bred cooperation on the sense-making level, because it is so deep and pervasive, would somehow carry over into the across-the-board level as well. The link between reciprocal response-readiness and a-cooperation remains indirect, however, insofar as it is considerably easier to find examples of a lack of a-cooperation than of a lack of s-cooperation. It is, for example, a much more everyday incidence to observe someone blankly refuse to contribute meaningfully to the task of making a table than to observe someone blankly refuse to increase their speaking volume so that the hearer can understand what is being said. This suggests that beyond sense-making, reciprocal response-readiness has less power to breed

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<sup>10</sup> Note that in Chapter 6 I will in fact be reluctant to call such examples true examples of flouting; they are rather, I will claim, *sedimented flouts*, i.e. they were flouts *once*, but the implicature is now part of the meaning potential of the given expression (see p. 227ff).



cooperation, and thus that cooperation on these levels may be (co-) governed by some other force, quite possibly to do with the need for material survival (see, e.g., Beaken 1996).

#### Weak vs. strong cooperation

Having established that cooperation comes in different types (s-cooperation and a-cooperation) according to the type of goal they are associated with (s-goals, and a-goals), it is also clear that cooperation is not simply a matter of cooperation vs. non-cooperation, of compliance vs. refusal to cooperate. Rather, we cooperate more or less. To explain this further, I first have to go back to a formulation in my tentative definition of cooperation above. Within parentheses I included a note to the effect that the coordinated activity which constitutes the cooperation can be either improvised or choreographed. Let me now explain what I meant. In the former case, guidelines that make the task at hand possible and the road to the goal more efficient, pleasant, and so on, are made up as the participants go along. In the latter case, the participants relate to guidelines that already exist (for instance, maxims) in order to enable efficient and pleasant fulfilment of the goal. Clear cases of either improvised or choreographed cooperation are probably few and far between as the most common type will be a mix between them (probably with a strong tendency towards a higher percentage of choreographed than improvised co-ordinated activity), but nevertheless I will, in the following, for reasons of precedence, have in mind a more purely choreographed type when talking about cooperation. Thus, to be s-cooperative will mean to manage in a predictable way our shared linguistic-communicative knowledge, or to observe its prescriptions closely. To be a-cooperative will mean to handle in a predictable way the various guidelines operative for the various a-goals, or to observe them closely.

Managing the prescriptions of linguistic-communicative knowledge and a-goal related guidelines in a predictable way means to observe, flout or violate them, or to recognizably opt out of their operation (see

Chapter 4 for a discussion of the family ties between linguistic-communicative guidelines (including maxims) and a-goal-related ones). Whenever most or all of these standards are being managed in a predictable way what we have is some sort of default level of cooperation, where meanings *do* come across, and a-goals *are* achieved, but perhaps not as expediently as they could have. No special care is taken here to convey meanings or to finish tasks, but nevertheless the expended effort normally suffices to satisfy the given goals.

In the last couple of decades there has developed a growing awareness of the multitude of different ‘moods’ that may characterize different exchanges (Briggs 1997). Some are peaceful and harmonious, others can be competitive and violent, and yet others – perhaps most – contain elements from either end of the scale. The atmosphere surrounding situations in which such default – *weak – cooperation*<sup>11</sup> as that just described reigns, can range from anything from hostile discord to amicable agreement. Sometimes, however, a positive atmosphere may be accompanied by *strong cooperation*, that is, an increased level of observance (and an attendant lowering of the number of incidents of flouting, violating and opting out) of communicative and non-communicative prescriptions, in order to enhance communicativity and expediency.<sup>12</sup> For instance, when speaking to one’s nearly-deaf grandmother, one will make sure one raises one’s voice and *speaks clearly* (that is, enunciating properly as well as observing the maxims of Manner) so that she can understand better. Or, when explaining something to a pupil or a student, a teacher may try to be as informative, truthful, relevant and clear as she can, that is, she may try to observe Grice’s maxims as closely as she possibly can, in order to ease the task of understanding for the student.

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<sup>11</sup> Cf. Linell’s (1996:7) term *co-ordination*, viewed as a “weaker form of cooperation” (20).

<sup>12</sup> Cf. Kasher’s (1976) notion of *full cooperation* (214), characterized in terms of observing the maxims to their fullest extent; and Allwood’s (1976) *ideal cooperation* (143ff).

This latter example shows, incidentally, how weak and strong cooperation are not always a matter of choice; they are often part and parcel of the definition of situations: a teacher, for instance, is always expected to be truthful, clear, and so on. This opens up for a situation where the given (here: maxim-related) cooperation, rather than a result of the 'natural' inclination, is first and foremost a result of prescription, which means that there may be (at least hidden) hostility even here. Or in other words, strong cooperation, too, *can* be accompanied by all kinds of atmosphere, although it is reasonable to believe that there will be a prevalence of positivity. Indeed, there is in fact reason to believe that a pronounced, observable *positive attitude* is an important part of the definition of being strongly cooperative. Consider, for instance, the following example: A has been assigned the task of helping B to mend a car. A performs her part to perfection, handing B the right tools at the right time and so on, but at the same time she stands there with a sour expression on her face because she would much rather, as B well knows, have gone for a burger. The important thing to note here is that in this sort of case, A, despite her impeccable carrying out of the functions involved in the task, will normally *not* be characterized as particularly cooperative. This is because the definition of strong cooperation involves both the notion of a high degree of observance of communicative and non-communicative prescriptions and an observably positive attitude to the task.

The importance of allowing the notion of 'positive attitude' into the definition of strong cooperation is also illustrated by virtue of the fact that a high degree of observation of maxims and other guidelines (which would result in extreme literalness) may precisely *not* contribute to increased communicativity. On the contrary, this kind of communication is renowned for the strain it may place on the hearer (consider, for instance, the language of laws). Flouting, by contrast, is a common way of creating unusualness (see Chapter 6, p. 211ff), which prevents utterances and texts and perhaps activity in general from becoming too dull to bear, another danger of observing maxims

to a too-high degree. The point I am trying to make is of course that someone who spells everything out in detail, or tries to perfect every move in a chain of coordinated movements, may actually sometimes be a hindrance rather than a help. But in contrast to what we saw in the previous example, as long as this participant's part is performed with the requisite attitude, he or she would probably nevertheless be characterized as helpful and cooperative. Thus, it is clear that a positive attitude is indeed an important part of the definition of strong cooperation.

Communicative situations involving strong cooperation can generally be seen to conform to a set of common sociocultural notions such as helpfulness, agreement, benevolence, generosity, good-will, sincerity, kindness, politeness, consideration, positivity, inclusion, willingness, and solidarity,<sup>13</sup> all of which can be recognized as being contained within an everyday notion of cooperation. In a previous section I suggested that Grice's notion of cooperation consists of a notion of maxim-related cooperation and another that goes precisely in the direction of everyday cooperation. Two of his statements regarding cooperation – which on the surface on it may seem to be contradictory – can now be correlated with the idea of weak and strong (everyday) cooperation as presented here. On the one hand, in *Logic and Conversation*, Grice states that “[our talk exchanges] are characteristically, to some degree at least, cooperative efforts” (1989:26), and on the other, (in a more retrospective piece), he characterizes his CP as “the principle of conversational helpfulness” (1989:61). The former statement could be said to invoke the notion of weak cooperation, the latter that of strong cooperation. The problem, however, is that the latter formulation, in actually labelling the entire principle according to some notion of strong cooperation, puts too much of an emphasis on strong cooperation, paralleling the fact that cooperation has indeed, as shall be seen further on, often been associated exclusively with strong (s or a-)cooperation, which probably explains (but does not excuse) the criticism directed at the

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<sup>13</sup> Cf. Allwood's (1976) set of *ethical norms* (55).

assignment of the notion of cooperation to such a prominent place in pragmatic theory. Because strong cooperation, at least in its very strongest form, is bound to be rather more *rare* than weak cooperation. This does not, however, mean, that there is no such thing as strong cooperation *at all*, as some seem to claim. Mey (1993), one of those who seems to see cooperation exclusively in the light of strong cooperation, seems to draw this conclusion, characterizing the 'cooperative ideology' as an ideology with little or no basis in how people actually behave. "Communication is concrete work", he claims, "not abstract cooperation" (289). The question *I* would like to ask, however, is why postulate a contradiction here? There is no doubt that communication is concrete work, but so is weak and strong cooperation. Cooperation is *both* abstract ideology, embodied, in the case of strong cooperation, in notions like the ones listed above, *and* practical application. This is the case because even ideology cannot survive forever without a certain measure of activity to support it.

#### Three two-way analyses of cooperation

I have been arguing for a four-way analysis of cooperation, that is, weak s-cooperation, strong s-cooperation, weak a-cooperation and strong a-cooperation. Three studies in particular have attempted similar analyses, but have only captured *types* of cooperation, disregarding *degrees*.<sup>14</sup> All three of them base themselves on the idea that some sort of s-type goal gives rise to some sort of s-type cooperation, and that some sort of a-type goal-set gives rise to some sort of a-type cooperation. Pavlidou (1991), for instance, introduces a distinction between

*substantial cooperation* and *formal cooperation*, the latter being simply co-operation in the Gricean tradition, i.e. acting according to the conversational maxims (or against them). Substantial cooperation, on the other hand, means sharing common goals among communication partners, goals that go beyond maximal exchange of cooperation. (12)

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<sup>14</sup> Cf. also a fourth analysis, that of Israeli (1997), which *mixes* types and degrees of cooperation, and which is moreover too limited, since it is seen to only apply to the speech act *request*.

Formal cooperation, according to this, can be said to correspond roughly to my s-cooperation (albeit encompassing less, since my s-cooperation also involves linguistic-communicative knowledge other than Grice's maxims), and substantial cooperation to my a-cooperation. Airenti et al. (1993) make a similar distinction, between cooperation arising from *communicative goals*, that is, "the goal of following the rules of conversation" (305), and cooperation arising from *behavioral goals*, defined in terms of the aim of reaching "an effect on a partner, i.e. either to change the partner's mental states or to induce him to perform an action" (305). Apart from, among other things, the previously mentioned fact that goals in principle cause cooperation, Airenti et al.'s 'cooperation arising from communicative goals' corresponds roughly to my s-cooperation (but again, encompassing less), and their 'cooperation arising from behavioural goals' to my a-cooperation (encompassing far less).

Pavlidou and Airenti et al. do not go about explaining their distinctions in any detailed way. Therefore, in trying to show further how *a two-way analysis does not suffice to explain all the nuances of cooperation*, it is better to turn to an account like that of Attardo (1997), whose richness of detail brings out more clearly the traps into which one might fall if one chooses to split up cooperation this roughly. Attardo distinguishes between *locutionary* and *perlocutionary* cooperation. Locutionary cooperation, according to Attardo, is cooperation "within the linguistic exchange" (753), and perlocutionary cooperation is cooperation "outside of the linguistic exchange" (753), which means that these two notions should correspond roughly to my s-cooperation and my a-cooperation. But at least as far as a-cooperation is concerned, this is merely a seeming correspondence. This becomes clear when one looks at Attardo's formulation of his so-called Perlocutionary Cooperative Principle (PCP), which is intended to capture the notion of perlocutionary cooperation:

Cooperate in whatever goals the speaker may have in initiating a conversational exchange, including any non-linguistic, practical goal. (Or, in other words, be a good Samaritan).

1. If someone needs or wants something, give it to them.

2. If someone is doing something, help out.
3. Anticipate people's needs, i.e., provide them with what they need, even if they do not know that they need it. (766)

The way this is worded should leave no doubt that rather than corresponding to my a-cooperation, Attardo's second type of cooperation corresponds to my notion of strong cooperation: the notion of helpfulness (to the point of selflessness) saturates his description. Furthermore, in concerning linguistic and non-linguistic goals alike, we see that the cooperation in question is *both* of the s-type and of the a-type. Thus, in his scheme as a whole, Attardo entirely misses out on weak a-cooperation, that is, sufficient (but not extremely helpful) cooperation, involving the flouting, violation, and so on, of the guidelines governing a-type activities; a very common, everyday form and level of cooperation.<sup>15</sup>

The claim that all categories (weak and strong s-cooperation, weak and strong a-cooperation) are needed to fully explain at least some examples, can be easily defended by borrowing one of Attardo's; one involving a question and two alternative answers:

S: "Where's the Phillips screwdriver?"

H: (a) "You need an Allen wrench for that screw."

(b) "\*Here's the screwdriver." (766)

Attardo's own explanation goes along the following lines: response (b) is an example of locutionary cooperation because H observes Grice's maxims. It is, however, *not* an example of perlocutionary cooperation, if H knows – and Attardo assumes he does – that an Allen wrench is needed for the screw. Translated into my terminology, Attardo is here saying that the speaker is s-cooperating but not strongly a-cooperating. Employing the full set of analytical tools provided here, however, we get a more nuanced picture of the reply in (b): there is weak s-cooperation since both parties are not at odds with the set of linguistic-communicative guidelines and strategies for exploiting them. Since all of these guidelines are in fact observed, there is also (at

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<sup>15</sup> For a similar type of deficiency, see Hewitt (1997), where he draws a distinction between "cooperation that is necessary to enter into and sustain talk, and cooperative style in talk" (28).

a very local level) strong s-cooperation. There is weak a-cooperation in that H accepts the role of hearer/speaker and gives a workable response when he is supposed to, but there is no strong a-cooperation in that H refrains from offering information that would be more useful to S in the furthering of his goals.

### **Understanding misunderstandings**

In his only published book, *Studies in the Way of Words*, a collection of his earlier work including *Logic and Conversation* and some more retrospective material, Grice writes:

While the conversational maxims have on the whole been quite well received, the same cannot, I think, be said about my invocation of a supreme principle of conversational cooperation. (368-369)

By now the contours of the reasons for this bad reception should have begun to take form. Grice's cooperative principle suggests, as we have seen, a number of different aspects of cooperativity, none of which are sufficiently clearly defined by Grice himself. What we shall see in the following is that rather than clarifying matters, commentators have rather managed to augment the confusion. We shall also see that this is basically due to a failure to distinguish between weak and strong cooperation. As mentioned earlier, many tend to mean by cooperation exclusively (some form or degree of) strong cooperation (see, e.g., Bramley 1997, Holdcroft 1983, Okolo 1996, Penman 1987, Sperber & Wilson 1995, Welker 1994), and finding little of it in the type of interaction with which they are concerned, tend to deem Grice to have been leaning too heavily on the notion, and his scheme therefore to be somehow deficient, or even invalid. Two particular claims will be investigated in some detail for illustrative purposes. Each corresponds to one of the two aspects of strong cooperation (that is, *maxim observance* and *positive attitude*), namely *All maxim breach is uncooperative*, and *Quarrelling is uncooperative*.

### We do not cooperate because we breach maxims

The view that cooperativity equals observing the maxims at all times, even when we are talking about flouting (found in, e.g., Attardo 1990,



1993,<sup>16</sup> Bollobás 1981, Kasher 1976, Tsohatzidis 1993, and Yamaguchi 1988), must be said to be one of the ‘great misunderstandings’, since it pertains to one of the more well-circumscribed aspects of cooperation in Grice’s original work, namely the relationship between the maxims and cooperation, where Grice – via the general pattern for the working out of a conversational implicature – leaves no doubt that the breach of a maxim *also* may constitute being cooperative (Thomas 1994b).

It can, of course, and has been argued that in flouting, breaching maxims is just a different way of observing them (the maxim being seen to be observed on a different level). This may on the surface seem to lend some credence to the view of these critics, since if flouting is in fact observance on a different level, then flouting will indeed be a cooperative venture even in their view, leaving them with the much more immediately acceptable view that *violation* is always uncooperative. There exist, however, a couple of facts that contradict this line of reasoning. First of all, we have seen that some maxims just cannot, by their very nature, be observed on a different level (see Chapter 2, p. 17ff). Thus, this argument cannot be used to construct an excuse for the view that ‘breach is uncooperative’. It should also be added that the view that violation is always uncooperative is not entirely justified either. Consider, for instance, Grice’s example of violation, that is, surreptitious breach of the first maxim of Quality, which produces what is more commonly known as *lies*. According to post-Griceans Corliss (1981:48) and Raskin (1985:104), for instance, lies are uncooperative. This reveals a view of cooperation as equalling strong a-cooperation (lying can by definition not constitute s-cooperation, since, if successful, it remains undetected and is hence non-communicative). The truth is, however, that lies are quite often used in the name of weak cooperation. For lies are not always malicious. They can be *face-saving* and can hence serve, for instance, the a-goal of establishing or sustaining rapport. If somebody asks you what you think of her new dress, you do not normally reply *It’s*

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<sup>16</sup> But see Attardo (1997), where he has developed a more nuanced view.

*abominable!* even if you think so. A mildly positive answer (a white lie) will be most people's natural choice, at least in a Western culture.

The second fact that goes against the argument that these people may simply understandably have swept flouts with them under the general carpet of observance, is that we have explicit statements to the effect that flouting is in fact seen as uncooperative. This is the case, for instance, in Bollobás (1981), in an article on the language of modern, absurdist theatre, where the use of *irony*, among other things, is seen as uncooperative behaviour, the presence of which leads him to suggest that an *uncooperative* principle must be at play in this genre<sup>17</sup> This postulation of an uncooperative principle is, incidentally, an example of an interesting tendency of this kind of critic to turn the cooperative principle around, that is, to construct opposite maxims so that "implicatures are no longer the results of the violation of any principle, but rather of the manifestation of some principle" (Komlósi & Tarnay 1986:213). This may of course seem like an excellent solution if the dilemma is that anything but observance of maxims represents an invalidation of a Gricean scheme which needs to be salvaged from this fate, but it is unfortunately also a solution which makes, as Komlósi & Tarnay point out, the whole idea of maxims "theoretically redundant" (213), which, then, means that such an attempt would defeat its own purpose.

One particularly interesting example of the tendency to turn the CP around is found in an article by AI-representative Joshi (1982). His suggestion is typical: "Rather than permitting an *ad hoc* violation of the usual convention, we will try to see whether we can suitably modify one of Grice's maxims . . . so that there is no violation of any of the maxims" (190). It must be said, however, that the interest of Joshi's example stems not so much from his account in itself, as from its connection with the field which he represents, and their particular approach to Grice. In AI, the idea of maxim observance (that is, strong cooperation) as the only cooperative solution has had a peculiar

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<sup>17</sup> See Gautam & Sharma (1986) for a contrasting example of how the CP could apply relatively effortlessly to the study of absurdist drama.

significance, since the projects within this field are concerned with developing systems that have to be devoid of underlying meaning, because a machine cannot reply to requests for clarification in interaction with a human participant:

system-directed dialogue breaks down when users ask questions of the system. A key, therefore, to the successful design of system-directed dialogue is to design the dialogue in such a way that users do not need to ask questions of the system. To do this requires optimizing the dialogue cooperativity of the system. (Bernsen et al. 1996:214).

The cooperativity of the system needs to be boosted, according to Bernsen et al., and the way in which to achieve this is to devise the machine so as to observe maxims – be strongly cooperative – at all times (see also Carletta & Mellish 1996:72f, Joshi 1992:181f; and see Chapter 4, p. 114f, for the significance of this as evidence of the involvement of the maxims in the creation and interpretation of underlying meaning).

Despite similarities between the AI critics and the others in this section as regards the common misunderstanding that breaching maxims always means being uncooperative, there is one fundamental difference between them, relating to what conclusions to draw as regards the relative success of the Gricean programme. For whereas the latter see the idea that Grice should have meant, by cooperation, exclusively strong cooperation, as a flaw in the Gricean programme, the former embrace the same fact, since this kind of cooperativity is just what their machines ‘need’. The idea that cooperation should equal strong cooperation being, as I have pointed out, fundamentally misguided, both criticism and ovation fall, however, quite drastically short of the mark.

#### We do not cooperate because we quarrel

From the eighties onwards, more and more attention has been directed towards discourse which positions itself towards the furthest end of the previously mentioned ‘mood scale’, that is, towards hostile, competitive discourse. There has, in the words of Briggs (1997), been a “shift in focus”, from everyday, orderly, cooperative genres to violent,

antagonistic ones, revealing “the need to examine and revise key assumptions that underlie work in pragmatics and related areas in general” (458). And attempts at such revision, especially regarding the assumption of cooperation, have indeed ensued. The problem is just that they all seem to have accelerated into a void, where the notion of cooperation, here measured exclusively up against the positive-attitude requirements of strong cooperation, has been deemed ready for eradication.

The notion of cooperation (as ‘positivity’) has been criticized along a scale from contemplative questioning *à la* Mey (1993),

Can people who have conflicting interests, and sometimes in fact are at battle with one another (such as Palestinians and Israelis, Iraqis and Americans, Sunnites and Shiites, Serbs, Croats and Muslims in former Yugoslavia and so on) really be supposed to adopt cooperation as the basis for conversational, and in general, communicative behaviour?  
(71)

. . . to outright rejection *à la* Ahluwalia et al. (1990): “Conversations are not so much exercises in smooth cooperation as negotiated encounters where participants constantly accommodate to both what is said and what is not said” (113).<sup>18</sup> The fact, however, remains that even that which “in everyday terms would be seen as “highly uncooperative behaviour”, such as arguing, lying, hurling abuse, may yet be “cooperative” according to some interpretations of Grice’s . . . term” (Thomas 1994b:1-2). Or, as Pratt (1981) puts it: “There is an obvious sense in which quarreling is cooperative. People quarreling do listen to each other, take turns yelling, maintain a degree of coherence, and so forth” (13) (see also Goffman’s notion of “collaboration between opponents” 1974:222; and Allwood 1976:54, and Schröder 1987:514). The obvious sense in which quarrelling is cooperative is, of course, in the sense of weak cooperation, which represents the level where understandings are forged, understanding being no less crucial to disagreement than to agreement. Hence, weak cooperation is a level which operates across moods.

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<sup>18</sup> It adds to the confusion that for others, e.g., Sarangi & Slembrouck (1992), negotiation in this sense precisely *counts as* cooperation (132).

To be fair, some of Grice's commentators who at first seem to be members of the club of 'misunderstanders', seem to have at least sensed the basic distinction that needs to be made. Holdcroft (1979) is an example. Seeing cooperation from the vantage point of strong cooperation, he doubts whether certain competitive activity types (or in his terminology, *discourse types* (127)) can be said to be cooperative, but see this as no reason to reject the CP, since even apparently 'uncooperative' exchanges after all display implicature and inference. This amounts, of course, to an implicit admission that even if we do not cooperate in terms of being nice to one another, we may still cooperate to create meaning, or, in the present terminology, there may still be weak s-cooperation. Haviland (1997), too, seems to be approaching an understanding of the distinction when he tries to demonstrate "how inference and implicature seem to work when people are quarrelling rather than (*or perhaps as well as*) "cooperating"" (548) (my emphasis). In an account of cooperation exclusively based on strong cooperation, quarrelling and cooperation are of course mutually exclusive. But what Haviland seems to have intuited is that there is no necessary contradiction between the two because the former – quarrelling – is equally much in need of basic enhancement by (weak) cooperation of meaning creation processes as any other, non-competitive activity type, and is thus equally likely to exhibit this level of cooperation as any other.

Haviland's understanding of the issues at stake remains, however, at the level of parenthetical remark. In his paper, he confronts the notion of cooperation with data emerging from a legal dispute between speakers of Tzotzil (a Mexican Indian language spoken in highland Chiapas), a specimen of what he terms "disorderly and openly contentious interaction" (547). Such disputes, according to Haviland, are characterized by impoliteness, by a lack of normal turn taking, by groups of people trying to out-shout one another, and so on; and may occasionally even erupt in physical violence. The problem for Grice's theory, as Haviland sees it, is the difficulty of reconciling these facts – the facts that there is no cooperation ("in the ordinary sense" (553))

and that the maxims do not seem to be at play – with the fact that there nevertheless seems to be inference.

Clearly, however, this ‘paradox’ vanishes into thin air once it is realized that Haviland’s two contentions – that there is no cooperation and that no maxims are at play – are both incorrect. The reason why Haviland would want to suggest that the data display a lack of cooperation is quite obvious: the data display quite heavy unfriendliness, and, relying, like so many others, on some notion of strong cooperation, Haviland has no choice but to deem the discourse uncooperative. What my analysis has shown, however, is that even unfriendly (non-strongly cooperative) discourse can be weakly cooperative. As far as can one can tell from Haviland’s article, there is no evidence that the participants involved do not understand what the others mean (on the contrary: most of them seem to be making themselves rather clear), and hence we may safely assume that there is at least weak s-cooperation.

Haviland’s second contention, that no maxims are at play, is, as I said, equally incorrect. The reason why Haviland would think that no maxims are at play is more obscure than in the former case; perhaps his claim rests on some narrow interpretation of Gricean cooperation to the effect that there cannot be cooperation without the maxims (and seeing that there is no cooperation, being forced to conclude that the maxims cannot be at play, either). The problem here, of course, is the previously mentioned fact that there are two kinds of cooperation, improvised and choreographed, where the former does not involve maxims. Thus, there may indeed be cooperation without maxims, and Haviland is wrong. It is, however, possible that Haviland’s ‘no-maxims’ claim rather rests on the observation that Grice’s maxims are all breached, which could also lead to a conclusion to the effect that they do not apply. But if it is indeed the case that Grice’s maxims are all breached, then this is, of course, indication that they do apply rather than the opposite. This fact does not detract from their application at all; on the contrary, what the phenomenon of flouting

teaches us is, among other things, that maxims may be just as useful in the breach as in the observance, if not more.

There is, of course, the *possibility* that Grice's maxims in fact do not apply at all and that Haviland is right; maxims being social and learned, it is quite likely that not all of Grice's maxims apply in all cultures and in all situations (see Chapter 4, p. 134ff). On the other hand, however, it is quite likely that some of Grice's maxims are rather *central* and that they will therefore apply at least across a large number of cultures and situations (see p. 154ff). But the point is that even when they do in fact not apply, there will (almost) always be other maxim-like entities which structure and regulate activity types and discourse (see p. 123ff). Haviland seems to intuit some such thing in saying that antagonistic interactions must be governed by some other factors, that is, some "quite specific "cultural logics" (or perhaps by tropes)" (548) (although he does not succeed in giving a particularly clear answer to what these are supposed to be). It is indeed very rare to encounter completely unstructured situations and hence fully improvised cooperation, and if such cases do occur, we are probably likely to try to borrow maxims and other guidelines from comparable situations, in order to not have to start completely from scratch.

Let me now give an example of how legal disputes in the Tzotzil-speaking community in fact can be shown to be highly structured, by maxims and other guidelines. Here is Haviland's general description of dispute settlement sessions:

Dispute settlement sessions before a Zinacantec magistrate . . . tend to follow a rough sequence . . . Each phase of the dispute settlement has a slightly different allocation of rights, opportunities, and obligations to talk. In brief, in a preamble to the settlement, the opposing parties who have brought a dispute to the authorities state their cases. The airing of conflicting positions, initially in an orchestrated sequence of monologues punctuated by occasional questions from the magistrate, is allowed to dissolve into open confrontation in which opponents directly challenge and heckle each other. There usually follows a kind of free-for-all, in which choruses of disputants in shifting teams try to shout each other down . . . Once they judge the shouting has gone on long enough, perhaps when they think the cathartic effect of such venting of emotions and arguments is sufficient, the dispute settlers intervene. They make pronouncements and ask the parties pointed questions, often explicitly suppressing back talk and side remarks. The gradual emerging evaluation of events and alternate positions is usually

taken up by a chorus of elders, who jointly announce their recommendations, although insurrectional backtalk [sic], especially from bystanders in the back rows, may continue. The parties to the dispute are at least nominally free to accept or reject the dispute settlers' recommendations (although in the latter case they may, in disputes at the town hall at least, risk jail or other punishment). The entire event may well then end with the «losers» presenting gifts - soft drinks, sometimes beer and bootleg rum - to their opponents and to the dispute settlers, shaking hands, making apologies, handing over cash, and so on, as appropriate to the case. (555)

We see, among other things, that the session is allocated a certain space in the sequential order of events, it cannot begin until certain routines have been performed, and it has to end when the dispute settlers see it fit. All the way, the situation is kept under strict control. The key word in this passage, however, is to be found in the last line of the quote, viz. *appropriate*. What is appropriate within the defining framework of an activity type will always vary according to varying sets of maxims. What is appropriate in this particular context is following the instructions of the dispute settlers, adhering to the prescribed sequence of the event, and so on. The fact that these are in fact 'maxims', too, is indicated by the fact that they can be breached, and that their breach produces underlying meaning. Blatantly refusing to follow instructions may communicate that the participant(s) are dissatisfied with the outcome for their part, and refusing to observe the prescribed sequence may carry a similar, rebellious message. On the other hand, there is reason to believe that at least some of Grice's maxims still prevail, as well. Without a basis in some notion of truth and relevance, for instance, workable understanding is quite possibly ruled out (see Chapter 4, p. 154ff). And no matter how much the participants are out to combat one another, this goal, as suggested before, is not achieved by saying goodbye to meaning: "Even in fierce arguments and hard bargaining, each participant needs to understand what the other means; the bitterest disputants must agree to disagree" (Martinich 1980:215). In fact, as can be divined on the basis of the following statement by Holdcroft (1979), it may well be that weak s-cooperation plays an even *more* crucial role in this kind of activity type than ones characterized by the presence of strong cooperation:

Cooperation for a limited purpose against a background of conflict and general suspicion is surely intelligible. Indeed, the background conflict



may provide a more powerful motive to talk, as the only way of breaking deadlock, than a background of amicable agreement. (135)

As Holdcroft points out, the urgency of the goal of resolving a conflict may be a factor which in fact increases the motivation to make sense, or, in other words, to uphold a certain level of s-cooperation.

In sum, even if we can safely say that Haviland's example contains no strong cooperation, there is definitely weak s-cooperation.

Furthermore, there is also weak a-cooperation: the mere fact that these people have got together solely for the purpose of this fight, indicates the presence of the social goals of venting aggression and finding a solution to some conflict. This example is interesting testimony to a particularly routinized way of achieving such social goals, involving elaborately structured roles like opposing party, dispute settler, and so on.

#### Cooperation and monological activity types

In *Logic and Conversation*, Grice himself expressed concern whether or not quarrelling would actually fit into his scheme. He did not reach a resolution, however, until in the Retrospective Epilogue in *Studies in the Way of Words*:

One source of trouble has perhaps been that it has been felt that even in the talk-exchanges of civilized people browbeating disputation and conversational sharp practice are far too common to be offenses against the fundamental dictates of conversational practice . . . we should recognize that within the dimension of voluntary exchanges (which are all that concern us) collaboration in achieving exchange of information or the institution of decisions may coexist with a high degree of reserve, hostility, and chicanery. (1989:369)

Here, he explicitly suggests a split between weak (s-)cooperation and strong (s or a-)cooperation, which means, of course, that save some new terminology and a somewhat more finely drawn analytical scheme, the present enterprise still moves well within the boundaries of that which we call 'Gricean'.

A second concern which Grice also mentioned briefly in *Logic and Conversation*, and one to which he also found some sort of resolution later on, is that of the suitability within his scheme of "letter writing" (1989:29). By letter writing I assume that he meant activity types that

have the character of monologue, that is, roughly speaking, discourse where there is no turn-taking as we normally understand it. He returns to the issue in the Retrospective Epilogue, here expressing an explicit desire to exclude monologues from consideration entirely:

insofar as the presence of implicature rests on the character of one or another kind of conversational enterprise, it will rest on the character of concerted rather than solitary talk production. Genuine monologues are free from speaker's implication. (1989:369)

In claiming, like he does here, that monologues are free from speaker's implication, Grice is perhaps in effect also claiming that they are free from cooperation, because in Grice, as we saw, cooperation is first and foremost tied to the notion of maxims (which in turn, of course, is tied to the notion of implicature). It was also argued, however, that Grice's original theory in addition contains a notion of cooperation related to the notion of *everyday* cooperation (above, p. 16). Would Grice, then, say that monologues can be cooperative in this everyday sense? This, I believe, is not likely, insofar as the everyday notion of cooperation, in addition to the other aspects listed so far, also encompasses a notion of *immediate exchange*, which, Grice rightfully argues in the above quote, we do not have in monologues.

I will return to the latter point shortly. To start with the beginning, however, Grice was wrong in claiming that monologues are free from implicature, and hence in claiming that no maxims are at play (and thus that there is no maxim-related cooperation). Holdcroft (1979), for instance, looking for implicature in monological discourse types, dividing them into two basic categories, that is, cases in which no addressee is intended (soliloquizing, talking to oneself), and cases where an addressee *is* intended (to deliver a . . . disquisition, sermon, speech, oration, peroration, etc.; to malign, vilify, abuse, defame, grouse, grumble at, jeer at, etc.; to confess, describe, report, explain, counsel, etc.) (132), found in all cases that there *is* implicature. Which means that maxims are at play here, as well.

It seems strange that Grice should suggest that there are not, even in monologues of Holdcroft's first type (which is possibly what Grice had in mind using the term *genuine monologues*). The idea is certainly

counter-intuitive: whoever talks to him or herself in a qualitatively different way from that in which he or she talks to other people? I believe the answer to why Grice would assume this to be the case might lie in his inherited view of human communicators as isolated, self-contained individuals with no actual connection with others apart from via the medium of transmitted information: for someone firmly lodged within this tradition, anything which is obviously shared knowledge – like for instance maxims – easily becomes seen as relevant only in situations where the solitary subject reaches out to others in incidental socialization, in exchange, as Grice would put it; it will not be seen as relevant to the individual when alone (cf. Chapter 3, p. 64ff). Thus, it will not be used in such situations, either.

An alternative way of seeing things, one which will be propounded throughout this work, is that the maxims – and maxim-like entities – are part of who we are to such an extent that they just cannot be left aside, even in the greatest moments of intimacy with ourselves. The maxims, acquired in communicative interaction, are part of the system of signs that composes our consciousness (Voloshinov 1973:11) (see Chapter 5, p. 169ff). They are, in other words, an inextricable part of the very matter that constitutes our *life-world* (Schutz & Luckmann 1973:3ff). Hence, the maxims are just as operative in our solitary life, and are indeed used when we confer with ourselves in thinking, in speaking to ourselves, in diary form, and so on. This is moreover something which we *will* do, because we *can*: not only is existence, as was pointed out above, dialogically constituted; the same is also true of consciousness (Bakhtin 1981, Bråten 1992, Rommetveit 1992:22, Trevarthen 1992:104ff), which means that we are born with the capacity to disengage ourselves, at least temporarily, from the flow of consciousness and see ourselves from the ‘outside’. The dual nature of consciousness is absolutely necessary for the possibility to fulfil our self-image by means of the perspective of the other, and furthermore it is what lies behind the often disregarded fact that we are not only producers of our own utterances, but also their interpreters, whether we are alone, talking to ourselves, or talking to others. When we talk to

ourselves, we are (to our knowledge) the only interpreters of our own utterances. When we talk to others we have to constantly monitor the correspondence between what we wanted to say and what we actually said, as well as the correspondence between our own interpretation of our own utterances and the hearer's possible interpretation of our utterances. A special case of the subject as interpreter of her own utterances in conversation is that of being *self-ironic*. When a subject is being self-ironic, he or she, such as in Grice's 'genuine' monologue, is both addresser and addressee, but with the twist that in the former situation, we are talking about a *display*: the self-targeted irony is quite simply a little theatrical performance staged for the benefit of the hearer, who in this case is temporarily and deliberately demoted to *overhearer*. Thus, the notion of the subject as interpreter of her own utterances here becomes the pivot of a communicative ploy to promote some aspect of one's own perception of oneself by offering a glimpse into the subject matter of one's own conversations with oneself.

Returning now to the original concern of this section, we remember that Holdcroft pointed out that there are implicatures and thus maxims at play in solitary talk production. This means that we are also dealing with at least a certain amount of weak s-cooperation. The presence of cooperation is, however, something which Holdcroft is not willing to acknowledge.<sup>19</sup> There is no cooperation, he claims, because there is no concrete physical proximity and no immediacy; participants cannot see or hear one another, there is no exchange (cf. the quote from Grice above). The same claim can be found in several places; van Dijk (1976), for instance, makes it specifically on behalf of the monological discourse type of literature:

Since the speaker/author does not intend to interact 'practically' with the hearer, no co-operation in fact seems required. His task is rather the construction of a linguistic object and, thereby, of a set of possible worlds, which the hearer/reader is assumed to 'reconstruct'. It is

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<sup>19</sup> Contrast Burt (1992), who takes it for granted that certain forms of cooperation (falling under what I call weak s-cooperation) are possible in at least one type of monologue, that is, that of written argumentative text (399).

therefore better, it seems, to introduce for literature a different axiomatic principle, viz. the Construction Principle. (49)

As we see, van Dijk's solution to the problem is to exchange the Cooperative Principle with some other, similar principle, allegedly holding for literature. Holdcroft (1979), too, suggests that the problem can be resolved by a change to the very basis of the CP, rewording the overall Cooperative Principle in the following terms:

Make your contribution to the discourse such as is required, at the stage at which it occurs, by the purposes you have in entering into, or which you have accepted as the purposes of, or which are the generally accepted purposes of, the discourse in which you are a participant.  
(139)

What Holdcroft does here is to move the focus from the people involved to the discourse itself, thus (perhaps conveniently) losing the troublesome notion of cooperation altogether, as a matter of fact, since cooperation is a notion which is thoroughly participant-centred.

So, what to make of this insistence (Grice, Holdcroft, van Dijk) that there is no cooperation in monologues because there is no face to face interaction, or no turn taking? Could it be that we are again witnessing the adoption of an aspect of the everyday, non-technical notion of cooperation? In the other cases discussed so far we saw that everyday ideas about cooperation as strict norm-observance and an attendant positive attitude have been allowed to become such an influence that other, subtler forms of cooperation have somehow ended up becoming overlooked. Could it be the case that the notions of closeness, physical proximity, and immediacy are equally much part of this everyday notion of cooperation, and thus function in the same way, that is, forming a boundary against the idea that there should be cooperation in activity types like the ones exemplified? If this is the case, then the latter, too, should, in a scheme like the present, be incorporated into the notion of strong cooperation, counteracting the tendency towards a too-narrow conception of cooperation by introducing the idea that there should be several levels of cooperation, and that weak cooperation, on the 'lower' level, is even more common than strong cooperation.

If a too-narrow, or 'lopsided', conception of cooperation is indeed the reason for the counter-intuitive insistence on the lack of cooperativity of certain activity or discourse types, then it is, of course, also interesting to ask about the sources for such a conception. How did the desire to label certain activity or discourse types uncooperative arise in the first place? The answer to this question has been partly suggested already: it stems from the same set of background assumptions as that governing the desire to shut off the possibility that such activity types have to do with *maxims* at all, that is, the set of background assumptions revolving around the notion of human communicators as self-contained units with no intrinsic connection with one another. Under this view, other participants, as we saw, are seen as not relevant to the speaker when they are not present (or even when they *are* present but are somehow prevented from interacting with the speaker) and thus, one fails to see how there can be any coordinated use of maxims, or any other form of cooperation, since cooperation is between people. The alternative view, on the other hand, states that I always carry the other with me, embodied in my capacity for communicating with myself when I am talking to myself, and embodied as a potential interactant when I am writing letters or speaking to someone from a stage. Thus, cooperation, in all its aspects, is no less of a possibility in monological activity types. Which means, of course, that monologue is never truly monologic. It is always dialogic.

## Chapter 3:

# BASIC INTERPRETATIONAL DRIVE

In the previous chapter we saw that the hearer's assumption that the speaker is cooperative, contrary to the claim of Grice and many of his followers, is merely a secondary source of interpretational drive. The *basic* source of interpretational drive, it was claimed, is *reciprocal response-readiness*; a source which feeds all interpretation, and thus, of course, also the interpretation of flouts.

In this chapter, I first return to the idea that the cooperative assumption should constitute basic interpretational drive, tracing its roots within the Gricean tradition and the monological paradigm to which this belongs, in preparation of a more thorough exploration of *actual* basic interpretational drive, that is, reciprocal response-readiness, placing *this* notion more firmly within the paradigm to which *it* belongs, that is, dialogism. I begin by looking at how Grice's predecessors, Grice himself and his successors have seen cooperation

and hence the assumption of cooperation to be anchored in inborn *rationality*. I show how this idea is counterproductive, since it entails a view of human beings as specimens of *Solus Ipse*, that is, as basically disconnected and non-social beings, thus driven to act – and to communicate – mainly, if not exclusively, by *self-interest*, an idea which corresponds poorly with the existence of certain forms of discourse which are extremely other-oriented (such as, for instance, talking to participants that lack communicative and/or linguistic abilities, or participants with only poorly developed communicative and/or linguistic abilities). I then go on to present an alternative account of human rationality, that of Habermas (1984). Habermas' rationality is a *communicative* rationality, consisting in, roughly speaking, the adoption of the common aim of negotiating forth consensus (10). Thus, this view of rationality is a step in the right direction in entailing a view of the rational communication participant as *Homo Socius*, allowing a view of communication as driven by a *common* interest. However, in stating that rationality is just one among several worldviews, or, in other words, that it is not universal, this brand of rationality cannot account for basic, universal communicativity and interpretativity either. Basic, universal communicativity and interpretativity, as I began to explain in the previous chapter, is rather due to certain existential conditions with which we are met upon entering the world. One of these conditions is being as ongoing event, which, as was explained, ensures a basic response-readiness, another is the need for the other's excess of seeing, which establishes a basic reciprocity to this response-readiness. In the present chapter, the notion of reciprocal response-readiness is further developed, among other things by showing how a third existential condition also plays a role in the providing of basic interpretational drive, namely that of *the spatio-temporal uniqueness of individuals*, which creates, according to Bakhtin (1993), a moral drive to actualize this uniqueness (56f).

In the final sections of this chapter, I turn to the phenomenology of reciprocal response-readiness in order to explain how it actually



functions as basic interpretational drive. Reciprocal response-readiness, it is claimed, functions by virtue of generating a *felt tension* which can only be released by action. As an example, I discuss phatic communication, which is the purest expression of such tension in the sense that it constitutes discourse which arises in situations where there is no reason to talk and nothing in particular to talk about, but where there is nevertheless a clearly felt need to talk.

#### RATIONALITY AS BASIC INTERPRETATIONAL DRIVE

Despite the fact that Grice's theory can be said to contribute greatly to a social perspective on language and communication (Gumperz 1990:429), Grice, as I pointed out in Chapter 1, is nevertheless solidly lodged within a monological tradition. In particular, Grice and his successors have displayed a peculiar insistence on the *rationality* of the communication participant, and the consequences of this rationality on among other things, communication and communicativity (and hence interpretativity). Human inborn rationality is seen to be the backbone of cooperativity, and thus that of basic interpretational drive. In this section I criticize this idea, showing, among other things, that a rational communication participant is basically isolated, only incidentally social, and hence fundamentally motivated by self-interest. Such an idea, it is claimed, is empirically unsound. An alternative is then presented, one in which rationality is *not* seen as intrinsic to human nature, but rather as one among a number of possible worldviews. I argue, however, that neither this kind of rationality can account for basic interpretational drive (even if it does open up for a view of participants as motivated by common interest). Since rationality is only one among a number of possible worldviews, it is argued, it is logically impossible to claim that this is what provides basic – universal – interpretational drive.

#### **Rationality in the Gricean tradition**

Throughout his account of the Cooperative Principle, Grice himself insists on the rationality of the communication participant (Pratt

1981:11, Linell 1996:7:18), and on the link between rationality and communication: according to Grice, talking is just “a special case or variety of purposive, indeed rational, behavior” (1989:28).

Thus, Grice situated himself firmly within an already existing tradition, and by this I do not yet mean the rationality paradigm. Because of the overwhelming attention given to his theory, it is easy to think that Grice was the first to propound ideas regarding a relationship between certain interactional guidelines and indirect meaning, but this is not the case. Grice had predecessors (e.g., Fogelin 1967, Grant 1958, and Nowell-Smith 1962), and these were, of course, already firmly lodged within the mentioned paradigm, and it was from these that Grice inherited his platform.

Most of these pre-Gricean accounts (as well as many of those of Grice’s successors) adhere to some version of the notion that communication participants are (in some sense of ‘are’) rational beings. With this overarching assumption as a point of departure, Grant (1958) focuses on rational types of agent *intention*, talking about “The principle that people usually intend the most probable consequences of their actions” (308); whereas Nowell-Smith (1962) focuses on the *rule-boundedness* and *purposiveness* of the rational human being:

there are . . . I believe, rules which might be called rules of rational discourse, which are in some sense universal and necessary . . . in the sense that they *must* be adopted by any rational purposive being if he is to achieve the ends for which speech is used. (4-5)

Moving on to post-Gricean accounts, Gordon & Lakoff (1975), in an attempt at formalizing Grice’s maxims (for the purpose of integrating them into a generative semantics), focus on the *reasonableness* of (rational actors’) utterances: “In addition to asking when a speech act is sincere [i.e. whether the speaker is observing the maxims of Quality], we need to ask when it is reasonable” (89). Kasher (1976) focuses on the predominance and primacy in the rational agent’s universe of *subjective aims*: “every participant has the right to change the direction [of the conversation] as he sees fit” (202), whereas Allwood (1976) aims at producing an exhaustive list of all the traits that

constitute “typical rational agenthood” (45): a typical rational agent will act intentionally, purposefully, voluntarily, motivatedly, competently, and so on. Brown & Levinson (1987) focus on the rational agent’s *politeness*:<sup>1</sup>

polite ways of talking show up as deviations [i.e. as breaches of maxims], requiring rational explanation on the part of the recipient, who finds in considerations of politeness reasons for the speaker’s apparent irrationality or inefficiency. (4)

And finally Levinson (1983) focuses on the *universality* of rational agents’ rational behaviour:

the maxims do indeed derive from general considerations of rationality applicable to all kinds of co-operative exchanges, and if so they ought in addition to have universal application, at least to the extent that other, culture-specific, constraints on interaction allow. (103)

In sum, then, the rational communication participant always acts with clear intentions, he is polite, motivated, competent and reasonable, he is always governed by a purpose and always abides by rules.

Not only, however, did Grice’s predecessors and successors insist on the rationality of the communication participant. They also insisted on a link between participants’ rationality and communication and understanding. Little is, however, said explicitly, most often such a link is merely understood. But where something *is* said explicitly, the link is often propounded very strongly, like, for instance, in Grant (1958), where it is claimed that if communication participants were not rational, understanding would not be possible at all, that is, rationality is a precondition for understanding: “We cannot hope to understand the actions of others, in an important sense of “understand,” unless we presuppose that on the whole agents intend the probable consequences of their actions” (308).

This ‘strong view’ is inherited over into *post*-Gricean research in the form of a powerful insistence on tying the Gricean meaning-creation scheme in general, and the notions of maxims and cooperation in particular, more closely in with the notion of rationality. The most radical example of this tendency is found in Kasher (1976), who proposes to override Grice’s overall Cooperative Principle and maxims

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<sup>1</sup> See also Kingwell (1993).

by a more general, overall principle of rationality, plus four sub-principles:<sup>2</sup>

- (5) At every stage of a way towards achieving an end of yours, act as required for the achievement of the aim.
- (6) (a) Do not use the means you have for achieving your ends more or less than is required for their achievement, *ceteris paribus*;  
(b) Try to achieve your ends by the standard use of the means you have for their achievement, *ceteris paribus*;  
(c) At every stage on a way to the achievement of your ends, consider the means being used by other persons to achieve their ends, as you come to determine the manner of your progress at that stage, *ceteris paribus*; and prefer using your means in a manner which is likely to help the progress of others on their way to the achievement of their ends, over any other use of these means, *ceteris paribus*;  
(d) Give preference to means which lead you to your ends over means which lead you to situations wherein achievement of the ends themselves is just a possible result. (203)

(5) is supposed to substitute completely for the overall Cooperative Principle, whereas Grice's maxims are to be seen as derived from (a-d). For example, the maxim of Quality is to be seen as a special case of (6b) because the standard use of means could mean using truthful indicative statements to achieve the aim of leading communication participants "to a state of broad coordination of knowledge and belief" (207). The idea of derived maxims is also present in Levinson (1983), where the maxims – which by virtue of their insistence on truthfulness, relevance, clarity and so on are already tailor-made to fit a description of rational behaviour – are also seen as depending on a rationality backdrop:

Grice's suggestion is that there is a set of over-arching assumptions guiding the conduct of conversation. These arise, it seems, from basic rational considerations and may be formulated as guidelines for the efficient and effective use of language in conversation to further co-operative ends. (101)

Bird (1979) also sees the maxims as deriving from a general rationality:

We might say simply that the participants in a conversation of course assume generally, other things being equal, that their partners are rational, and that their utterances are intended to be sincere, as informative as possible and connected. (151)

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<sup>2</sup> See also Kasher (1977a, 1977b).

And finally, Mey (1985), despite the fact that he has doubts regarding the prevalence of rationality in everyday communication (178), does not reject the possibility of seeing “cooperative behaviour as a kind of rationality (‘without cooperation, communication wouldn’t be possible, hence we had better cooperate’)” (1993:71).

As we remember from the previous chapter, maxims and cooperation are two sides of the same coin: (choreographed) cooperation means relating to the maxims and other guidelines in predictable ways, or observing them more often than not (strong cooperation). (At least the latter is not controversial, which is reflected in the fact that what counts as being rational (and hence what is valued), is not ‘having’ maxims or knowing about them, but *observing* them). Because of this connection between maxims and cooperation, we may argue as follows: if observing the maxims is, as it is, seen as anchored in rationality, then *cooperation* must, in the above accounts, also be seen as anchored in rationality. And this is indeed what is generally implied (except in Mey (above), where it is stated explicitly). This is an important point because in turn this means that basic interpretational drive, which in Gricean schemes is seen to be tied to an assumption of cooperativity, must also in these accounts be seen to be ultimately based in rationality.

### **To be or not to be rational: the sapience vs. the worldview view**

In the last decade, at least a few voices have been heard criticizing the tightly-knit relationship between some – largely undefined (Richardson & Richardson 1990:499) – theory of rationality and Gricean explanations (e.g., Haviland 1997:547, Mey 1993:71, and Sarangi & Slembrouck 1992:141). But the problem is the frequent lack of explicitness regarding the position taken on rationality vs. communication: the complaint has quite simply been that rational behaviour is not as prevalent in real communication as Gricean theory makes it seem, a statement which could be an expression of at least two different opinions, that is, either *Rationality is not universal*, or *Rationality is universal, but there are more ‘exceptions’ to it than*

*previously assumed.* Whether one opts for the former or the latter has tremendous consequences for the subsequent theory – the former entails a complete rejection of rationality as backdrop, the latter not – and thus clarity on this point is absolutely necessary. The position taken here aligns itself with the former of the two outlined opinions, viz. that human beings are not a rational species (although we do sometimes, if not often, behave ‘rationally’), and hence, the reason why we – I presume universally – communicate, and in particular, the reason why we interpret utterances, *cannot* be the one that we are rational. In order to validate this claim, let me first start by taking a closer look at the tradition from which Gricean theory, via the pre-Griceans and Grice himself, inherited these background assumptions.

The preoccupation with rationality in philosophy dates, as is well known, back to Descartes and the Enlightenment. These were times of great upsurge and consolidation of ideas concerning man’s peculiar capacity for disciplined, systematic, logical thought:

Enlightenment was a desire for human affairs to be guided by rationality rather than by faith, superstition, or revelation; a belief in the power of human reason to change society and liberate the individual from the restraints of custom or arbitrary authority; all backed up by a world view increasingly validated by science rather than by religion or tradition. (Outram 1995:3)

This fundamentally subjectivist paradigm has not survived unchallenged; in the 19<sup>th</sup> century Hegel, Marx, Darwin, Nietzsche and Freud demonstrated how ‘structures of consciousness’ were more restricted and restrained than previously thought (in terms of historical and social conditions, and the subconscious); and today, in the 20<sup>th</sup>,

we are said to be living in a “post-Heideggerian,” “post-Wittgensteinian,” “poststructuralist” age. The spirit has once again been desublimated. Subjectivity has been shown to be “infiltrated with the world” in such a way that “otherness is carried to the very heart of selfhood.” (McCarthy 1984:x)

Despite these challenges, however, the Cartesian paradigm *has* survived, and not only within philosophy, which should be evident from the previous sections. We still largely live in a “mental world we have allowed ourselves to inherit from the Enlightenment” (Trevarthen 1992:100). This world, according to Trevarthen,

“venerates “cognition” above both “conation” and “emotion”. And so our society “knows” more confidently than it “wills” or “feels”. It is scientific in the purest sense” (100).

Rather than going into the details of the development just roughly sketched, I shall in the following focus on a couple of present-day rationalists who represent opposite ends of a scale regarding the extent to which (some definition of) rationality is a defining feature of human-ness. I will do this in order to illustrate the point that the rationality bias in Gricean pragmatics can be seen to be due, first and foremost, to those who see rationality as *the* defining feature of human-ness, since such a view is bound to have had an immense consolidatory effect in processes of paradigm acceptance and perpetuation. Thus, one important claim is that the *sapience trend* (e.g., Bennet 1989, Brandom 1994) is far more to blame than the *worldview trend* (e.g., Habermas 1984) for the uncritical adoption and perpetuation in Gricean pragmatics of background assumptions regarding rationality. Adherents to the *sapience* view will subscribe to some version of the view that the capacity to hold beliefs, make judgements, give reasons for actions, and hold something for true and false is inborn, and something that makes us qualitatively different from other living creatures. Bennet (1989), for instance, stipulates that ““rationality” is to stand for whatever human possession it is that creates a mentalistic difference of kind between us and other terrestrial animals. The trigger for this was the time-worn definition of “man” as “rational animal”” (vii). Language, under this view, in distinguishing us “as rational, indeed logical, concept-mongering creatures” (Brandom 1994:xi), becomes a “manifestation of rationality” (Bennet 1989:6). Language is an instrument of communication, and hence, without rationality, no communication either. Adherents to the second view, on the other hand, take rational thinking and behaviour as a manifestation of an inherited worldview: the cultural context we are born into contains pre-interpreted (but negotiable) notions and ideals giving rise to certain ways of thinking and behaving. In a rationalized culture – a culture influenced and

dominated by rational ideals – the predominant worldview will be the rational one (Habermas 1984). Clearly, language and communication will stand in a completely different relationship to rationality here, quite simply because if rationality is not universal, then language and communication can have no intrinsic ties with it, since *they* so clearly *are*.

In the following, I examine these two trends with more specific focus on the view of the communication participant which permeates each, and on the consequences of this view for the notion of communicative-interpretative drive.

#### Solus Ipse: self-directed interest as interpretational drive

In its insistence on rationality as part and parcel of human nature, the sapience view retains stronger links to the origins of rationality theory than does the worldview view. Because the Cartesian paradigm, of course, precisely re-invents man as constituted by his ability to reason. The unhappy side-effect, however, of such a point of departure, was the well-known emergence of a view of man as *solitary* thinker, or *Solus Ipse* (McCarthy 1984:ix). Descartes' emphasis on *cogito* and his postulation of the primacy of *subject, reason, mind* and *self* over notions like *object, sense, desire, body* and *other*, advocated a view of human beings as mind and reason-driven individualists, or in other words, as essentially *disconnected* from the rest of the world.

This disconnectedness has two interrelated aspects, that is, *detachment* and *non-communicativity*. The former springs directly from the split between subject and object, self and other, reason and emotion: each person is the only subject in a world of objects, that is, nobody and nothing is truly *like* him or her; the self is, in principle, different from the other. Furthermore, Solus Ipse is, of course, not only detached from others, he is also detached from himself: his reason is seen to be his best companion, with emotion at best being something superimposed on that reason. This detachment, moreover, entails a basic lack of communicativity: the conceptual enclosedness of each item in each conceptual pair (subject-object, etc.) prevents any real



relation between them; the self can, for instance, perceive the other, and can even allow him or herself to be influenced by the other, but can also at any point close off the channel and from then on be completely alone, in a basic state of dissociation. Thus, Solus Ipse is intrinsically private and only incidentally social. Under this view, “Action is “social” insofar as its subjective meaning *takes account of* the behavior of others and is thereby oriented in its course” (Weber 1977:38) (my emphasis). The movement is one-way (from self towards other); the self goes out and gets what he wants and needs, and then returns ‘home’.

#### *Solus Ipse in Gricean pragmatics*

The influence of Solus Ipse is observable in many aspects of Gricean pragmatics. The most obvious symptom is perhaps the way interpretational processes are often seen as conscious ‘reasoning processes’ (see, e.g., Grice’s general pattern for the working out of a conversational implicature (quoted on p. 15)), but it is also evident in, for instance, the almost complete lack of consideration of the importance of emotions in interpersonal communication, and in the general acceptance of the code model, which presupposes a complete lack of connection between point A (the sender) and point B (the receiver). Finally, the general view, as illustrated by the following quote, is that of the communication participant as first private, then social:

[the principles of normal rational agenthood] characterize an isolated Robinson Crusoe-type of individual just as much as an individual who is an interacting and cooperating member of a social group. We will therefore . . . consider some of the ways in which cooperation introduces factors not necessarily present in individual normal rational action. (Allwood 1976:52)

Here, an individual is first and foremost seen as an individual actor. This is the basic starting-point. *Interaction* only comes along and ‘introduces factors’, as a second layer, superimposing these factors upon the individual.

My next question, then, is what can possibly be seen to motivate the profoundly un-social character of Solus Ipse to become, as Allwood

puts it in the above quote, an interacting and cooperating member of a social group. The answer can be found by looking again at Kasher's (1976) principles of rationality, prefaced by the general principle "At every stage of a way towards achieving an aim of yours, act as required for the achievement of the aim" (203). Implicit in this principle, as in all of Kasher's principles, indeed as in any account with a rationalistic leaning, is the assumption that what motivates the actor to act in the world, is exclusively the desire to fulfil his own, personal needs, which is, of course, a natural extension of the Cartesian view of human beings as islands.

For some, for instance Sampson (1982), a Grice critic who employs theory of economics in his understanding of pragmatic phenomena,<sup>3</sup> this stance, which Attardo (1997) has labelled *the principle of self-interest* (778), entails that people do *not* observe Grice's maxims and that people do *not* cooperate, whereas for others, it is not in conflict with the view that people observe Grice's maxims and that they cooperate: cooperation, after all, can also be a good strategy for achieving one's *own* purposes. The point is that in the former case, people's motivation to communicate and hence to interpret is seen to stem *directly* from their rational – self-interested – nature, whereas in the latter case, the self-same motivation may be perceived to be seen to stem indirectly from it, via cooperation.

A special case of this principle of self-interest can be found in a particularly influential Gricean 'offspring'. With its cognitive-computational orientation, its lack of regard for social fact, and one-sided preoccupation with rational notions like relevance and efficiency, *relevance theory* (Sperber & Wilson 1995), like Kasher's theory, carries its Cartesian heritage on its sleeve<sup>4</sup> and has therefore been embraced wholeheartedly in positivistic, Chomskyan, linguistic circles (and of course less so in, for instance, social pragmatics circles; see Yus Ramos (1998) for an excellent overview of the history of the reception of relevance theory). It is, of course, not strange that there

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<sup>3</sup> For a criticism of such an approach, see Mey (1985).

<sup>4</sup> See Ziv (1988) for an attempt at combining Sperber & Wilson's and Kasher's models.

should be such an affinity between a tradition and a theory both so entirely saturated by the presence of Solus Ipse. For Chomsky (1965), “linguistic theory is concerned primarily with an ideal speaker-hearer in a completely homogeneous speech-community” (3). For Sperber & Wilson (1995), the speaker and hearer are most interesting in their capacity as “information processing devices” (1).

Sperber & Wilson’s conception of interpretational drive (which, incidentally, is not seen to have any connection with cooperation) is a special, cognitivist case of the above-mentioned principle of self-interest. What is required, according to these authors, in order to ensure attention and interpretation, is, roughly speaking, on the one hand that the information presented allows the hearer’s cognitive apparatus to draw fresh conclusions, and on the other that these conclusions are capable of being drawn efficiently. Or, in Sperber & Wilson’s terminology, that the information is *relevant*. For, “Information processing involves effort: it will only be undertaken in the expectation of some *reward*” (49) (my emphasis). And in this case the reward is not even required or received by the human being as a whole, but rather by some device within the brain.

#### *Self-interest, Mutt, and Jute*

But, if self-interest – non-cognitive or cognitive – is the main driving force in communication, how do we explain, for instance, that people talk to their dogs, or to their potted plants, or to themselves? Or that people spend hours communicating with babies who do not yet have a language? Is a teacher who struggles his way through a text written by a dyslexic, motivated by self-interest? What sort of private, personal goals can we possibly hope to achieve by engaging in these exercises?

Undoubtedly, such goals do exist even in these cases, and we do pursue them. Talking to one’s dog as well as to babies (as well as trying to understand their attempts at communicating back) can, for instance, be pleasurable (perhaps mainly because we have been *socialized* into finding it so); and talking to one’s plants, by some people’s beliefs, make them grow more quickly. There is even likely to

be a certain amount of self-interest motivating the teacher in his or her work: there may, for instance, be the short-term goal of finishing up work before the week-end so one may take some time off, or the more long-term goal of extracting praise for one's good work with a particular pupil, and so on. But the mere fact of the complexity of our social motives is enough to realize that it would be wrong to try to explain communication exclusively by the concept of self-interest. Talking to dogs, for instance, is an activity that might be undertaken because of a desire to achieve control over them so that they do not hurt others; talking to babies may be done out of a desire to help them along with their linguistic development, and teachers most probably keep struggling with their pupils' texts also because they have a sincere wish to help. Our goal-structures – when they *do* play a part in enticing us to communicate (which they do, in co-constituting socialized interpretational drive (see Chapter 2, p. 24ff), but only secondarily, after reciprocal response-readiness) – are likely to mostly be a mix of regard for self and regard for other, and in the event that one of the two dominates at a particular time in a particular place, this is most likely to be a result of reigning moral patterns.

These examples also show the incorrectness of Sperber & Wilson's assumption that it is *cognitive* self-interest (in the form of a 'desire' for relevance) which motivates communication and interpretation. For in the majority of these cases, at least where the communication participant is a dog or a plant, or oneself, there cannot be said to be much chance of cognitive reward in the form of cognitively productive and efficient information emanating from these sources. Especially in the case of the plant, where there is no reply at all, of course, and in the case of talking to oneself, since one cannot be expected to be able to present information which is 'new and interesting' to one's own mind, since one is already 'in it', using the elements that are already there.

But then there are cases where utterances are indeed issued, and where the information *does* come from a human, linguistically capable source outside oneself, but where it is still hard to see how Sperber &

Wilson's assumption could possibly hold water. Take, for instance, the fact that at least a few people actually read, and even claim to understand, texts like the following, an excerpt from James Joyce's *Finnegans Wake*:

Jute. - Yutah!

Mutt. - Mukk's pleasurad.

Jute. - Are you jeff?

Mutt. - Somehards.

Jute. - But you are not jeffmute?

Mutt. - Noho. Only an utterer.

Jute. - Whoa? Whoat is the mutter with you?

Mutt. - I became a stun a stummer.

Jute. - What a hauhauhauhaudibble thing, to be cause! How, Mutt?

Mutt. - Aput the buttle, surd.

Jute. - Whose poddle? Wherein?

Mutt. - The Inns of Dungtarf where Used awe to be he.

Jute. - You that side your voice almost inedible to me. Become a bitskin more wiseable, as if I were you.

Mutt. - Has? Has at? Hasatency? Urp, Boo hooru! Booru Usurp! I trumple from rath in mine mines when I rimimirim!  
(1939:16)

And so on, and so forth, for two more pages. The cognitive reward here can only be of the slightest sort, since very little in the text is designed to tie in productively with the reader's pre-existing cognitive context: we recognize turns, words, sentences and punctuation, but the turns are strangely overstructured (1-2, 1-2, 1-2, etc.), most words and sentences do not make anything like immediate sense, and punctuation (capitalization) is 'abnormal'. Furthermore, there is no way that – in Sperber & Wilsonian terms – any cognitive product axed out of this piece of discourse will ever compensate for the lack of efficiency in the processing of it. So why do (some) people nevertheless bother?

An element of non-cognitive self-interest could, of course, be said to play a part in accounting for the fact that people read and interpret *Finnegans Wake*; the reader may well have some self-interested, socio-

cognitive goals in mind, for instance the goal of creating a favourable impression of his or her intellectual capacities: *Wow, you've read Finnegans Wake! I'm impressed! And made some sense of it, too!* But this, of course, far from constitutes the be all and end all of the explanation of why people read this particular novel. One can also, for instance, as always, identify a number of possible *non*-self interested goals that could very well play a role, for instance that of helping students to understand it.<sup>5</sup> To the extent, of course, that this is a piece of writing which is intended to be understood at all, in the traditional sense of the word. Personally, I suspect that this text was created not so much to be 'Solus Ipseanly' grasped as to be entertaining, provoking, disturbing, amazing; to create cascading thought and vivid imagery, and to challenge and crush traditional conceptions and sedimented ideas; in a word to be a great big flout, in a sense to be investigated in Chapter 6.

#### Homo Socius: common interest as interpretational drive

What we have seen so far is that adherents of the sapience view, situating rationality internally, end up portraying communication participants as a naturally detached and non-social group of people whose communicative-interpretative drive stems exclusively from self-interest. We also saw, however, that this view is not viable, because self-interest is really just one among many types of socialized (and hence secondary) motive for acting in the world, which becomes particularly clear when investigating certain forms of discourse, like talking to oneself or to communication participants without communicative competence or with limited linguistic competence.

In the present section we turn to an alternative view of rationality, and moreover one which sheds light on why these kinds of motive should be socialized. This alternative view posits that rationality is just one

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<sup>5</sup> Other kinds of socialized interpretational drive could also play a role; Herman (1994), for example, suggests that readers of texts in general, and texts like *Finnegans Wake* in particular, are strongly driven by the assumption that discourse will be coherent (220f); an assumption which, as was suggested earlier in this chapter, can be seen to be a derivative of the assumption of cooperation.

among a number of possible world views, and is represented here by its main proponent, viz. Habermas (1984).

*The worldview view and Gricean pragmatics*

The worldview view is the evident answer to criticism accusing rationalists of being oblivious to the fact of sociocultural variation, like that of Mey (1985): “a universal, linguistic rationality makes . . . little sense . . . A rationality of language use, if such a concept indeed has validity, must relate itself to the structure of the particular society which is the carrier of that language” (178). The worldview view is also the answer to criticism revolving around the scarcity of sociocultural factors taken into consideration in theorizing about communication, like that of Sarangi & Slembrouck (1992):

it makes little sense . . . to postulate a theory of communication which only considers ‘efficiency’ and ‘rationality’ as governing and constitutive properties of communication, without taking in the roles of ‘stereotyping’, ‘prejudice’, ‘preconceptions’, ‘affections’, and so on.  
(141)

The worldview view, in virtue of its conception of rationality as a set of norms constructing a worldview which is merely one among others, offers a view of rationality as non-universal and extrinsic, and hence opens up for sociocultural variation and sociocultural factors such as the ones listed by Sarangi & Slembrouck. Thus, it is by far the preferable choice for providing an outlook on communication. One example of this is how a view of rationality as non-universal and extrinsic allows us to show how self-interest, insofar as it constitutes one motive to act and communicate in the world, is a socialized motive, because if rationality itself is socialized, and self-interest springs from rationality, then self-interest surely must be socialized, too. Secondly, since the essence of the worldview view is that there exist alternative world views, this also means that self-interest cannot be the only socialized motive for acting and communicating in the world.

It might seem, then, that if we chose to ‘upgrade’ the set of rationality assumptions that line Gricean theory from sapience to worldview, this would salvage the theory from the fate of having to face a gradual loss

of credibility because of an empirically ill-fitting view of the communication participant and his or her drive to interact with the surrounding world. Consider also in this connection the case of the rationality-biased set of maxims proposed by Grice: under a worldview view, these maxims could be seen as only one possible (albeit most likely incomplete) set of norms geared towards one particular worldview, and thus one that stands in need of being supplemented by other sets of norms with links to alternative worldviews. Which is precisely what I propose to do in Chapter 4.

#### *Communicative rationality*

Before drawing any radical conclusions, however, we need to look at the worldview view somewhat more closely. Because from what has been said so far, one might well get the idea that we are talking about the same old view of rationality as before, with solipsistic efficiency and relevance as the major concerns and self-interest at the centre, only less deeply rooted and thus not as pervasive as previously thought. As far as Habermas (1984) is concerned, nothing could be further from the truth. And this has great consequences for the view of the communication participant, and for what motivates him or her.

Habermas' idea of rationality is one of *communicative* rationality:

*communicative rationality* carries with it connotations based ultimately on the central experience of the unconstrained, unifying, consensus-bringing force of argumentative speech, in which different participants overcome their merely subjective views and, owing to the mutuality of rationally motivated conviction, assure themselves of both the unity of the objective world and the intersubjectivity of their lifeworld. (10)

Being rational in Habermas' terms means trying to liberate oneself from pre-interpreted notions (beliefs, norms, and so on) inherent in language and culture through immersing oneself in ongoing discourse. To be rational is to try to be understandable and to try to understand, in order to enable oneself and one's fellow participants to negotiate forth new agreed-upon versions of these notions. 'Being rational', then, means being deeply communicative from the start; this in stark contrast to Solus Ipse, whose communicativity is only incidental. Solus Ipse is disconnected. Habermas' communication



participant is a *Homo Socius* (see Israel 1992:167f), thoroughly *embedded*, in language, culture and social practices. Hence, the emphasis changes from motivation by subjective *self*-interest to motivation by intersubjective *common* interest (that is, the interest in achieving *consensus*), not necessarily as the only type of communicative motivation, but as the basic, and from a rational perspective desired, type:<sup>6</sup>

We call persons rational who can justify their actions with reference to existing normative contexts. This is particularly true of those who, in cases of normative conflict, act judiciously, that is, neither give in to their affects nor pursue their immediate interests but are concerned to judge the dispute from a moral point of view and to settle it in a consensual manner. (Habermas 1984:19)

What we see here is that consensus-seeking constitutes a normative drive in communication: a rational community encourages rational behaviour (consensus-seeking) by branding it 'good', which gives rise to communication, because this is a means to that end. The question is, however, whether this can be said to constitute the *basic* drive to communicate and to interpret.

The answer to this question is quite clearly no. First of all, normatively engendered consensus-seeking is worldview-bound. And if basic communicative drive were to be seen to stem from just one worldview among many, then cultures with different dominant worldviews (mythical worldviews, for instance (Habermas 1984:44)) would have to be seen as uncommunicative. And this is, of course, an absurd idea. Thus, the goal of seeking consensus can at best be seen as another example of socialized interpretational drive, with a principled role to play only in societies where the rational worldview is the dominating worldview. Furthermore, in virtue of being a socialized interpretational drive, its role is also secondary, which goes well with the idea that no society is (or should ever be) so rational that its norms are never violated. As Briggs (1997) points out, even in the most rational of societies, "*disorderliness* may be just as ordinary in

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<sup>6</sup> It is important to note that Habermas does not reject the possibility of individually motivated action, but even here his is a different kind of individuality, i.e. it is *Socius*, shaped by active communicative participation within a shared worldview.

discourse” (456). Thus, we need a concept which can explain how communication goes on despite the constant disappointment in such ideals as the one described by Habermas.

#### RECIPROCAL RESPONSE-READINESS

The concept we are looking for has already been introduced, of course. In the previous chapter, I explained how the notion of communicativity-interpretativity can be elucidated by reference to two Bakhtinian concepts, that of being as ongoing event, and that of the need for the other’s excess of seeing. Being, it was pointed out, is a form of becoming, which means that being is essentially active. Thus, when life is presented to us at the doorstep, rather than receiving it passively (like a Solus Ipse would), we respond to it, in the only way we can, viz. by interpreting it and commenting on it, thus actually leaving the doorstep, reaching out into the world and interacting with it, in a fundamental sense. This, I suggested, is general response-readiness. Furthermore it was suggested that when the world which thus presents itself on one’s doorstep comes in the form of an other, response-readiness becomes enhanced and reciprocal. Subjects, forever trapped inside their bodies, may well have the advantage of closeness and intimacy with the beings which are themselves, but this location-boundedness also entails a great disadvantage: chained to one body and one ‘mind’ we can never step outside ourselves and have a look at ourselves in full view. Certain aspects of the physical and mental being which is me, psychological aspects as well as physical, are forever outside of the range of things which I can experience more directly. Moreover, it is not as if without experience of these things, I would merely stay curious about certain aspects of myself. Without it I would quite simply lack the necessary existential anchor to be capable of acting in the world; without it, my being would be too amoebic, too amorphous for me to grasp, rendering ‘myself’ as a tool for understanding and relating to the world I have been born into, incapable of performing its task. Thus, I need access to what others know that I cannot know; I need access to their excess of seeing,

to the perspective which they have and I not. I depend on this for my successful assembly into a workable human being. Therefore I turn to them from the most profound depths of my existence. And they turn to me. And from there on we all fumble and struggle to communicatively fulfil our mutual, existentially assigned task, a task of which we are normally not aware, but which we can sometimes sense, in moments of particular success, perhaps, where a profound sense of *self* is accompanied by an equally profound sense of *togetherness* with a single person, or a group of individuals.

### **Further aspects of reciprocal response-readiness**

According to Cook-Gumperz (1975), "It seems that the child's desire to communicate with others is a spontaneous act" (150). With the notion of reciprocal response-readiness, we seem to have acquired the outlines of a tool for understanding why this should be so.

Several researchers into communication and language have mentioned the importance of and the need for looking into a concept of communicativity, for instance Blakar (1992):

First, we have the individual communicants and the preconditions [for successful communication] associated with each of them, i.e. the individual prerequisites. An essential distinction within this vital category of prerequisites is between *will* and *can* . . . The will or motivational precondition has not yet been subjected to systematic investigation and manipulation in our research. On the contrary, initially it was almost implicitly taken for granted that the participants were motivated to communicate, i.e. to make something . . . known to each other. (240)

Mey (1993) even suggests the postulation of a communicative principle:

When people talk, they do this with the intention to communicate something to somebody; this, I will call the Communicative Principle. Even though this principle is not mentioned in the pragmatic literature (at least not under this name), it is nevertheless the foundation of all linguistic behaviour, and the minimal agreed-on premise of all investigation into the pragmatic activity of humans. (55)

Now apart from the fact that their authors rarely take them any further than the level of brief comment, the problem with these notions is that they tend to focus exclusively on a *productive* drive, the drive to make something known to each other, or to communicate something *to*

somebody. By contrast, as was suggested in the previous chapter, reciprocal response-readiness covers both the productive and receptive aspects of communication, as it should do, since these are obviously thoroughly interrelated: both production and reception are in their deepest sense a response to something, although this is easier to see with respect to the latter, because the response in this case is to a simple one-step event, that is, an encounter with an interpretable element. In the case of production, on the other hand, the response is to a two-step event, an encounter with an interpretable element plus the actual interpretation of it. An act of production is a response in this sense because nobody can produce communicative matter in a vacuum; some (old or recent) preinterpreted notion has to be available to provide a starting point for the productive process (see Holquist 1990a:60, Lähteenmäki 1998:78f, Linell 1996:7:100ff, and Linell & Gustavsson 1987).

This one-sided focus on the productive aspect of communicative drive and, relatedly, on the individual (see Blakar above) and on individual intention (see Mey above) is again, of course, a reflection of *Solus Ipse*. It reflects a view of the communication participant as one who rather than participating in the world extends himself into it from his solitary spot, here in the sense of first and foremost desiring to be speaker. Furthermore, it reflects a view of the communication participant as one whose motivations – to speak as well as to say something in particular – are shaped in supreme isolation as if by a conscious plan, thereby being to a certain extent idiosyncratic to, and therefore also basically controllable by the individual himself (cf., for example, Blakar's near-implication that the speaker can actually choose to be communicatively motivated).

Although we can, of course, most certainly on occasion choose not to speak (but not without strain, see section below on phatic communication), it is considerably more difficult not to hear and interpret, if the utterance is within hearing range and in a language which one understands. Much has been said about the limits of communicative motivation (see, e.g., Knight 1985:239f, and Lakoff

1990:472), but the point is that however we look at it, these (non-) actions are not the norm. They are deviations. *On the whole*, we cannot choose not to be communicative beings. Because this, as explained above, would mean not being able to assemble into a stable, perceivable shape for ourselves, which we need to do in order to be able to perform the task of making sense of the world. Unable to perform that task to a certain minimum extent, we fail, in a dramatic sense, to be human beings. This is why reciprocal response-readiness sets in – has to set in – at the stage before both willingness and intention, which are driving forces which, of course, also play a role, but at a later stage, one more typically available to conscious control and introspection. Reciprocal response-readiness resides at the level of shared existential necessity and thus reveals the true depths of *Socius*: whereas someone like Habermas would place the source of basic human interactivity at the level where communication visibly goes on (this being the trigger of negotiation), the present notion anchors basic human interactivity at a far deeper level, which predicts that the even the merest hint of human availability should trigger interactivity, a supposition which is supported, among other things, by work done by Bråten (1992) on the concept of *the virtual other*.

#### The virtual other

A basic precondition behind reciprocal response-readiness, and thus ultimately behind communication, is that we should have the ability to have a conception about an other. Because without it, we would not have a conception that someone is 'like us', and hence no conception of where to turn to collect the existential fulfilment of ourselves.

The fact that we indeed do have a conception about the other lies, incidentally, at the heart of an alternative, much referred-to version of the principle of reciprocity, viz. that of Schutz & Luckmann (1973:60f) (see also Cook-Gumperz 1975:146, Goodwin & Heritage 1990:286, Nystrand 1986:13, and Rommetveit 1992:27). This *principle of the reciprocity of perspectives* states, in simple terms, that we take for granted that other human beings are like us, and thus that they experience the world in same or similar way to us, and that they

therefore also have a comparable collection of experiences as a basis for forming understandings (that is, the life-world is *intersubjective*). But wherein lies this capability of thus conceiving of the other? The answer offered by dialogism is that the human mind is dually constituted, that is, it contains, from the beginning, provision for both self *and* other and the relation between them (Bakhtin 1981, Bråten 1992, Rommetveit 1992:22, Trevarthen 1992:105). Indications that this should be the case are plentiful, but all that is really needed is an act of simple introspection, because obviously, we think “with a notional “other” in our head” (Trevarthen 1992:103). We discuss things, we ask and receive answers, all without a single actual other person within reach. The “units of which inner speech is constituted”, according to Voloshinov (1973), “resemble the *alternating lines of a dialogue*. There was good reason why thinkers in ancient times should have conceived of inner speech as *inner dialogue*” (38). It has to be this way, insofar as if our inner dialogue were in fact an inner monologue, thinking would be far too inflexible to be particularly productive. Objects of thought need to be contemplated from several angles to develop into useful artefacts, and one single voice would merely give opportunity for single-angle contemplation. A monologic mind would furthermore be like a one-lane road from Anywhere to the centre of a Big City: it would very soon be crowded by rush hour. It would quite simply not be resourceful enough to take care of all the thought tasks that faces the average human being during one day.

It is important to realize, however, that these do not constitute the *reasons* why the human mind is dually constituted. These are merely consequences of an imaginary situation in which mind is *not* dually constituted. If we want to investigate into the reasons, we have to look again at the fact that the self depends on the other’s excess of seeing for a self-perception which makes the self ‘whole’ enough to be able to function in the world. Insofar as this is one of the most important existential tasks there is, it would be reasonable to assume that the human mind comes with some form of provision that will facilitate this process. And one type of provision which would facilitate this

process, is the presence of some biological predisposition for – a ready-made ‘slot’ for – others and their perspectives.

A much better metaphor for this phenomenon has been invented and explored by Bråten (1992). In his study of interaction between infants and their caretakers during their first months of life, Bråten finds that infants from a very early age engage actively in ““protoconversation”, and other forms of socio-emotional communication” (77). This, according to Bråten, is enabled by an inborn cognitive structure: “An inner, primary companion process . . . termed “the virtual other” inviting and permitting replacement by actual others, is postulated as inherent in the operational circuits by which the mind recreates and transforms itself” (80). The process of replacing this virtual other by an actual other takes place, according to Bråten, upon direct sensation of the actual other, and is not mediated by symbolic representation.

Note, however, that Bråten seems to think that it is this inborn ability to conceive of the other in itself which causes the observed protocommunication, in the same way as so many seem to believe that Schutz & Luckmann’s (1973) principle of the reciprocity of perspectives in itself is enough to trigger communication. I do not believe this to be the case. The mere awareness that a certain set of other creatures is like us does not necessarily come with an intrinsic shipment of communicative urge. Cows, for instance, may well – for all we know – have some kind of (lower-order) awareness that other cows (as opposed to the farm cat, the dog, or the pig) are somehow ‘of their sort’. Why else would they stick together as one herd, rather than linking up with the cats, the dogs, or the pigs? Despite the likelihood that cows should possess this kind of awareness they still, however, for the most part keep grazing quietly side by side, rarely seeming to grasp the occasion for a chat.

Although there will exist, I am sure, several competing explanations of the lack of this particular behaviour in cows, there is no denying that equipped exclusively with the awareness of others as like me, the human scenario could quite possibly have looked something like the one just sketched. Thus, the explanation of what triggers

communicativity and hence interpretativity has to be sought elsewhere. And it is to be found, as explained, in the notion that to be at all, we have to 'become' (or in other words be active in our relationship with the world in general), and furthermore, it is to be found in that which the virtual other here is seen to enable, namely the vital exchange of perspectives between human beings, which makes response-readiness reciprocal. Hence, the scenario is not, like Bråten seems to suggest, (in very crude terms): *Baby exchanges virtual other by actual other, baby starts communicating*, but rather something like: *Baby exchanges virtual other by actual other, this enables the beginning of an exchange of perspectives, baby starts communicating*. Something which is basically and profoundly correct in Bråten's account, however, is also what is most directly supported by his empirical data, that is, the instantaneous character of the process: in the very same moment that the infant's virtual other is replaced by an actual other in virtue of felt contact with a fellow human being, the communicative cycle is pushed into motion. Thus, only the merest hint of human availability is necessary to get the process going, no encounter with the symbolic order is necessary to trigger the urge to enter the communicative arena and participate in it.

Research on the communicative activity of infants (see also Trevarthen 1992) is extremely important in general in the exploration of the notion of reciprocal response-readiness, since the results seem so strongly to support the idea that communicativity-interpretativity resides at the level of awareness and feeling, at the level of "pure, unthinking motivation" (Trevarthen 1992:105). Or, in other words, it exists long *before* it begins to manifest itself in signs and socialization, in beliefs and acquired and learned reasons for communicating. Interestingly, however, dialogism offers yet another notion to contemplate in relation to reciprocal response-readiness, one which actually promises to bridge the gap between the communicative urge which can be seen to be due to non-elective existential conditions and that which is due to this socialized level. Like reciprocal response-readiness as we have understood it so far, it is anchored in an



existential condition, but in involving the human will and a higher degree of choice it also displays family ties with socialized drive. I am talking about Bakhtinian *answerability*.

### Answerability

Being inescapable existential conditions, both reciprocal response-readiness-generating notions – that is, being as ongoing event and the need for each other’s excesses of seeing or perspectives – function to generate reciprocal response-readiness despite the individual. The human will is not yet in the picture. We cannot, we do not, choose to respond to the world and others on this basic level, although we can of course lack or suffer from disorders of the biological preconditions which cause us to react appropriately to these conditions, in which case we would be talking about illness or at least about serious dysfunction.

There exists, however, a third communicative drive-generating force which, on the one hand, is anchored in an existential condition – that of the spatio-temporal uniqueness of individuals – but which, on the other, is channelled through the human will, and is thus somewhat less essential to the functioning of a human being *qua* human being.

One of Bakhtin’s great concerns is with the fact that each individual is unique<sup>7</sup> in the sense that each occupies their very own time/space coordinate in the world: each individual is born into a spatio-temporal ‘slot’ which is uniquely theirs; hence, of course, their excess of seeing vis-à-vis other individuals. The realization and acknowledgement of this uniqueness by individuals, according to Bakhtin, ignites – actualizes – an inherent moral potential within each one, an *ought*, which is then placed before the will of the individual as a ‘recommended action’ (Bakhtin 1993:82, translator’s note), which then, if it accepts the recommendation, transforms it into *answerable*, or responsible, *activity*.

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<sup>7</sup> This, of course, makes this a completely different form of uniqueness than the one propounded in the solipsistic tradition: Homo Socius’ *mind* is still crowded with the perspectives and voices of others (cf. Holquist 1990a:22).

The unitary uniqueness of this world . . . is guaranteed for actuality by the acknowledgment of my unique participation in that world, by my *non-alibi* in it. This acknowledged participation of mine produces a concrete ought – the ought to realize the whole uniqueness, as the utterly irreplaceable uniqueness of being, in relation to every constituent moment of this being; and that means that my participation transforms every manifestation of myself (feeling, desire, mood, thought) into my own actively answerable deed. (Bakhtin 1993:56-57)

On the point of exactly how the realization of one's uniqueness actualizes one's moral potential, Bakhtin is not, it seems to me, particularly clear. But the story *could* go something like the following: the primary reality, as Bakhtin keeps pointing out, is a shared reality: not only do we depend on one another for the fulfilment of our image of who we are; we also depend on each other for our practical, material survival (Beaken 1996). But then, within this reality, the fact presents itself (we 'acknowledge') that we are in fact completely separated, physically speaking, which in the light of this primary reality seems to be almost an anomaly. And not only that: it also opens up for potentially threatening scenarios, because it creates a possibility for conflicts of interest. The human species in general shares an intrinsic fear of such conflicts, because on the whole, they threaten the existence and survival of the species (this fear, which, I hasten to point out, must be seen to apply generally and not universally, is, of course, often overruled by socialization). This fear is what generates the mentioned moral potential, which, quite simply, under this interpretation, then, consists in an existentially motivated intrinsic urge to avoid conflict. Thus, when Bakhtin says that the acknowledgement of our uniqueness ignites our moral potential, leading to answerable activity, what he may well be saying is that when we realize (in a wide sense) the danger of potentially damaging conflict, we realize the necessity not just to act, but also to act in certain ways (ways which are most often predefined by the society into which we are born, see Chapter 4), or in other words, to act answerably.

The idea that answerability not only provides a further incentive to act, but also to act in certain ways, makes this aspect of reciprocal

response-readiness different from the other two – that is, readiness emanating from the existential conditions of being as ongoing event and the need to share perspectives – because these only provide the former. A second difference has also been alluded to before, viz. that readiness emanating from being as ongoing event and the need to share perspectives is not a matter of choice, and if someone is somehow lacking in the capacity of taking these conditions on, we must suspect grave dysfunction. Readiness emanating from the condition of individual's spatio-temporal uniqueness, on the other hand, that is, answerability, involves the will of the individual, which means that even though the ought that influences the will in the case of answerability is anchored in an inescapable existential condition and thus exerts a very strong pressure on the will to follow its dictum, there is indeed choice involved. Also, the fact that we are working here on the level of the will means that we are also working on the level of that which we can become aware, on the level of that of which is realistically available for reflection, that which is potentially reportable to others. Or, in other words, we are now at the level where conscious choice and negotiation can take place (note that this is where Habermas' tale of rationality and communicative drive *begins*).<sup>8</sup>

This does not, however, mean that we are yet on the level of socialized communicative drive, on the level where the specific reasons to communicate reside, although this type of drive also involves possible awareness, potential reflection and reportability. Far from it: in fact, the three existential conditions which feed the communicative and hence interpretative drive which I have been calling reciprocal response-readiness can rather be seen to form the basis for socialized communicative-interpretative drive, in the sense that that which *is* the case (existential conditions, leading to reciprocal response-readiness) very soon, in the human realm, tends to turn into something which is seen as something which *should* be the case, because of the need to

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<sup>8</sup> Note also that Bakhtin sees rationality as merely one type of manifestation of answerability: "Rationality is but a moment of answerability" (1993:29). This, of course, signals a worldview view, but more than that, it also opens up interesting perspectives on why a rational worldview would evolve in the first place.

protect the *status quo* and predictability (cf. Chapter 4, p. 128ff). This means, of course, that there should exist a firm conceptual boundary between reciprocal response-readiness and socialized communicative-interpretative drive, which, in virtue of the incorporation of answerability into the notion of reciprocal response-readiness, we now have.

### **The existential-communicative equilibrium**

What we have not yet discussed, is how reciprocal response-readiness functions as a driving force for human beings. Clearly, for the experiencing subject the cognitively anchored drive to communicate manifests itself as a *physical, felt* phenomenon; cognition needs a way of communicating with the human being which it inhabits, a way of turning need into actual, action-generating drive; and sensations and emotions are one of the basic forms of communication available to it. Being a force which first and foremost works on the subconscious level, reciprocal response-readiness is mainly communicated to the human being precisely via sensations and emotions, making it a force which ‘exists in the mind but rules via the body’, where it is experienced as a *tension*, one which can only be released by obeying its demands, i.e. by immersing oneself in the ongoing discourse.

The final section of this chapter then explores the idea that it is the need for a release of this felt tension, the need to maintain a physical *existential-communicative equilibrium*, which explains the phenomenon of phatic communication.

### Reciprocal response-readiness as tension

Reciprocal response-readiness, even that stemming from the existential condition of being as ongoing event and the need to share each other’s excess of seeing, is, as was just pointed out, not an entirely ‘blind’ force, an anonymous battery that silently and undemandingly makes humans tick. On the contrary, most of the things that contribute to ‘keeping us going’, that contribute to making us human, extend – at least at certain times and to a certain extent –

into the phenomenological level, for reasons also stated above. This is true of plain biological facts, where the functioning of the cells that constitute us makes itself felt in virtue of the senses, in virtue of feeling cold or warm, for instance, or feeling pain; or just in virtue of the general sensation of being in possession of a physique. And it is also true of the fact of existential conditions, which via reciprocal response-readiness make themselves felt as slight stress, as a physical tension, as soon as the fact of their actuality is not properly acknowledged.

As regards the reciprocal response-readiness stemming from the two former existential conditions, this tension most often remains at the outskirts of the experiential *horizon* (Chapter 5, p. 184f). That is to say that it is mostly experienced merely as an everyday 'pull' towards being awake and aware (and aware of others in particular). It could be called a tension of life, that is, a drive towards being alive, and alive *to* things; towards being, and being in the world.

Despite its function as background, so to speak, this tension is by its very nature slightly unpleasant. It is unpleasant because it is meant to function as a physical demand for action. The tension can only be released if the subject acts, that is, if she or he responds to the world. If he or she does not do so, or does not do so to a sufficient degree, the tension will quickly accumulate, like lactic acid in a muscle, and the unpleasantness will increase. In metaphorical terms, what reciprocal response-readiness does here, is make the bow taut, in preparation of the release of the arrow. When the arrow is released, that is, when the actor acts, the tension is temporarily relieved, until the the next time the bow is tautened, which will be, as it were, in the following instant, because reciprocal response-readiness, when it is not temporarily overridden by social conventions (see below, p. 93), is a steady force. The physical need of the subject created by reciprocal response-readiness consists in finding the correct rhythm of tension and release, one which will secure an existential-communicative equilibrium, a pleasantly felt sense of being alive and functioning.

So far I have mainly been talking about reciprocal response-readiness in virtue of its first two aspects. There is, of course, also answerability. Answerability, which is first and foremost a reciprocal response-readiness enhancer, functions so as to make the said tension more pertinent, more strongly felt (which means that answerability might enhance the risk of accumulation). Furthermore, however, answerability, as pointed out, operates via the human will, which means that the communicative drive that emanates from it is more likely to enter more central interpretative spaces in the human 'reality forge'. Here, it comes into contact with cognitions, which takes the felt tension from the level of mere sensation to that of emotion (cf. the traditional view within psychology that emotions are, roughly speaking, due to a combination of general physical arousal plus a specific cognition (see, e.g., Ax 1953, and Schachter & Singer 1962)). Thus, communicative (and hence interpretative) drive can here take the form, for instance, of *eagerness*, *interest*, or *joy* in participating. Or, if for some reason the tension is allowed to accumulate (so that the 'muscle goes sour'), we may get negative interpretations such as *boredom* and *restlessness* (both of which pertain especially to tension due to reciprocal response-readiness emanating from being as ongoing event), *nervousness*, *aggression*, and *impatience* (the latter two especially if the tension is accumulating because of outside causes beyond the subject's control).<sup>9</sup>

Most subjects will try to alleviate such feelings precisely by paying more attention to the world and others in it, and by taking part more actively, trying to regain their existential-communicative equilibrium. Some individuals, however, may be unable to pay the right kind and amount of attention, for reasons that are situationally or permanently imposed upon them (forced isolation, bio-existential shortcomings, and so on), or because of they have been socialized into unhealthy patterns of disregard, or a too high regard, in fact, for this fundamental

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<sup>9</sup> All of which, I might add, have many additional explanations; none of these phenomena are due to one single cause, although I think there is good reason to believe that reciprocal response-readiness-generated tension lies very close to the heart of the matter.

need. The result for both groups is a permanent state of more or less strongly felt stress, stemming either from under-observance of the need, that is, from turning away from the world and the people in it (cf. depression), or from over-observance, by which I mean an over-attentiveness to the world and the people in it (cf. anxiety). It is not without reason that we are talking about an equilibrium.

Clearly, vague sensations (like the bare, unaccumulated drive emanating from being as ongoing event and the need for others' excess of seeing) are less accessible to consciousness and hence less easy to relate to than specific emotions. Thus, communicative drive when it is enhanced by answerability much more easily ends up in the general flow of inner dialogue. Inner dialogue also happens to be the home of socialized assumptions regarding communication, assumptions regarding why we should or should not communicate, when, and with whom, and so forth. Negotiation may thus here arise between reciprocal response-readiness-generated tension and these socialized assumptions, where the role of the former is to provide a steady push towards communicating, whereas the socialized assumptions provide grounds, either for going with that flow or for going against it. If reciprocal response-readiness is in tune with socialized assumptions in a given situation then all is, of course, well and good, which may also be the case even when there is a mismatch: if socialized assumptions (which may sometimes be expressed in written laws) strongly state that, in a given situation, it is alright *not* to respond (such as, for instance, in the case of questioning of a prisoner without his lawyer present), then this might temporarily override reciprocal response-readiness, being silent thus functioning to preserve the existential-communicative equilibrium just as efficiently as responding would have done (see also below, the section on phatic communication). More often, however, a mismatch between reciprocal response-readiness and socialized assumptions precisely does entail an accumulation of tension. An example of this is the general idea that we (at least in Western cultures) do not have to respond to anything or anyone if we do not want to (an idea which has

had some trouble becoming a norm, most probably because it is at odds with reciprocal response-readiness). This, in our individualistic age, is felt to be one of our 'human rights', and thus we occasionally subject each other to the silent treatment on the private as well as on the not so private plane, often with the dual purpose of proclaiming this right and producing a message (since this also constitutes a meaning-generating breach of a maxim, namely the (reciprocal response-readiness-derived) first maxim of Quantity; see example in Chapter 2, p. 20). We rarely do this, however, without also suffering a great deal of accumulated tension, a suffering which it is possible to grow accustomed to, of course; perhaps to the extent where it is even re-interpreted as pleasure. At least, it is a suffering which one is often willing to endure in order to make one's point (or, in other words, in the trade-off between obeying the dictum of reciprocal response-readiness and making a point, the latter wins).

According to Trevarthen (1992), socialized impulses mostly take over as communicative drive as a human being matures. Infants, he claims, orient themselves to others by virtue of an inborn *primary intersubjectivity*. As the child develops, he continues, this primary intersubjectivity diversifies into four basic developmental levels of intersubjectivity, that is, a primary, emotion-based, 'intimate' intersubjectivity, and three further levels characterized by a higher cognitive complexity: *playful* intersubjectivity (the arena for playful competition), *socially conscious* intersubjectivity (the arena for the testing out of personal identity) and *secondary* intersubjectivity (the arena for negotiation of reality by symbolic means) (128ff).

All of these levels, including intimate intersubjectivity, are seen to be "present at all ages, in varying relative strength or elaboration" (128). This may at first sight seem to correspond well to the idea proposed here, that reciprocal response-readiness and socialized assumptions are present and in a constant state of negotiation with one another. But in reality our accounts clash, since Trevarthen relegates the occurrence of primary intersubjectivity – and hence basic



communicative-interpretational drive – in adulthood, to *intimate* situation types: it is seen to remain

as a foundation for all . . . intimate relationships. It is active in family life, in direct emotional and physical conflict, whenever changes occur in close attachments, and when someone who is sick or weak is given sympathetic care. (129)

As a human being grows up such intimate situation types are traditionally seen to be reduced in number and importance. Thus, what Trevarthen claims here, is that basic communicative-interpretational drive loses its importance as human beings develop; that other, more cognitive approaches to the world take over and provide drive thereafter and on most arenas, those not based on intimacy and mutual feeling.

I believe it is wrong to say that such mutual feeling as that provided by basic communicative-interpretative drive is a stamp of intimate activity types only, and thus that it is wrong to imply that it loses its importance as a child gains independence. It may change, perhaps, acquiring different interpretations as it becomes subject to negotiation with socialized forces, but mutual feeling as such still remains as a core in all activity types, ensuring a basic level of being-alive-to situations and the people in those situations. I will develop this claim further by offering a brief, tentative model of phatic communication, which, in virtue of the fact that it arises as a function of the need to talk and the existence of situations in which there is no real interest in talking and nothing in particular to talk about, is the purest expression of reciprocal response-readiness.

#### Phatic communication

Since Malinowski introduced the term *phatic* almost 70 years ago, the phenomenon of *phatic communication* has most often been studied in terms of its functions, its topics, and its conversational structure (see, for instance, Laver 1975, and Schneider 1988). That is, to the extent that it has been much focused on in its own right at all. According to relevance theoretician Zegarac (1998), “phatic communication is often mentioned in passing, sometimes described, but, to the best of my

knowledge, never explained” (327). Though “easy to grasp”, he continues, “the notion of *phaticness* defies explanation” (328). Unfortunately, Zegarac’s Sperber & Wilsonian approach to phaticness does not do much to rectify this situation either, because insofar as it is true that communication participants process utterances differently when they communicate phatically than otherwise, this is still not an explanation of phaticness, but rather just the recording of one possible consequence of phaticness. Because the roots of phaticness go back to long before any concrete utterance has been conceived; it begins with the basic drive to communicate, with reciprocal response-readiness, thus establishing interesting links back to Malinowski’s own initial suggestion that the motivation for phatic talk “is the fundamental tendency which makes the mere presence of others a necessity for man” (qtd. in Schneider 1988:28).

*Phaticness: reciprocal response-readiness in agenda-less situations*

As described in previous sections, being as ongoing event, the need for the other’s perspective and answerability together generate reciprocal response-readiness, which works by exerting physical pressure on the individual, a pressure towards acting, towards responding to the world and others. As long as we are awake, we cannot *not* notice the things that go on inside as well as around us. And when we are in a situation with others present, we cannot *not* respond to that situation and that fact. To do so – to the extent that it is a matter of choice – would be to seriously jeopardize some deeply rooted-aspect of our human-ness, as well as causing considerable discomfort for everyone involved.

In most situations, we are greatly assisted in avoiding or relieving such discomfort by virtue of a conventional and hence socio-culturally variable *agenda*, or at least a pre-defined general direction, which has generated a certain conventionalized set of topics to talk about, and certain conventionalized ways in which to talk about these topics. This is equally true whether we are talking about a formal business meeting, about teacher-class interaction or the Queen’s speech, or whether we are talking about an informal chat with a friend, gossiping,

giving/receiving comfort in grief, etc. The increased tension caused by the presence of others here mostly finds easy, well-rehearsed channels lying there waiting, channels which are so immediately and readily available that at least most practised adults will have little problem in maintaining their existential-communicative equilibrium.

In other situations, however, we may not be so lucky. Because we may find ourselves in the presence of others when there *is* no particular agenda, and hence no conventionalized topics and strategies. We may find ourselves, for instance, in the presence of one or more complete strangers (a typical generating factor of phatic communication (Schneider 1988:5)), in an inescapable situation with no agenda. Or we may find ourselves in the presence of one or more people we *do* know, in a situation with no agenda, for instance, in a chance meeting somewhere or other. In both cases, reciprocal response-readiness will be at work as usual. And now imagine that nothing is said. If the encounter is brief, tension will, of course, never have the time to exceed manageable levels, but if we for some reason cannot escape the situation for a certain amount of time, reciprocal response-readiness-generated tension levels will quickly mount to intolerable heights.

The point I am trying to make is that phaticness is a function of reciprocal response-readiness and agenda-less situations. Phaticness is a term most correctly used for the felt quality of a situation in which reciprocal response-readiness exerts its pressure but in which there is nothing that we are supposed to be doing together; there is no particular significance to the fact that we are in the same place at the same time, no immediate point to our being there together.<sup>10</sup> Thus, there is no easy basis for potentially stress-relieving conversation.

If this is a correct interpretation of events, this means that phaticness arises long before a word has been uttered. But because the tension will soon become unbearable, some sort of conversation will, however,

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<sup>10</sup> This stance is supported by the fact that “Situations for phatic communion are characterized [in the linguistics literature] with particular reference to social or psychological make-up, rather than to the exterior situation or setting” (Schneider 1988:27-28), by which he means that when phaticness is being referred to, it is often in terms of precisely a tension, embarrassment, a felt ‘danger’, and the like.

most often ensue. In the genuinely phatic case, this conversation will be wholly improvised. It goes without saying, however, that very few cases will be genuinely phatic in this sense. Precisely because of the characteristics of these kinds of situation – that is, a need to act on reciprocal response-readiness plus a lack of evident outlet and an attendant danger of quickly rising tension levels – it has been of paramount importance to create routinized ways of dealing with this sort of situation. Thus, conventionalized tools for channelling the urge into talk have indeed evolved, some for use across different agenda-less situations, others for use in more specific, recurring agenda-less situations (such as, for instance, in the waiting room, at the bus stop, and so on (see Schneider 1988:17)).

The fact that there is no specific agenda greatly influences the content of such tools. Wholly improvised phatic talk will naturally take as a point of departure that which is bound to be deeply shared common knowledge, such as very general issues, or features of the ongoing situation.<sup>11</sup> Thus, conventional topics and strategies, which are *sedimentations* (Schutz & Luckmann 1973:121) of those created in improvised phatic talk, also tend to be general, free-standing, non-specific, or immediately situational. Such topics traditionally define what we call *small talk*. In a Western culture, meeting a stranger at a bus stop, one will most typically talk about the weather, talk of the weather being the prototypical phatic topic. If one accidentally runs into an acquaintance when queuing up to get a table at a restaurant, the chat will most probably revolve around why the other is there, who she is with, and so forth (see Schneider 1988:12ff for a list of typical phatic utterances), which also, like most phatic talk, has additional

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<sup>11</sup> Problems arise, of course, if one cannot think of a topic that possesses an appropriate level of generality, and nothing particularly interesting happens in the surroundings. Comments such as *Isn't it great that the earth keeps revolving around the sun?* and *Look at that lovely, brown door* (in a doctor's waiting room) will in all probability not go down very well with the audience: the former is too general, the latter not interesting enough (or, in other words, none of them are *relevant* enough, see Chapter 5, p. 185ff). This might, incidentally, hold the key to why smokers are reputed to be so much more sociable than non-smokers: whenever a smoker encounters another smoker, stranger or friend, there is always a ready phatic topic at hand, and one which smokers moreover never seem to tire of talking about.

functions as well, such as, for instance, the general social function of charting others, their relationships to us and others and their actions.

Paradoxically, one conventionally established tool for alleviating tension in phatic situations is *silence*. Despite the fact that silence opposes the dictum of reciprocal response-readiness and thus should create rather than alleviate tension, it sometimes does the opposite, because socialized assumptions can sometimes override reciprocal response-readiness: if a community agrees that being silent is an acceptable response in certain phatic situations, then this may well be enough to prevent accumulation of tension in those situations. In the Norwegian culture, for instance, it is possible to identify quite a few situations in which silence is an acceptable, if not required, response (on the bus, in waiting rooms, and so on). A Norwegian abroad, for instance in America or even Britain, will quickly realize how much small talk Norwegians have actually managed to annihilate by virtue of this response-by-silence strategy, and might find himself overcome with stress, having had his reciprocal response-readiness tap reopened in virtue of the realization that the rule he follows so happily at home is not always valid here.

There are, however, cultures which quite surpass the Norwegian culture in using silence as the conventional response in phatic situations. This at least seems to be the case with the Apache Indians in North America, as observed by Basso (1971, 1979), here in the words of Blum-Kulka & Olshtain (1986):

White Mountain Apache Indians' attitude toward silence (the maxim of quantity) seems strange to the Western observer; in many cases, greetings among Apache are expressed by silence, and even telephone conversations are often begun in silence, to allow the person called to adjust to the new activity. In the eyes of the Apache, on the other hand, Anglo-Americans simply talk too much; they are depicted in joking imitations . . . as people who tend to state the obvious ("What a beautiful day"), ask questions, and make comments about topics not considered appropriate to be talked about among strangers (require and provide too much information). (167)

What we see here is that greetings and other conventional conversational openings, which in Western cultures, including the Norwegian, constitute a 'phatic bridge' between reciprocal response-

readiness and the initiation of agenda-related topics and strategies (cf. Schneider 1988:29ff), are avoided by Apache Indians. *Their* preferred phatic bridge is that of silence. Furthermore, the Apache are seen to tend to avoid small talk at large, ridiculing Anglo-Americans for talking too much (cf. also Clyne 1994:216).

Note that Blum-Kulka & Olshtain's explanation of this difference revolves around the idea that the Apache interpret the maxim of Quantity differently than Western cultures. Although, as shall be seen, the notion of different interpretations of maxims is indeed valid (see Chapter 4, p. 157ff), there is still reason to believe that the maxim of Quantity is not at all at play here; more probably, a different and much more local, cultural and *activity-type-specific* constraint (see p. 148ff) is at play, one which states Do not engage in content-less chat, which in the phatic situations in which it is valid in this particular culture is strong enough to temporarily override reciprocal response-readiness, hence managing to keep tension at bay. By contrast, something like Leech's *phatic maxim* (Avoid silence/Keep talking) (1983:141f) could be seen to be at play in certain Western cultures, actually strengthening the force of reciprocal response-readiness, making talking even more pertinent.

#### *A phatic activity type?*

Arguably, the fact that we have developed conventional ways of handling agenda-less situations means that we are looking at a specific *phatic activity type*.

It is possible to envisage several counter-arguments to this claim, among other things ones based on the idea that phatic talk is somehow not particularly active: on the one hand, talking phatically is something we often feel that we are forced into doing (see comments below on the typically negative attitude towards small talk), and on the other it could be seen as merely involving an easy ride on a wave of ready-made conventions. The former implies that participants are not willing to make an effort, the latter implying that they do not even have to. The defence against the former of the two claims is, of course,

that it is based on too strict an idea of activity as something which has to involve exertion. As will have become clear during the discussion of the existential conditions behind reciprocal response-readiness, human activity constitutes human being ('I act, therefore I am'). Thus, we are active even when we are passive, in the everyday sense of that word. Furthermore, the idea that phatic talk does not require much expenditure of energy because the road ahead is always fully planned does not quite hold water either. Greetings and conventionalized phrase-mongering only takes you so far. After merely a few exchanges of lines about the weather, you are on your own, so to speak. From there on, one has to be at least as inventive and creative as in other activity types, although, like in other activity types, there will be larger, more general conventions supporting that process. In phatic activity types proper (see below) it is, for instance, paramount that one does not abandon the phatic character of the talk. If one is talking to a stranger in a doctor's waiting room, for instance, one does not begin to ask personal questions such as *What are you in for?* One should keep sticking to general topics, even when the obvious phrases are used up.

A second possible misgiving in relation to the postulation of a specifically phatic activity type might arise from the fact that phatic talk occurs in such a multitude of different locations, and in such a multitude of different circumstances, that it seems counter-intuitive to heap these situations together and declare them as identical or even similar units of analysis. The point here is that activity types are not defined on the basis of location or circumstance or any other such thing, but precisely on the type of activity that goes on (Levinson 1992). And it is, at this point in the analysis, easy enough to identify a uniting type of activity across these situations, namely that of preventing or alleviating reciprocal response-readiness generated tension. The more traditional, Malinowskian account would most probably state that the main activity that goes on in phatic situations is that of creating social bonds between humans, or *communing* (hence the term phatic *communion*), by means of talk (see also Schneider 1988:23). What I have tried to show, however, is that such a

bond already exists long before there is any talk – that it is in fact the engine which drives such talk – and thus that ‘communing’ is not an ‘activity that goes on’ here at all. What we do when we communicate phatically is merely creating an expression for an already existing inescapable togetherness.

A third and final possible misgiving as regards the idea of a specific phatic activity type has to do with the previously mentioned fact that phatic communication so often forms part of other activity types in terms of constituting *phatic bridges* between the moments before an activity type has properly assembled into its agenda-related, conventional shape and the moment when it has; between the moment when some given agenda-related talk ends, and the moment of the dissolution of the group or the assembly of a new activity type; and also, it should be added, across breaks in agenda-related talk. Or, in other words: phatic communication is too scattered a phenomenon to constitute an integrated activity type.

One easy way of countering such a complaint is of course to point to all the examples of purely phatic situations, where the only point to the activity *is* to release tension (for instance the exchange of pleasantries with the person at the counter as one is paying for one’s goods, cocktail party conversation, and so on), which shows that such activity types do indeed exist (albeit in a more or less pure form, of course), and why should the fact that we find traces of them elsewhere detract from that fact? More importantly, however, rather than being a counter-argument to the idea of a phatic activity type, the existence of such phatic bridges, I believe, actually testifies to the enormous centrality of this particular activity type.

The story goes as follows: the phatic activity type, in being constituted in virtue of the fact that reciprocal response-readiness must find its outlet even when there is no particular need to talk, or real interest in talking, is, as I have said, the purest expression of reciprocal response-readiness possible (a fact which is supported by the observation that we often pay less attention to *what* is said in phatic situations; what is important is *that* something is said (Zegarac 1998:336)). This means



that the phatic activity type must somehow be paradigmatic. More than that, however, the phatic bridge phenomenon indicates that the phatic activity type might – literally – be at the bottom of all other activity types, in the sense that all other activity types are superimposed upon it: if the phatic activity type is always there as a backdrop, this would explain why phatic communication – its hallmark type of talk – always surfaces as soon as there is an empty space in the top-layer activity type’s agenda.<sup>12</sup>

Considering the extreme centrality and all-pervasiveness of reciprocal response-readiness and its eminent, first-order expression, phatic communication, it is funny how in present-day societies where phatic communication means small talk, there should be such a widespread and profound contempt for it. Schneider (1988), whose account I have drawn richly from during this discussion, undertook a survey of attitudes to small talk by means of looking up 28 English-English dictionaries and checking out the synonyms. What he found was that “In most cases small talk is . . . specified as **light** (16 [cases]), **trifling** (5), **unimportant** (4) and the like” (4).

This indicates what we already know, namely that small talk is seen as the pursuit of those who have nothing better to talk about, indeed an expected attitude in a culture saturated by Solus Ipse, who is someone sure to always have an agenda and not to speak in vain. The truth is, however, that if Solus Ipse actually did tread the earth, acting out, as he would, this attitude to small talk, he would more than likely be regarded as some kind of freak, even by those who most deplored the existence of this particular social institution.

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<sup>12</sup> Contrast this view with that of Laver (1975:218), who relegates phatic communication to the ‘marginal phases’ of interaction.

## Chapter 4:

### THE CONSTRAINTS-WEB

From cooperation and reciprocal response-readiness, I now turn my attention to a further important theoretical element in an account of flouting and flout-based meaning, namely the concept of *maxim*.

Unlike that of cooperation, this concept has not – at least not in its non-functional aspects – created any major waves in the post-Gricean field of research in the form of many heated discussions and predictions regarding the demise of Gricean theory. Just as in the case of cooperation, however, the concept has largely been allowed to drift aimlessly along on an undertow of contrasting tacit assumptions, assumptions which group themselves around two poles. On the one hand, there are those who see maxims as *Solus Ipsean* – internal and inborn – entities, and on the other, there are those who see them as *social* – learned and thus internalized – entities.

A solipsistic angle will 'necessarily' be reductionist: one cannot postulate too many inborn faculties if one wants to preserve the plausibility of such an account; and there have indeed, as shall be seen, been many attempts at shaving off 'unnecessary matter'. A social angle, by contrast, will necessarily be 'proliferationist': saying that there will be only a meagre handful socialized assumptions governing interaction is just plain counter-intuitive when one looks at the blossoming variety of that interaction. Thus, no wonder that the exact *number* of maxims has often been a bone of avid contention, and to such a degree that quite a significant smokescreen has been puffed up between Grice's maxims and the real issues, such as the relative soundness of the abovementioned views.

Examples are given, in the present chapter, of post-Gricean accounts of both convictions, and reasons are presented as to why a solipsistic approach should be avoided. The social-pragmatic approach to maxims is, however, also questioned, since Solus Ipse can be shown to loom in the background even here, creating a lack of internal consistency in such theories (for, how can you defend the bringing together, within one single theory, of a fundamentally non-social communication participant and a social approach to communication?). Thus, even though the social pragmatics approach is the only one which can be seen as related to the present enterprise, there are nevertheless great differences between that approach and the present one. The basic difference, of course, is that of a shift of platform from Solus Ipse to a dialogic Homo Socius, and an attendant emphasis on the fact, implicit in Grice's account, that the maxims are intersubjective entities, meaning, on the one hand, that they are socio-culturally shared, but also that they have to be situationally shared by all relevant parties in order to be properly operable in their major function of providing support for predictability, and, interrelatedly, of generating underlying meaning.

As an account which looks at maxims as socialized entities, the present account is also potentially proliferationist. And it is indeed my opinion that the maxims are part of a large array of *intersubjective*

*constraints on interaction*, identifiable as a group, it is argued, by virtue of the *floutability* of each individual member. It is, however, not my intention to follow in the footsteps of most accounts of this type and try to enumerate and label each individual constraint, or argue for the postulation of one set of constraints rather than another. To the extent that such accounts aim to be exhaustive, they have, in my opinion, embarked on a futile task, not only because there is bound to be a large number of such constraints, all identical in their basic functions and therefore at least in that sense equally important, but also because, in virtue of their socio-cultural and socio-cognitive nature, the only thing that is constant about constraints is that there will always be some given set of constraints which is operable. Everything else that concerns constraints is about diachronic and synchronic variability: old constraints die and new ones are born. Most constraints do not exist in all cultures, and in all activity types. Not all constraints apply equally to everyone in a given activity type. Some constraints normally apply but are temporarily suspended. Not all constraints are interpreted in the same way across cultures and situations. And last but not least, not all constraints are generally or socio-culturally regarded as equally important.

This chapter is, among other things, about taking this variability seriously, using it as a basis for a description of the nature of constraints, a description which could become an important tool for identifying the object of study. This, it is claimed, is an infinitely better strategy than the traditional 'enumeration alternative', which is bound to end up leaving out important elements, and is perpetually at risk of picking up less valid items on the way, for lack of a clarified view regarding what maxims are really about.

#### GRICE'S MAXIMS

One of the pillars on which the present work rests, is the idea that Grice's theory harbours the potential of a socio-cognitive theory, a potential which deserves to be highlighted and actualized. Nowhere is

this potential as evident as in relation to the maxim concept, and in the first part of the present section, I try to extract some of it from Grice's own writings. In the second part, I show how his post-decessors, on the issue of maxims, have divided themselves into two groups according to whether or not they identify with the former or the latter of the two opposing (monological and non-monological) interpretational possibilities inherent in Grice's work.

### **What claims did Grice make for his maxims?**

In the previous chapter we saw that Grice's own insistence on the connection between maxims and rationality, on behaving according to the maxims and behaving rationally led quite a few of his followers to include the maxims into pure rationality schemes, thus creating a connection between the maxims and the rationality of individuals, and consequently, to the nature of individuals. Despite his adherence to Solus Ipse, this is not, however, the conclusion that Grice draws. For Grice himself leaves little doubt that in his opinion, the maxims are social and non-innate. One "fundamental question about the Cooperative Principle and its attendant maxims" (1989:28), Grice claims, is the following:

[what is the basis for] the assumption which we seem to make . . . that talkers will in general (*ceteris paribus* and in the absence of indications to the contrary) proceed in the manner that these principles prescribe. A dull, but, no doubt at a certain level, adequate answer is that it is just a well-recognized empirical fact that people do behave in these ways; *they learned to do so in childhood* and have not lost the habit of doing so; and, indeed, it would involve a good deal of effort to make a radical departure from the habit. It is much easier, for example, to tell the truth than to invent lies. (28-29) (my emphasis)

This social, learned nature of maxims, as shall be seen, is one of the facts about maxims which has been most profoundly overlooked, in spite of the empirical evidence in support of it: we do not, for instance, use or master maxims straight away; rather, "Children . . . start using ambiguous comments or saying the reverse of what is meant at about age 5" (Cook-Gumperz 1975:157).<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Note, however, that when children first begin to practise using indirectness they are more likely to begin with repetitions of sedimented phrases (see Chapter 6, p. 227ff)

Furthermore, Grice implicitly shows how the maxims are – must be – *intersubjective* entities: clearly the maxims must be socio-culturally and situationally shared in order to function properly in the processes he claims that they are a part of. The fact that the notion of the generation of underlying meaning is the most central aspect of his theory makes the necessity of the maxims’ intersubjectivity one of the main aspect of maxims.

A prerequisite for the necessary sharedness of maxims is of course that the maxims are somehow strongly present in the *socio-cognitive contexts* (i.e. sets of interpretative resources (see Chapter 5)) of the participants who work with and around them. If the maxims did not possess some such staying power for individuals, they would surely quickly wane and chaos would be allowed to reign. One reason why this does not happen is that the maxims strongly embody a normative aspect, one which is thoroughly recognized by Grice, according to whom the maxims establish a bond between participants which is of a moral nature: a standard type of conversational practice like that exemplified by observing the maxims (on some level), he claims, is something “that we *should not* abandon” (1989:29). And if we, he continues, do indeed abandon such a practice, we will be open to social sanctioning, to ‘comment’: “a man who expressed himself with undue prolixity would, in general, be open to milder comment than would a man who has said something he believes to be false” (27). The moral-ness of the maxims is also emphasized in the Retrospective Epilogue, where Grice talks about conversational maxims as “conversational imperatives”, and uses terms like “commandments” (370) when referring to them.<sup>2</sup>

A final aspect of maxims that presents itself clearly in Grice’s account is this: in claiming that his maxims – or at least some version of them –

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used frequently by adults, rather than with genuinely creative maxim breaches (cf. Read & Cherry 1977).

<sup>2</sup> A number of people have criticized Grice for being overly *moralizing*, seeing the maxims as Grice’s comments on how we *should* behave in conversation (Mey 1993:67). For an example, see Margolis (1979:44). This is, of course, far from what Grice meant, and another example (see Chapter 2, p. 41) of a ‘great misunderstanding’ (Thomas 1994a:5).

govern both verbal and non-verbal interaction, Grice can be seen to claim for his maxims a status as *general interactional principles*:

As one of my avowed aims is to see talking as a special case or variety of purposive, indeed rational, behavior, it may be worth noting that the specific expectations or presumptions connected with at least some of the foregoing maxims have their analogues in the sphere of transactions that are not talk exchanges. (28)

The most important consequence of this view I have already stated: it means that the Gricean scheme cannot restrict itself to the maxims that Grice posited, something nobody would agree with more emphatically than Grice himself: “There are, of course, all sorts of other maxims (aesthetic, social, or moral in character), such as “Be polite,” that are also normally observed by participants in talk exchanges, and these may also generate nonconventional implicatures” (28).

In the following we shall see that some have chosen to disregard all the implications of Grice’s theory listed here and thus also to disregard their consequences. Others, however, like Grice, stand with one leg in both camps and try to have their cake and eat it.

### **Subjectivist vs. social interpretations**

Tangible, constant (according to their creator), and being that which implicature hinges on, maxims occupy an extremely prominent spot in Grice’s theory, and thus whenever a piece of research discusses the CP, the maxims also tend to be part of that discussion. This means that the maxims have figured in an enormous number of different contexts, influencing the way in which we look at them today. As mentioned above, however, very few of these contexts have been ones where the question *What is a maxim?* has been explicitly debated. But two basic positions with respect to this question can nevertheless be broadly singled out. Both, like Grice’s original work, are largely monological, for instance in the sense that the code-model of communication is either fully or partially endorsed, and in the sense that interaction is seen in terms of individuals reaching out to one another in attempts at communicating (rather than as part of an intrinsically social, intersubjective universe). Disagreement *within* this

general, agreed set of background assumptions, has then aligned itself roughly along either of the two subjectivist vs. social strands inherent in Grice's original theory, so that on the one hand, we have 'hard-core' subjectivist accounts that regard maxims or some similar concept as inextricably tied to human nature or literally 'wired into' the human brain, and on the other we have accounts that see maxims as social, non-innate entities. The former, cognitive strand is typically accompanied by largely acclaimed *reductionist* attempts (culminating in Sperber & Wilson's so-called *principle of relevance* in 1986), the latter by a largely criticized *proliferation* of maxims (culminating in Leech's (1983) *Principles of Pragmatics*). Here I show that the former is based on a misunderstanding of Grice's work, and that the latter, although it points in the right direction, so to speak, just comes with too much unwanted luggage to deserve to be wholly embraced.

#### Wired-in maxims

Despite the emphasis in Grice on the socio-moral nature of maxims, they very soon turned cognitive in mainstream pragmatics. That is, some linguists preferred to attach themselves to the pre-Gricean, in fact, idea that maxims, or at least certain maxim-like entities, were rational and hence – in some fuzzy and unspecified way – linked to human nature. Grice's predecessors posited "rules of rational discourse" (Nowell-Smith 1962:4), the most discussed of which was some version of "Do not say *p* unless you believe *p*" (6), easily recognizable as a pre-Gricean version of the first maxim of Quality. The rules of rational discourse are, Nowell-Smith claims, "in some sense universal and necessary" (4-5). They have, he continues, "something of the character of *a priori* principles in that it is impossible for us to think away our rational purposive nature without ceasing to *think* at all" (6). There was, however, admittedly, in this pre-Gricean movement, also a certain tendency towards what we could call the Gricean doubleness of vision (that is, *Maxims are rational but they are not intrinsic to human nature*), especially in Nowell-Smith and his follower Fogelin (1967). The former talks about his rules as something that needs to be "*adopted* by rational men" (6), and draws



in the eminently socio-moral notion of *entitlement*: “Entitlement to infer something from something else implies the existence of rules; for to be entitled is always to be entitled under some rule” (4). Fogelin reiterates the point, stressing that “we have a *right* to suppose that a speaker is respecting these rules” (19). But at the end of the day, the socio-moral nature of ‘these rules’ remained a low-key concern throughout, for the pre-Griceans. All in all, as Mey (1993) points out, “the moral aspect of the matter is not what has kept philosophers and linguists busiest. The former’s avowed aim (adopted by many of the latter as well) is to construct a rational philosophy of language use” (67).

*Post-Gricean* philosophers tended to see Grice’s theory precisely as a rational philosophy of language use, or at least as the beginnings of one (see, e.g., the Grandy-Stalnaker-Warner dialogue in *The Journal of Philosophy* (1989)). For some, notably Kasher (1976, 1977a, 1977b), the practical project then became, as we saw in Chapter 3, that of anchoring maxims more firmly than Grice had done inside a rational framework. Kasher did this by positing a superordinate rational cooperative principle and rational maxims from which Grice’s maxims were seen to derive. In so doing, he succeeded in de-emphasizing completely the social and intersubjective aspects of the original maxims. Kasher’s rational maxims first and foremost express an isolated rational subject’s individual strategies in achieving his or her goals, and Grice’s maxims, being derived from them, thus have these characteristics superimposed upon them, too.

Similar efforts (albeit not equally stringent and equally strongly tied to Grice’s original scheme) can also be found in Fraser (1975), Allwood (1976:240) and Bird (1979), the latter suggesting that Grice himself would probably endorse such an approach (151). This may in fact be quite correct. Having won acclaim, but also having suffered more than a few critical blows between the first issuing of *Logic and Conversation* and the advent of *Studies in the Way of Words*, Grice, in the Retrospective Epilogue, seemingly decides to retreat back onto the safe ground of rationalism, denouncing interest in anything but the

rational aspects of conversation, re-labelling his maxims *principles of conversational rationality*.

Perhaps some refinement in our apparatus is called for. First, it is only certain aspects of our conversational practice which are candidates for evaluation, namely those which are crucial to its rationality rather than to whatever other merits or demerits it may possess; so, nothing which I say should be regarded as bearing upon the suitability or unsuitability of particular issues for conversational exploration; it is the rationality or irrationality of conversational conduct which I have been concerned to track down rather than any more general characterization of conversational adequacy. So we may expect principles of conversational rationality to abstract from the special character of conversational interests. Second, I have taken it as a working assumption that whether a particular enterprise aims at a specifically conversational result or outcome and so perhaps is a specifically conversational enterprise, or whether its central character is more generously conceived as having no special connection with communication, the same principles will determine the rationality of its conduct. It is irrational to bite off more than you can chew whether the object of your pursuit is hamburgers or the Truth. (1989:369)

This does not necessarily mean, of course, that we have to, or should, follow Grice down this path. Undoubtedly, despite its ‘immaturity’ and lack of consistency, Logic and Conversation remains Grice’s major feat. And, seemingly resisting all attempts to take it on (even Grice’s own), this speck of an article continues to present challenges to the research community, insofar as nobody as yet has managed to capture its spirit. Some of that spirit, in my opinion, lies in its socio-cognitive potential, and from this perspective it is clear that even though the maxims express rational concerns, and even if observing them may be seen to be a rational thing to do, they are nevertheless not rational *entities*. For as Grice wrote in Logic and Conversation, we have learned to use them in childhood and have not lost the habit of doing so (1989:29). And postulating a rational entity which is *learned* is, naturally, a blatant contradiction, insofar as that which is rational is also seen to be intrinsic to human nature.

#### *Neo-Gricean pragmatics*

I turn now from the Gricean philosophers to the linguists, who for the longest time have also willingly inhabited the ‘house of Solus Ipse’. According to Pratt, Grice’s contention that talking is “a special case or variety of purposive, indeed rational behaviour” (1989:28) became an

eminent excuse for incorporating his efforts into this already existing, strongly subjectivist paradigm, “the implication being, apparently, that the Co-operative Principle may have a cognitive basis” (Pratt 1977:131).

Presumably because of some of the less than subjectivist aspects of Grice’s theory, the seventies and eighties saw an avalanche of worry over how to accommodate the new insights provided by Grice’s CP. And it would, naturally, be those working within the field traditionally seen to be bordering on pragmatics, that is, semantics, who would feel the threat most strongly: would something be taken away from them (for instance, some problems which had hitherto been theirs to solve), and/or were they being given something which they did not want? It soon became clear, however, that Grice’s CP allowed semanticists to explain facts that had previously been rather bothersome, e.g. the presence of types of non-truth-conditional meaning that could not easily be boiled down to straightforward presupposition or entailment, *without* any “sullyng of the distinction between semantics in our austere sense and pragmatics” (Lycan 1984:76).<sup>3</sup> These cases were now explained, as Grice himself had in fact done, as cases of generalized conversational implicature via one of Grice’s maxims, neatly preserving, as Grice had intended his theory to do, the distinction between purely semantic and non-semantic meaning.

For the semanticists, however, merely importing this explanation from pragmatics was, of course, not satisfying. In order to make the explanation theirs, they had to make the theory that generated it fit their mould (but without, of course, calling it *semantic*, since this *would* sully the distinction between semantics and pragmatics). The solution, resting firmly on the unarguably sensible view that “Gricean theories need not and do not restrict their resources to Grice’s formulations” (Atlas & Levinson 1981:11), was to turn the maxims into pragmatic versions of cognitively anchored, linguistic rules of

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<sup>3</sup> But see, for instance, Katz & Langendoen (1976) for a vigorous fending off of the idea that a pragmatic explanation of such meaning should be needed: ‘semantics can stand on its own two feet’!

individual competence. The approach taken was to adopt “speech-act theory [including the CP] as a complement to autonomous linguistics, sort of a guest wing added to the house of Chomsky” (Pratt 1981:6).

A major movement of de-contextualization, disambiguation and quantification of the maxims ensued (see, e.g., Atlas & Levinson 1981, Gazdar 1979, Gordon & Lakoff 1975, Harnish 1976, Hirschberg 1985, Horn 1976, 1984, Kempson 1975, Kroch 1972, Levinson 1983, 1987a, 1987b, and O’Hair 1969). No matter how notoriously difficult the project (Gazdar 1979:53f), the maxims had to be made more precise, they had to be filled with “serious content” (Kempson 1975:221); they must be “brutally formalized” (Gazdar 1979:44). The Cooperative Principle, the claim went, is so vague that it is vacuous; “almost anything can be worked out on the basis of almost any meaning” (Sadock 1978:285) (see also Bird 1979:144, and Kroch 1972:265), and hence the theory is unfalsifiable (see also Kiefer 1979:57).<sup>4</sup> Not to make use of “formalist methodology in an area like this”, it was claimed, “can only lead out of linguistics and into literary criticism” (Gazdar 1979: 54).

The maxims, to be acceptable within the semanticists’ scheme, had to be able to accurately predict implicatures, in the same way that any other good linguistic rule had to prove its right to life by accurately predicting *other* linguistic phenomena. And for this to become a reality, originally flexible socio-cultural principles of verbal and non-verbal interaction had to be turned into rigid, non-breachable entities lodged within the human brain, that is, “code-like rules which take semantic representations of sentences and descriptions of context as input, and yield pragmatic representations of utterances as output”

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<sup>4</sup> Contrast here views that the maxims as they stand are too *narrow* (too ‘precise’) because they apply only to declarative speech acts (e.g., Larkin & O’Malley 1973, Hudson 1975:6f, Martinich 1980:219, 1984:51). This is in fact in agreement with Grice’s own position: “The conversational maxims . . . and the conversational implicatures connected with them, are specially connected (I hope) with the particular purposes that talk (and so, talk exchange) is adapted to serve and is primarily employed to serve. I have stated my maxims as if this purpose were a maximally effective exchange of information; this specification is, of course, too narrow, and the scheme needs to be generalized to allow for such general purposes as influencing or directing the actions of others” (1989:28).

(Sperber & Wilson 1995:36). The favoured guinea pig in experiments of turning maxims into rules was the first maxim of Quantity, which appeared in several different versions. It was most often applied to Horn's (1976) so-called scalar items, where a rule to the effect that the speaker will say as much as he knows (and not more) was seen to predict that the presence of, for example, *some* in a given utterance will invariably imply *not all*: if the speaker had 'known more' (i.e. *all*), he would by this rule, have said *all*.

This rule-based approach forced a necessary exclusive focus on observance, and on generalized conversational implicatures (rather than particularized ones). The former because a derivational rule works in an automatic, straightforward line from input to output (anything else is a misapplication and hence a mistake); and the latter because only a rule tied to a particular linguistic item with a range of context-independent implicatures typically associated with it can be expected to be able to perform such a task in the first place. Thus, a rule-based approach, and this was openly admitted, is useless with *particularized* conversational implicatures (Grice 1989:37), which are highly dependent on context, a problem which Gazdar (1979) solved elegantly by declaring particularized conversational implicatures uninteresting for linguists (39). Others were more doubtful. Kempson (1975), for instance, although definitely part of the described 'scene', would all along express concern about the loss of applicability resulting from the attempt to rescue the maxims from vacuity; maybe it was the case that the generality of original Gricean theory somehow logically corresponded to the intangibility of the notion of context? A similar doubt surfaces in Sadock's (1978) statement that "While it is perhaps possible to eliminate some of the redundancy in the maxims, I feel that the extreme power of the system is in fact an unavoidable characteristic" (285). Such misgivings, however, were not at the time allowed to rise above the level of afterthought.

About a decade later, however, critical voices begin to emerge. When their *Relevance* was first published, in 1986, Sperber & Wilson note:

The pragmatic phenomena amenable to this sort of treatment are rather limited: they essentially arise when the utterance of a certain sentence is so regularly correlated with a certain pragmatic interpretation that it makes sense to set up a rule linking the one to the other. (1995:36)

The question, however, is whether one can make a case that such fixed regular correlations between an utterance and its pragmatic interpretation exist at all. Because even the most irresistibly consistent of the formal semantics examples tend to falter when met with concrete context. Consider the following example: a teenager once finished a whole bowl of strawberries which was meant for the family to share. His mother was watching the scene from inside the house and the teenager knew he was being watched. When the mother later enters the garden she exclaims in mock-amazement, *Wow, did you really manage to eat all those strawberries, all by yourself?* The teenager looks at her and replies dryly, *Well, I did eat some . . .* The question is, did the teenager imply *not all*? The answer to this question is evidently no; the teenager here rather implicates that he *did* eat all, and with the added ironic (implicit) comment that he knows he has been observed and that he realizes that his mother is being sarcastic.

The point is, of course, that “pragmatic principles, unlike so many grammatical rules, operate in concrete contexts, rather than in the abstract space of linguistic speculation” (Mey 1993:58). And in context, there are quite simply so many elements at play in addition to maxims that it will be an impossible task to find any such thing as standard correlations between maxims and meaning.

One of the fiercest arguments against turning maxims into rules is found in Altieri (1978):

Grice . . . often speaks as if his maxims were exhaustive and represented formal rules for pragmatics. But it seems likely to me that maxims are neither rules nor conventions. Rather, Grice’s maxims represent what Wittgenstein might call features of the grammar of linguistic activity: when we learn how to use language to communicate, we learn not only semantic rules but general practices and expectations relating to how we construe relevant contexts and implications of speech acts. When we learn to use a language, we learn how these expectations might be relied upon or exploited because we know how we would react to similar utterances. Grice neatly captures these grammatical implications in his use of the term “maxims.” “Maxim” is a term from moral practices, where we do not expect to be presented with the

formal descriptive statements that typically characterize rules, for example in games, legal settings, or formal languages. Rather, maxims are guides for practical reasoning: they do not by themselves account for phenomena, but instead a speaker relies on them because he knows that his hearer can use them as principles or strategies for making a probabilistic judgment. . . Maxims . . . are used to project hypotheses which must be adjudicated so as to fit the vagaries of specific sentences and contexts. Maxims do not project type sentences or generative semantic patterns, tokens of which are uttered in particular cases. And because of their abstract, pragmatic status, it is unlikely that one could produce an exhaustive list of maxims or specific rules for applying them in all cases. Grice's maxims, then, are essentially some perspicuous examples of how the cooperative principle works . . . The maxims are specifications of some pragmatic principles which a speaker understands as conditions of communication and which thus establish the probable hermeneutic strategies he assumes his audience will apply. The maxims do not have the same kind of objectivity as semantic or social conventions. They are embedded in social practices as expectations deeply interconnected with our concepts of person and communication. And these concepts clearly resist any overt sense of rules. Thus it is simply a category mistake to hold Grice accountable to . . . charges of vagueness . . . charges like Joseph Margolis' claim that his maxims are only principles of common sense may indicate his strength rather than his weakness. A **sensus communis** is not a bad ground on which to base our capacity to understand the pragmatics of speaker's meaning. (91-92)

Altieri's main point is, roughly speaking, that rules map expectations onto outcomes with a high degree of precision (a grammatical rule which, for instance, prescribes such-and-such a grammatical structure under such-and-such conditions will always yield that particular structure under the said conditions). A maxim, on the other hand, has no one-to-one relationship with any entity in the world, at least not in the linguistic world. Just imagine all the infinitely different structures, sentences and expressions that would count as, for example, observing the first maxim of Quantity: *Yes/no* (as a reply to the question *Have you eaten today?*); a lecture on the weather conditions in the North Atlantic (as a response to the request for some lengthy information on this topic); silence (if no information has been requested), and so on. The reason why I choose to quote Altieri at such length is, however, not only that he makes a good case that maxims should not be considered to be rules, it is also the best expression I have so far found of a view of maxims similar to the one represented in the present work. The maxims, according to Altieri, are learned, culturally embedded guidelines for practical reasoning, they are principles and strategies for making a probabilistic judgement within a

conglomerate of other types of contextual element. They do not, like rules, operate in a vacuum, which means that it does not make sense to talk about the maxims alone as accounting for given meanings. The maxims support the work of projecting hypotheses, in a process where no one factor alone determines the outcome. Thus, any criticism of vacuity, such as that issued from the semantics camp, is pointless. And finally, the abstract pragmatic status of the maxims, according to Altieri, entails that it would be pointless to try to create an exhaustive list of maxims.

Despite its shortcomings, the 'rule-making' semantic approach to Grice still gathers adherents even today (see, e.g., Blutner 1998, Boguslawski 1997, Chapman 1996, Huang 1991, Mazzoleni 1994, van Kuppevelt 1996, Wainer & Maida 1990, 1994, and Ward & Birner 1993). The trend survives and thrives under the label of *neo-Gricean pragmatics*, some of the most recent shoots on the branch experimenting with incorporating a formalized notion of context (e.g., McCafferty 1987, and Welker 1994). It remains to be seen whether aspects of context other than maxims will subject themselves more fruitfully to a rigid pinning down than Grice's maxims have proved to do. There is perhaps good reason to doubt that they will.

*Be reductionistic: the principle of relevance*

In the name of tidiness and precision (some of Grice's maxims have been accused of overlapping each other, even by Grice himself), the neo-Griceans tended to want to collapse two or more maxims into one rule. It is, as has been pointed out, a typically reductionist trend. The zenith of this trend (and also, perhaps, that of the cognitivist, subjectivist tradition in pragmatics at large) was reached with Sperber & Wilson's introduction of their single *principle of relevance*.

Sperber & Wilson's (1995:33ff) criticism of the CP largely echoes that of the neo-Griceans: the concepts used in the maxims are undefined, leaving, it is claimed, the maxims too vague and thus incapable of correctly predicting implicatures. Furthermore, Sperber & Wilson claim, it is not quite clear what a maxim is, and thus it is hard to say



how many maxims there should be, maybe there should be *fewer* than Grice suggested? They conclude that even though Grice's contribution to the field has been valuable, it is now time to part with most of the details of the Gricean account (and the various elaborations of them), and rethink things at a very basic level:

We believe that the basic idea of Grice's *William James Lectures* . . . offers a way of developing the analysis of inferential communication . . . into an explanatory model. To achieve this, however, we must leave aside the various elaborations of Grice's original hunches and the sophisticated, though empirically rather empty debates they have given rise to. What is needed is an attempt to rethink, in psychologically realistic terms, such basic questions as: What form of shared information is available to humans? How is shared information exploited in communication? What is relevance and how is it achieved? What role does the search for relevance play in communication? It is to these questions that we now turn. (38)

The quoted paragraph explicitly marks both a departure and a new beginning: like the neo-Griceans, Sperber & Wilson take leave of absolutely every trace of the potential of Grice's CP that leads in the direction of a socio-communicative theory; but whereas the neo-Griceans at least took the maxims with them (after transforming them to fit into an abstract linguistic system which is a reflection of Solus Ipse), Sperber & Wilson quite simply choose to leave all the maxims behind, taking us straight to the heart of Solus Ipse, which happens to be his brain: the focus is on information processing, and the little there is left of originally Gricean terminology – that is, the label *relevance* – is moulded to fit into that scheme: relevance is defined as maximum cognitive profit at minimum cost (see also Chapter 3, p. 66f). The human cognitive apparatus is seen to be completely governed by the quest for relevance in this sense, hence the *principle* of relevance: “Every act of ostensive communication communicates a presumption of its own optimal relevance” (158).

Sperber & Wilson's choice of borrowing a label also used for of Grice's central terms has created a misleading appearance of likeness between Grice's relevance *maxim* and Sperber & Wilson's *principle* of relevance. The truth is, however, that these entities have nothing in common, which Sperber & Wilson willingly admit to: whereas Grice's maxims are learned and rehearsed in social situations, providing and

expecting relevance is “a property of mental processes” (119), as rigid and logically necessary as biological processes: “Communicators and audience need no more know the principle of relevance to communicate than they need to know the principle of genetics to reproduce” (162). As a result, the principle of relevance, like the neo-Gricean rules, is not breachable, and hence not meaning-producing in the breach, like Grice’s maxims. The speaker may of course fail to be relevant (as one may fail to apply one of the neo-Gricean rules accurately), but this, according to Sperber & Wilson, merely counts as going wrong (in the neo-Gricean case, it counts as making a mistake and producing an incorrect utterance/interpretation). And the likely result of going wrong, according to relevance theory, is that the hearer withdraws his attention because he does not find a continuation of the communication worthwhile.

Having detached the notion of relevance and given it new content, Sperber & Wilson prefer to rid themselves of the rest of the Gricean baggage. The final blow dealt to Grice’s maxims is that although some such type of entity as maxims may well exist (13f), it does not bear any principled relationship to implicature. Because it is their brand of relevance which is thus crucial: if the straightforward utterance, the so-called *explicature* (176), is not cognitively relevant, according to Sperber & Wilson, then the hearer will go on processing on the basis of the expectation that the indirectly recoverable meaning is cognitively relevant (193ff).<sup>5</sup>

The fact of the matter, however, is that socio-cognitive entities like the maxims *are* in fact at play in relation to implicature, and in a principled way as well. This is strongly indicated by findings in the field of artificial intelligence, where one has also taken an interest in maxims (e.g., Bernsen et al. 1996, Carletta & Mellish 1996, Dale 1992, Dale & Reiter 1995, Joshi 1992). In the development of and experimentation with human-machine dialogue systems it has been

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<sup>5</sup> Note that this claim is at odds with another, previously mentioned Sperber & Wilsonian claim, namely that the hearer will only attend to elements which are immediately relevant (1995:49). Because if this is the case, why would a hearer choose to go on and try to find indirect meaning?

discovered (esp. Bernsen et al. 1996, but see also Carletta & Mellish 1996:72f, and Joshi 1992:181f) that a crucial measure to be taken is to make the machine observe Grice's maxims with 100% accuracy, because otherwise, the human dialogue partners will read more into the machine's utterance than what it actually says. In AI, this is of course something which has to be avoided at all cost, since a machine cannot improvise answers to questions for clarification (Bernsen et al. 1996:214). A tighter network of observed constraints (that is, *more* maxims or maxim-like entities) also contributes to eliminating unwanted inferences.

In other words, observance of (a high number of) constraints removes interpretational headroom, non-observance enhances it. This indicates very strongly that on the one hand, there are such constraints as the ones Grice foresaw (and more), and on the other, that they *must* somehow be involved in the generation and interpretation of underlying meaning.<sup>6</sup> If more evidence is needed similar experiments could easily be set up for pragmatics. I would be surprised, however, if the same results did not emerge here. Hence, maxims remain looming in the background of Sperber & Wilson's effort, casting doubts on the idea that they should play such an insignificant role in the process, thus in turn casting doubts on the correctness of Sperber & Wilson's explanation of implicature.

#### Social maxims

To sum up, all of the accounts discussed so far have chosen to take Grice up on his subjectivist stance, thus either transforming them into rational and cognitive entities, or choosing to get rid of them entirely. In the following I will first and foremost focus on accounts that see maxims as part of the social realm, that is, accounts that have taken Grice up on his actual characterization of the maxims. This view often entails envisioning a wider applicability for Grice's maxims than the neo-Griceans have done (for instance seeing them as operable outside

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<sup>6</sup> The phenomenon of poetry actually represents another excellent indication, the two trademarks of poetic expression being a strong divergence from everyday norms of language use, and an unusual richness of interpretational possibilities.

the realm of verbal interaction). Interrelatedly, it entails the previously mentioned view that there must be more maxims than the ones listed in *Logic and Conversation*. Because there is no reason to think that social interaction at large should be governed only by the few maxims that Grice proposed. On the contrary: the idea of maxims clearly connects with a larger issue, namely that of how interaction at large is kept manageable, within the boundaries of what humans can grasp, or in other words, how it is kept predictable. All of this suggests the existence of quite a large number of maxims.

The possible connection between Grice's sketchy ideas and such larger issues has made many researchers suggest that Grice's theory may contain a potential for a point of departure for a more general theory of social interaction (Bierwisch 1980) or communication (Brown & Levinson 1987:5, Green 1990:411ff, Sarangi & Slembrouck 1992:119f). Nobody has, however, to my knowledge, taken steps to explore these potentials to their full extent. Rather, what we have seen within the field of social-pragmatics, is a piecemeal adding to Grice's original scheme of maxims specifically to do with the production and maintenance of social relationships. Linell (1996:7) sums up the general atmosphere thus:

to explain why, in a given situation, a speaker may, or may not, utter something specific with a particular formulation, it is not enough to invoke Grice's . . . maxims of cooperative, rational communication . . . One must also consider rules of social propriety (Goffman, 1983), tact (Leech, 1983), or politeness (Brown & Levinson, 1987); "the moral norms of considerateness which bind individuals qua interactants. Delicacy, courtesy, modesty, politeness – these are the sorts of attributes that are involved" (Goffman, 1983:28). (190)

Although such a widening in scope of Grice's theory has been one of the most important tasks in the wake of Grice, it is a process which has nevertheless been allowed to go on without a much needed examination of the of the subjectivist platform from which Grice's original maxims spring, which means that although Gricean theory may have grown in size, it has not really made the change necessary to accommodate the new maxims. Thus, ideologically, Gricean theory remains more or less as Grice left it, split between its Cartesian past and its socio-culturally oriented future, a split which induces a

contradiction between the philosophical platform and the maxims and their functioning, as well.

In the following I focus on the major trend in this type of research, that is, that which deals with the notion of *politeness*. The two most influential works in the area of politeness are those of Brown & Levinson (1987) and Leech (1983). Despite its tremendous impact, the former is not directly relevant here, since Brown & Levinson do not postulate maxims to account for politeness, but rather build their account around the concept of (positive and negative) *face*. They do, however, see Grice's maxims as a backdrop in communication, interacting with politeness.<sup>7</sup>

Leech's (1983) well-known work is most famous for its introduction of a large number of new maxims into the Gricean scheme, of which the politeness maxims have received the most attention. One of Leech's programmatic statements goes as follows:

Grice himself, and others who have invoked the CP, have understandably reflected the logician's traditional concern with truth, and hence with propositional meaning; whereas I shall be more interested in a broader, socially and psychologically oriented application of pragmatic principles. This is where politeness becomes important. (80)

In Leech, Grice's maxims and the politeness maxims (which are seen as part of a politeness principle (PP)) are subsumed under a so-called Interpersonal Rhetoric.<sup>8</sup> Leech makes an explicit case that pragmatic principles (including maxims) differ considerably from linguistic rules (e.g., in contrast to linguistic rules, pragmatic principles "apply variably to different contexts of language use"; "apply in variable degrees, rather than in an all-or-nothing way"; "can conflict with one another"; and are regulative rather than constitutive (8)).

Furthermore, the maxims are seen to "introduce communicative values, such as truthfulness, into the study of language" (9). Also they

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<sup>7</sup> Contrast Arundale (1999), who argues that Grice's theory should be rejected as a point of departure for politeness theory because of the latter's reliance on the subjectivist notions of code model and speaker intentions (119).

<sup>8</sup> See also Lakoff (1973) for an account where a set of rules of politeness is seen to subsume the Gricean maxims (and Pratt (1977:151) for a criticism of this approach). A similar point is also made in Kingwell (1993).

are seen to vary across cultures, classes and situations, and they should be studied, Leech claims, in the total speech situation. In short, Leech sees the maxims as socio-moral principles, as learned, variable, and intersubjective. Thus, he basically takes Grice up on his social characterization of his maxims, but, like the latter's, Leech's account nevertheless rests at least partially on a subjectivist fundament, which I will return to later.

Leech's efforts have been subject to much critical comment. That offered by Brown & Levinson (1987) could be said to reflect the general reaction against his work:

if we are permitted to invent a maxim for every regularity in language use, not only will we have an infinite number of maxims, but pragmatic theory will be too unconstrained to permit the recognition of any counter-examples. (4)

As I see it, this criticism is not warranted. First of all, proliferation of maxims, as mentioned, is unavoidable in a scheme that exploits the 'intersubjectivist' interpretational possibilities inherent in Grice. Entities which regulate social interaction will always be large in number because of the great variety of interaction and ways in which interaction is organized. Entities which are social and learned will also vary diachronically, and thus the number of maxims will also always vary. These are, of course, all unhappy facts for those who seek a neat and tidy theory of pragmatics, but it is one that cannot be overlooked if one wants an empirically valid account. The voicing of a need for a moderate theory reflects a subjectivist ideal, which in relation to most issues in communication and language will always remain just that: an ideal.

Secondly, Brown & Levinson are wrong in claiming that Leech's maxims (and principles) merely describe regularities of language use, thereby implying that Leech's notions are just banal lists of observable phenomena in communication. What Leech's maxims pinpoint is rather *constraints* which – if they are strong enough – will *lead to* such regularities. Tactfulness, for instance, would not be a regularity unless it was enforced by a constraint (that is, if we do not want to postulate innateness for tact). The constraint of tact *produces* tactful behaviour,

and ultimately also conventionalized linguistic expressions such as, for instance, generalized indirect speech acts, that save speakers and hearers from the task of thinking up new, ingenious ways of observing this maxim at every bend (cf. Hopper & Traugott 1993).

A third critical point raised by Brown & Levinson against the postulation of politeness principles revolves around the notion that the politeness principles are somehow not of the same order as the maxims of the CP:<sup>9</sup>

Grice's CP . . . is of quite different status from that of politeness principles. The CP defines an 'unmarked' or socially neutral (indeed asocial) presumptive framework for communication; the essential assumption is 'no deviation from rational efficiency without a reason'. Politeness principles are, however, just such principled reasons for deviation. (5).

Brown & Levinson – who despite their focus on an eminently social concept stand firmly within the subjectivist tradition – here reveal that they see Grice's maxims as universal, rational, and 'asocial', that is, as solipsistic entities lodged inside the brains of isolated individuals. It is only if or when Solus Ipse chooses to enter the social realm that politeness comes into play. What Brown & Levinson may not be aware of, however, is that Leech, in fact, argues something (far less radical but nevertheless) similar, thus revealing how he, too, stands with at least one leg on a subjectivist platform: Leech, too, for instance, sees maxims as universal (80), but if we acknowledge that a universalistic stance may be due either to an innateness position or to a view that certain phenomena are universal because of certain, general traits of all societies (see Green 1990:419), he could perhaps be given the benefit of the doubt here. Other facts give less room for doubt, however, like, for instance, his implicit adoption of the code model and formulations like the following: "s uses language in order to produce a particular effect in the mind of h" (15), which reveal a basically solipsistic view of language and communication. Probably because of this kind of platform, Leech, too, envisions a division of labour between the CP and the PP, along 'less social' and 'more social'

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<sup>9</sup> See also Mey (1993:70).

lines: the CP is seen to further “illocutionary or discursal” goals, whereas the role of the PP is to “maintain the social equilibrium and . . . friendly relations” (82).

Brown & Levinson then go on to claim that politeness should play an explanatory role vis-à-vis Grice’s maxims (because politeness explains why maxims are (sometimes) breached). Again, however, Leech is not alien to the thought (see Leech (1983:80) for his famous argument that the PP shall rescue the CP). Brown & Levinson’s and Leech’s paths split up, however, in the conclusion to the argument: for the former, it is obvious that something that explains something else cannot be on a par with this something else (it will, traditionally, be of a higher order), whereas for the latter, there is no contradiction between the PP explaining certain facts about the CP, and still constituting a set of pragmatic principles alongside the CP.

Leech’s basic position – that the CP and PP should be on the same theoretical level – is supported by the evident fact that both Gricean-type maxims and politeness-type maxims at least in one important sense function in the same way, that is, hearers respond in the same way to maxims from both sets when they are breached, a point also made by Goffman (1983):

Although constraints on the laconic formulation of utterances (whether due to what has not been provided in the text, in the local environment, or in joint experience beyond the situation) do not seem to be entirely of the same order as constraints due to politeness rules, there is one critical way in which they are similar: response to apparent violation. Most literally offensive utterances are not designed to be taken at face value – for example, as malicious or insulting or inconsiderate. Rather, as Lakoff (1973*a*) suggests, a framework of reinterpretation is applied, leading the recipient of the apparent offense to read it as jocularity, inadvertence, or another of our standard discountings. And just as with cognitive presuppositions, if the context supports neither a “literal” interpretation nor a conventional reframing, then some kind of deep mindlessness may have to be imputed. (30)

Brown & Levinson, however, do not agree:

the assumption of cooperative behaviour is actually hard to undermine: tokens of apparent uncooperative behaviour tend to get interpreted as in fact cooperative at a ‘deeper level’. Now if politeness principles had maxim-like status, we would expect the same robustness: it should, as a matter of fact, be hard to be impolite. Instead, when one said ‘Shut your mouth’ or the like, we would expect an attempt to construct an inference of the sort: ‘The speaker has



broken the maxim of Tact . . . however, given the Politeness Principle, we must assume that the speaker is in fact following the PP; the only way to preserve this assumption is to assume that he is not in a position to observe the maxim of Tact, say, because he is in a hurry.' We take this to be a *reductio*, and an argument against setting up politeness principles as coordinate in nature to Grice's Cooperative Principle. (5)

According to Brown & Levinson, Tact cannot be a maxim because if it is breached it is impossible to find a way of restoring the assumption that the speaker is following the PP, that is, is being polite. As we saw in Chapter 2, however, it is the case with a number of maxims that their breach generates meaning even if when it is logically impossible for the maxim to be seen to be observed on a different level, and thus flouting, it was claimed, is a phenomenon which does not depend on such 'other-level' observance (p. 15). Thus, in the case of Brown & Levinson's example, *Shut your mouth*, any number of conclusions could be drawn by the hearer, depending on the context, for instance, *The speaker intends to threaten me to silence*, *My wife is having a bad day*, *My sister must still be hurt by that remark I made last night*, and so on. Note that flouting, as I define it here, involves the breach of a maxim or maxim-like entity which by virtue of its strikingness or unusualness (or *imposed thematic relevance* (Chapter 5, p. 188f)) creates a general *increased interpretational activity* in the hearer (Chapter 6, p. 239ff), and thus not all of the meaning which emanates from such a breach is in a traditional sense characterizable as implicature, but may nevertheless be an important product of the workings of a given maxim in the breach.

As should be clear by now, I am out to make a case for the idea that there exist 'maxims' of politeness, and that they are floutable. Brown & Levinson's criticism has been aimed at undermining such a view, and I hope to have restored it somewhat here. I would like to emphasize, however, in line with what I have said before regarding the pointlessness of enumerating maxims, that I am not out to prove that there is such a thing as a maxim of Tact, or any other of Leech's maxims, or any other maxim which has been proposed over the

years.<sup>10</sup> Whether or not individual, suggested maxims are actually what they claim to be is something which has to be determined on the basis of empirical investigation.<sup>11</sup> Leech's account, as well as most other accounts which enumerate new maxims, basically lack such empirical evidence, but nevertheless it is my belief that Leech's account deserves more credit than it has received. There are basically two points on which I follow Leech. First of all, I hold that politeness-maxims (generate and) govern politeness (*generate* is within parentheses because this particular point is not made in Leech). Secondly, I agree that Gricean and politeness maxims (plus a number of other maxim-like entities) are somehow interrelated, a view also shared by Sadock (1978), who expresses it in the following way:

I have some trouble understanding exactly why it is that such maxims [aesthetic, social, moral, politeness] differ from those that fall under the Cooperative Principle, for on the one hand, it would be uncooperative to be gratuitously impolite, antisocial, or unpleasant, and, on the other, the requirement that we make our contributions true and that we tell the whole truth could easily be construed as moral principles as well as, or instead of, cooperative principles. (282-283)

I disagree with Leech, however, insofar as he seems to be of the opinion that maxims are enumerable entities that can be easily compartmentalized. If the maxims are indeed social, learned, synchronically and diachronically variable, and indeed generally interactional, then it is obvious, as I have said before, that there will be a large number of such maxims, that there will not be a fixed number of maxims, and also that it will be difficult to label them once and for

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<sup>10</sup> The following is an assorted selection of post-Gricean accounts containing some form of modification of Grice's original list of principle-and-maxims (e.g., additions, subtractions, replacements, collapses, rephrasings): Allwood 1976, Atlas & Levinson 1981, Bach & Harnish 1979, Baker 1975, Bernsen et al. 1996, Bollobás 1981, Clark & Haviland 1977, Corliss 1981, Dale 1992, Dale & Reiter 1995, Fraser 1975, Harnish 1976, Horn 1976, 1984, Hunter 1983, Joshi 1982, Kasher 1976, Kempson 1975, Knight 1985, Komlósi & Tarnay 1986, Lakoff 1973, Leech 1979, Leudar & Browning 1988, Levinson 1987a, 1987b, Martinich 1980, Mason 1982, May 1981, Mohan 1974, O'Hair 1969, Penman 1987, Pratt 1981, Raskin 1985, Ryan 1981, Schmerling 1975, Scotton 1983, Searle 1979, Stewart 1983, St George 1987, Sweetser 1984, van Dijk 1976, Welker 1994. See also Grice's own additions to his list of Manner maxims in *Presupposition and Conversational Implicature* (1989:273).

<sup>11</sup> One fruitful course of action could, for instance, be to look at speakers' explicit reference to intersubjective constraints on interaction; see Baker (1975) for an interesting account of so-called but-prefaces, some of which can be said to be instances of such explicit reference (e.g., examples like *I don't mean to be rude, but . . .*), and Lakoff 1973:297. See also Thomas 1995:204ff for a list of what may count as evidence in pragmatics.

all. I do, of course, thereby not mean to propose that a study of individual maxims and various families of such maxims should be abandoned. I just think that before this can be done with any success, we first need a thorough characterization of the notion of maxim as a guiding principle in the search for old and new members of the class. And such a characterization is precisely what I attempt to provide in the following section.

#### INTERSUBJECTIVE CONSTRAINTS ON INTERACTION

In this section I try to answer the question *What is a maxim?* by substantiating the claim that Grice's maxims form part of a set of *intersubjective constraints on interaction*.

Numerous different labels and characterizations have been applied to Grice's maxims over the years. The maxims have been variously described as "theoretical ideals" (Kowal & O'Connell 1997:309); as "*inferential heuristics*" (Levinson 2000:35); as "general psychosocial principles" (Davis 1998:3); as "general standards governing verbal communication" (Sperber & Wilson 1995:34); as "one set of unconventional beliefs we hold about how people behave in conversations" (Cooper 1981:1); as something "like norms" (Schiffrin 1994:396), as "norms speakers operate with in conversation" (Brown & Yule 1983:32), as "norms of interaction" (Blum-Kulka & Olshtain 1986:167); as "communicative norms" (Allwood et al. 1977:37); as "global conventions" (Martinich 1984:38); as "the communicative conventions . . . of society" (Mey 1993:59); as "normative rules" (Clark & Haviland 1977:4, Ruhl 1989:96); as "Rules of Conversation" (Lakoff 1981:33); as "general rules of conversation" (Hudson 1975:5); as "'rules of conduct' for conversation"; as "descriptive rules" (Schauber & Spolsky 1981:36); as "Grice's rules" (Pratt 1981:11); as "constraints on interaction" (Levinson 1983:103); as "constraints on conversation, or, more generally, on social interaction" (Hudson 1975:4), and so on. These labels often reflect either a social or a cognitive leaning (*norm*, for instance, most often reflects a social approach, *rule* a cognitive

approach). Sometimes, however, the label reflects nothing but the inventiveness of the author.

The term chosen here – namely intersubjective constraints on interaction – is meant to reflect a socio-cognitive stance. Maxims, it is claimed, is part of our overall *stock of knowledge* (Schutz & Luckmann 1973:99ff), which consists of our share of the experiences of the group to which we belong, plus our own, individual experiences, and which functions to help us make sense of the world:

Each step of my explication and understanding of the world is based at any time on a stock of previous experience, my own immediate experiences as well as such experiences as are transmitted to me from my fellow-men and above all from my parents, teachers, and so on. All of these communicated and immediate experiences are included in a certain unity having the form of my stock of knowledge, which serves me as the reference schema for the actual step of my explication of the world. All of my experiences in the life-world are brought into relation to this schema, so that the objects and events in the life-world confront me from the outset in their typical character – in general as mountains and stones, trees and animals, more specifically as a ridge, as oaks, birds, fish, and so on. (7)

The stock of knowledge to which the maxims and other constraints belong is social in that it is acquired or learned, but *socio-cognitive* in that everything that happens to us is mediated through our cognitive apparatus (see Chapter 5). Thus, any element within this stock of knowledge, including maxims and other constraints, “exists only with respect to the subjective consciousness of members of some particular community” (Voloshinov 1973:66). They are part of individuals’ socio-cognitive contexts, that is, their mediated sets of interpretative resources (see p. 168ff).

This fact is reflected in the term *intersubjective* (constraints on interaction) which, as mentioned earlier, is a term which represents the idea that the only way in which maxims and other intersubjective constraints on interaction can function in meaning production and interpretation is by being generally and situationally shared and endorsed by all participants in actual moments of production and interpretation. Furthermore, *constraint* is my preferred main term because it avoids a cognitivist or a social stance, but still refers to the normative nature of the entities in question in the sense that their

existence prescribes or proscribes a certain type of act.<sup>12</sup> Finally, I have chosen to label maxims and their relatives intersubjective constraints on *interaction* rather than, for instance, *conversation*. I have done this because I follow Grice in assuming that maxims, and other constraints, govern interaction in general, not only verbal interaction (see also Green 1990:424). In fact, the fact that social interaction is prior to linguistic interaction (Schutz & Luckmann 1973), actually creates good reason to see non-linguistically relevant constraints as prior to linguistically relevant constraints. Many might be reluctant to include non-linguistically relevant constraints and equally non-verbal flouts (that is, a non-verbal ‘utterance’ which constitutes a flout, generating underlying meaning) into a pragmatic theory, because of an adherence to the idea that pragmatic theory is or should be theory of *language* (in) use. I choose, however, to include both, since the perspective that social interaction is prior to linguistic interaction entails that a theory of communication is prior to, or must encompass, a theory of language, and since I regard my efforts here as taking steps towards the former rather than the latter. Secondly, however, I also believe that any line drawn between non-linguistic acts/non-linguistic meaning and linguistic acts/linguistic meaning is at best artificial: a non-linguistic flout may, of course, give rise to non-verbal as well as verbal meaning (that is, one can either holistically grasp the meaning of a non-verbal act, or one can spell out its meaning to oneself or to others in words), and the same is true of verbal flouts (here, too, the meaning can be holistically grasped, or verbalized). Thus, we should probably not necessarily exclude non-verbal constraints and non-verbal flouts even if our efforts *were* towards a theory of language.

Having declared maxims to be part of a set of intersubjective constraints on interaction, and intersubjective constraints on interaction to be part of the larger stock of knowledge which furnishes individuals’ socio-cognitive contexts, what remains to be done is to find some way of distinguishing between intersubjective constraints

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<sup>12</sup> Constraint is also a term Grice uses on at least one occasion, talking about the maxims as “constraints on the speaker” (1989:37).

on interaction and other types of context. How do we find a way of saying something meaningful about the difference between, on the one hand, Grice's maxims, politeness maxims, rules for conversational organization, felicity conditions, informal rules for appropriate behaviour, rules of law, religious commandments, and so on, all of which, as shall become clear, fall under the notion of intersubjective constraints on interaction; and on the other, for instance, beliefs, e.g., the belief that trees have leaves? The answer to this question has to do with the former's *normativity*. Being a matter of agreement (and to a certain degree, enforcement) within a social community (rather than, for instance, a reflection of an unchangeable fact of nature), an intersubjective constraint on interaction, unlike any other type of socio-cognitive context, can be breached by participants vis-à-vis other participants with the result that an effect is produced in the realm of meaning, that is, it can be flouted.

The first part of this section deals with the defining criterion of *floutability*. In the second half of the section I turn, however, to the notion of diversity, looking at the *socio-cultural variability* of constraints. Because, as it turns out, not all constraints apply – or apply equally to everyone involved – at all times and in all cultures and activity types. Moreover, constraints may be suspended, or they may be interpreted differently from case to case. And last but not least, not all constraints are equally important, either in general, across cultures, across activity types, or across activity-type roles.

### **Floutability**

Floutability – the capability of being breached, where the breach brings about the effect of a change of meaning or an addition of meaning in relation to the straightforward content of the utterance – was actually also used by Grice as an important criterion for the inclusion of maxims into his scheme. Whereas he foresaw certain differences in status between his various maxims (see last section of this chapter), he found no reason therefore to treat them as different

entities, precisely because they could be seen to function in the same way:

It is obvious that the observance of some of . . . [the] maxims is a matter of less urgency than is the observance of others; a man who has expressed himself with undue prolixity would, in general, be open to milder comment than would a man who has said something he believes to be false. Indeed, it might be felt that the importance of at least the first maxim of Quality is such that it should not be included in a scheme of the kind I am constructing; other maxims come into operation only on the assumption that this maxim of Quality is satisfied. While this may be correct, so far as the generation of implicatures is concerned it seems to play a role not totally different from the other maxims, and it will be convenient, for the present at least, to treat it as a member of the list of maxims. (1989:27)

Others have also suggested a functional definition of maxims and similar entities, for instance Recanati (1987):

In the absence of a clear consensus among philosophers of language as to the exact nature of conversational maxims, we could simply decide to apply this expression to all the principles that can function similar to Grice's maxims in the interpretation of utterances. (133)

However, whereas Recanati here proposes a functional definition as the answer to a lack of consensus regarding the exact nature of maxims, thereby suggesting it as a poor substitute for a proper understanding of the notion, what I am trying to do is to see how such a definition can *inform* our knowledge about maxims. Thus, the question I begin to ask in this section is, *What is it that makes a constraint a constraint (rather than any other sort of entity in the stock of knowledge)?*, or in other words, *What is it that makes it into an entity which can be breached, which is a precondition for it becoming an entity which can be flouted?* The answer to this question revolves around the fact that a constraint is a *norm*, that is, an action-strategy which is agreed on and to a variable extent enforced by a community,<sup>13</sup> basically because we need a fixed set of such strategies in order to ensure *predictability*, which governs understandability. Its status as norm in this sense makes a constraint into something which

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<sup>13</sup> It is, incidentally, because they are norms that I choose to keep formulating maxims and other intersubjective constraints on interaction as imperatives. (Contrast the criticism issued against the imperative formulation (e.g., Thomas 1994a:5, 1995:160), and note the choice of some scholars to formulate the maxims, versions of them or additions to them as declaratives (e.g., Green 1996:90f, Lakoff 1972:916, van Dijk 1976:47ff). Note also the connection between this tendency and the tendency to focus on hearer's expectations rather than speaker's constraints (see later on in this chapter, p. 133f)).

has two basic aspects, an observance aspect and a breach aspect. And the fact that it will be observed more often than not (or *perceived* to be observed more often than not, see p. 223f), due to the importance of upholding the constraints-web which forms the *predictability grid*, means that observance will rarely be noticed, whereas breach, in virtue of being a departure from a norm, creates an effect, traditionally the effect of triggering the recovery of an implicature, but in the present terminology, the effect of causing the hearer to experience increased interpretational activity.

### Normativity

According to Habermas (1984),

Norms express an agreement that obtains in a social group. All members of a group for whom a given norm has validity may expect of one another that in certain situations they will carry out (or abstain from) the actions commanded (or proscribed). (85)

Most intersubjective constraints on interaction are norms in this sense, whether they are Gricean maxims, linguistic conventions or codified laws: they express an agreement which obtains in a social group, and people expect one another to comply with these.

### *The predictability grid*

Behind normativity and the concept of norms lies the concept of *predictability*. Interpretative activity set in motion by reciprocal response-readiness needs to be met by a certain measure of interpretability, that is, it needs to be met by some condition which makes it possible to *achieve* the project of understanding. And interpretability is first and foremost aided by predictability.

Nature provides one kind of predictability: the lakeside view outside one's bedroom window (that is, if one has a lakeside view outside one's bedroom window) will always be there tomorrow morning when one wakes up; the sun will set at night (unless, of course, one finds oneself in the land of the Midnight Sun around midsummer); when and where it will rain next is difficult to ascertain with 100% certainty (reliable unpredictability also being a form of predictability). Unlike



nature, however, the social world is not thus intrinsically ordered, so human beings are left to try to create some order out of the chaos themselves. We need to create some boundaries against chaos, some rules to manage the social 'traffic', in order to make the social world more easily understandable. Thus, at least on one level, it is the shared need for a basic amount of predictability which creates norms.

As regards the project of making order out of chaos, each individual does not, of course, have to start from scratch. We are born into an already relatively well-managed world; we inherit a social *predictability grid* which is specific to the culture and the group to which we belong, a grid made up of a large number of intersubjective constraints on interaction, some of which govern and define large cultures, for instance, religious commandments;<sup>14</sup> others minor activity types, for instance, rules regarding general behaviour and proper behaviour in restaurants (for instance, the general rule that you sit down at a table rather than on the floor, and the rule for proper behaviour that you do not pick your nose in public, or put your feet up at the table). Yet others govern and define language, for instance, pronunciation standards, and grammatical rules. Without an elaborate system of such constraints, ensuring that everyone generally acts in predictable ways, our possibility for understanding the world would be seriously undermined. Furthermore, if we could imagine a situation in which it was suddenly eradicated we would in fact be able to imagine nothing less than a social version of the atomic bomb: everything we know, put our faith in, live by, would be wiped out in an instant.

The view that predictability lies behind normativity is also found in Allwood (1976):

Social conventions exist to regulate and coordinate the actions and interactions of not just a particular individual, but of a group of individuals. The 'raison d'être' of a convention is that it is beneficial for the members of a group to establish coordination patterns in their

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<sup>14</sup> Note that they are not always 'in effect' as constraints. In certain Christian cultures, for instance, at least some of the commandments have lost their force (adultery and blasphemous language, for instance, may in certain cultures flourish relatively unsanctioned).

interaction. They need some kind of set coordination equilibria which, by introducing predictability, will make social interaction more manageable. Conventions create such coordination equilibria if they come to be espoused and followed by a sufficient number of people.  
(53)

Allwood being a rationalist, the similarity between his and my account ends, however, with the idea, inevitable in a rationalist framework, that *self-interest* should be the main driving force behind the need for predictability and hence the establishment of norms. When Allwood claims that it is beneficial for the members of a group to establish coordination patterns in their interaction he surely means something else than when the present account states the same. For Allwood, the enhanced management of social interaction is seen to be sought for the reason that it will aid the individual to further his or her own mundane ends.

In the present scheme, as was suggested initially, it is the notion of reciprocal response-readiness which is seen to lie behind the notion of predictability, since reciprocal response-readiness lies behind the need for understandability, which precisely thrives on predictability. But reciprocal response-readiness also works in other ways to motivate the emergence of norms, perhaps first and foremost in virtue of its most recently included aspect, that emanating from the Bakhtinian *ought*. The ought, as was explained in the previous chapter (p. 81f), manifests itself in a (subconscious) basic fear of potentially damaging conflict, creating an incentive to act, and to act in ways which are beneficial in the sense of reducing the danger of such conflict. It is easy to see how this incentive might end up with routinized patterns of 'ways of acting', or structures of norms. More generally, reciprocal response-readiness, in creating a network of mutual need and responsibility which drives human beings together, creates a sociality – a basic crowdedness – which would be unbearably intimate and chaotic without the development and sustenance of some means for its management, that is, constraints. No matter how tightly, however, a society weaves its constraints-web, this sociality always bubbles dangerously and excitingly *under* its net-like cover, surfacing now and again in the form of crime and creation.

### *Enforcement*

Habermas' definition of norm as an agreed-on entity should perhaps be slightly qualified. Such agreement is, of course, rarely absolute. Any disagreement does not, however, (or at least rarely seriously) have to do with whether or not we should have constraints; for that, the phenomenon of constraints *per se* is far too intricately woven into the tissue of existence. There may, however, be, as there indeed are, discussions regarding the right to life or importance of individual or smaller sets of constraints (for instance, discussions regarding whether or not liberal parenting is a good thing; discussions regarding the awfulness of children's collective faulty pronunciations; discussions regarding whether it is better to always tell the truth or to protect other people's feelings, and so on).

Such discussions, although necessary in the process of developing consensus, nevertheless tug at the predictability fundament, albeit on a very small scale. And so do breaches of constraints, especially 'breaches without a cause', that is, rebellious breaches without a clear and sensible message. Because of the existence of such a constant surge of small threats to the predictability grid, constraints need to be protected. They need to be *enforced*. The enforcement of constraints by some form of *social sanctioning* has been noted by many (e.g., Mao 1996:109, Mey 1987b:295f, 1993:75, Pomerantz 1978:88ff, van Dijk 1976:45), not least by Grice himself ("a man who has expressed himself with undue prolixity would, in general, be *open to . . . comment*" (1989:27) (my emphasis)). Allwood (1976) puts it thus:

The obligating force of many norms is strengthened by the fact that societies usually tie sanctions to their conventions and norms. There is a price to be paid if one does not follow the norm, and sometimes a prize to be won if one does. The price varies in strength from mild social reproach to capital punishment. (54)

Keenan (1976), in her famous study of language use in a Malagasy community, a study which is first and foremost famous for allegedly having refuted the claim of universality for Grice's maxims, furthermore describes various measures taken in this particular society to ensure constraints observance. These measures span, according to Keenan, from reprimanding and ignoring the poor

culprits, to taking away their right to speak and talking behind their backs. The most powerful device is that of accusing people of causing *henatra*, or *shame* (76). Some of these strategies are common in Western cultures as well, and in addition there are here other typical responses such as “anger and demands that . . . [the culprits] explain themselves and their actions” (Heritage 1988:128).

The notion that breach is sometimes punished must not, of course, be understood to mean that *all* forms of breach are *always* punished, like Davis (1998), for instance, seems to do in the following quote, where he talks specifically about linguistic conventions. He begins, correctly, by making the important point that

because they are traditional means to social ends, linguistic conventions are reinforced by social pressure. Despite their characteristic arbitrariness, the conventions of a group are generally accepted norms. They are widely viewed by members at both an intuitive and an intellectual level to be right and proper. (135)

The point made regarding how the conventions of a group are generally accepted norms receives support by among others Hymes (1989), who on the basis of ample experience with empirical research concludes that “grammar is a matter of community ‘should’ as well as ‘could,’ is inherently normative” (449). But then Davis goes on:

*Violations of the rules are generally considered mistakes*, and speakers are criticized for them, or corrected. Children are praised and otherwise rewarded for learning to speak and write properly. Sometimes the penalties for nonconformity are stiff, as when the conventions are enacted as laws. Sometimes the penalty is merely an utterance that “sounds odd”. (135) (my emphasis)

What Davis leaves out of consideration here, is that sometimes, if not often, a culprit stops being considered culpable if he has a good enough excuse for his ‘sins’. And flouting is generally precisely regarded as such a good enough excuse, and not because the constraint is being observed on a different level – we saw in Chapter 2 that not all constraints can meaningfully be seen to be observed on a different level (and linguistic conventions are probably among these) – but because the constraint was breached with a higher purpose in mind, namely that of conveying some meaning which could not have been conveyed in the same way by any other means. Whether or not a given flout actually can constitute such an excuse in a given case (or,

in other words, whether or not a *potentially* floutable constraint is *actually* floutable in concrete contexts) depends on a number of factors, however. It depends, among other things, on the perceived importance of the constraint in society. For instance, the strictly enforced rule of law stating that one should not take another person's life is hardly floutable: the message – if one is indeed intended – will most likely be lost completely in the general outrage against the act, and the flout will thus fail as a flout in the sense that it will not communicate anything (although it may nevertheless succeed in attracting attention, which may be an end in itself (Chapter 6, p. 216ff)). The relative value and hence the degree of enforcement of a constraint on the one hand determines whether a constraint is floutable at all, like in this example. On the other hand, however, if the constraint is indeed floutable, the degree of value and enforcement determines the degree of effect of the breach: a highly valued, heavily enforced constraint will, when breached, cause a higher degree of increased interpretational activity than constraints which are not so highly valued and heavily enforced.

Whether or not a flout can actually constitute an excuse for breach moreover depends on whether or not there are in fact constraints against *flouting* in a given community or activity type (because the institution of flouting, like most aspects of human activity, is itself subject to regulation). In court conversations, for instance, as Penman (1987) has observed, “any infringement of a rule is important and thus sanctions are inevitably applied” (204). Here, the ideal is as much directness as possible, in the name of truth, clarity, and fairness to all.

#### Breach of constraints vs. breach of expectations

One other thing which deserves to be mentioned before I leave the subject of normativity and floutability, is that a one-sided consideration of constraints of course expresses a one-sided speaker-perspective in our theorizing about flouting. A constraint constrains the speaker, limiting his room for action (as well, of course, as giving him a tool for *expanding* his room for action in terms of offering

possibilities for meaning-generative breach). The incorrectness of not taking an account of flouting and flout-based meaning further than this becomes clear when we realize that the speaker's breach of a constraint only indirectly triggers the search for implicature, via the breach this creates of the hearer's expectation that the constraint will be observed. Or, in other words, it is not the speaker's breach *per se*, but rather the hearer's observation that there is breach which causes the search for implicature, or rather, the increased interpretational activity.

There are those who have chosen to focus exclusively on the notion of breach of expectation (e.g., Altieri 1978, Michaelis 1994, and Tannen 1979). This, however, is not such a good solution either, since doing so means losing out on important explanations regarding why the hearer should be expecting certain things in the first place. For it is, of course, the existence of constraints which build up a predictability grid, which allows us to entertain expectations. In the next instance, the way the speaker chooses to relate to the constraints determines whether or not our expectations are met (observance) or let down (breach). The normative aspect, that is, the existence of constraints, is thus prior to the expectation-aspect, an intuition of which is possibly one of the reasons why, in the past, speaker-constraints have received more attention than hearer-expectations, and which is definitely the reason why it has been treated, and will continue to be treated, *as prior* in the present account.

### **Socio-cultural variability**

What I have done so far is to identify a large class of intersubjective constraints on interaction on the basis of the normativity – and hence the breachability and floutability – of its members. The specimens brought together by virtue of possessing these properties are, it may have been noted, often representatives of entities about which we are not particularly used to talking in one and the same breath (for instance, Grice's maxims and linguistic conventions).

We have already seen a lot of evidence that the idea that there are more maxims is far from new. I have already discussed the post-Gricean tendency to look at maxims and politeness constraints as similar or identical entities, which may well have been inspired by Grice himself:

There are, of course, all sorts of other maxims (aesthetic, social, or moral in character), such as “Be polite,” that are also normally observed by participants in talk exchanges, and these may also generate nonconventional implicatures. (1989:28)

One could also, however, list quite a few post-Griceans who have seen some form of connection between Grice’s maxims and *other* types of entities, especially between the maxims and Austinian/Searlean *conventions on speech acts* (e.g., Gazdar 1979:37, Goffman 1983:25ff, Kiefer 1979:72, Knight 1985:258, Leudar & Browning 1988:7, Margolis 1979:45, Morreal 1983:80ff, Pratt 1977:130, Sweet 1985:193).<sup>15</sup> Mostly, however, the connection has been made as if it were somehow self-evident; very few have actually paused to justify it. Exceptions to this are Goffman (1983:30), Morreal (1983:80ff) and Sweet (1985:193), who all claim that appropriateness conditions/felicity conditions can be and are breached in the same way as Grice’s original maxims, with the same kinds of effect.<sup>16</sup>

All of these accounts, including Leech’s, must, however, still be said to be rather cautious and even conservative in relation to the present one: saying that there are (a few) more maxims than the ones Grice postulated is quite a different matter from saying, as I am doing here, that maxims rightfully belong in a class comprising all floutable norms (or intersubjective constraints on interaction). The only other statement I have come across that even remotely matches this one in breadth and generality, is one made by Levinson (1983):

for every kind of mutually assumed constraint on language usage, there will be a corresponding set of potential inferences that come about either from the speaker observing or flouting the constraint. (132)

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<sup>15</sup> Others have, by contrast, problematized the *difference* between Gricean maxims and such conventions, for instance Leech 1979, and Straus 1987:227.

<sup>16</sup> See also Tsui (1991) who makes this claim on behalf of *sequencing rules* (rules governing conversational organization, such as for instance turn-taking rules).

Levinson, however, limits himself down to constraints on language use. The reason why I want to include both non-linguistic and linguistic constraints should be clear from previous arguments: I believe, among other things, that the boundary between non-linguistic and linguistic meaning is artificial (that is, a non-linguistic breach can easily yield linguistic meaning, and vice versa). Another important reason, however, is that leaving out the former means missing out on the enormous generality of the phenomenon of flouting; it means not seeing how a flout, far from being an insignificant peculiarity of certain speech situations and/or certain verbal utterances, is in fact an important general action category: most action consists of interaction, and interaction is always guided by constraints. We cannot opt out, other than sporadically; we have to relate to them, because the constraints-web is there and there is no alternative, no real 'outside'. And as regards this 'relating', we have, as we know, two alternative courses of action, namely *observance* and *breach*, two important action categories, then, of which the latter is the by far more interesting one.

The inclusion of all floutable norms into a Gricean scheme like the present entails that one will have on one's hands an extremely large number of theoretical items, such that isolating and labelling each individual one of them will be a difficult, if not impossible task (a much more manageable task would, of course, be to identify subcategories of constraints, which has also been done in the past, cf. Leech's (1983) *textual* and *interpersonal* maxims (16)). Another property of the class of intersubjective constraints on interaction contributing to making such a task problematic is that it is an open class. For, with the possible exception of a few very central constraints (see last section of this chapter), it is a fact that sometimes old ones will die and new ones be born. Or, in other words, intersubjective constraints are subject to *diachronic variability*.

Constraints are also, of course, subject to *synchronic variability*, which is a different kind of variability insofar as it does not pertain to whether or not constraints actually exist at any one point, but rather to



how existing constraints are distributed: individuals who are born in different cultures will be subjected to different constraints, individuals within one and the same culture will be subjected to different constraints according to which activity type they find themselves participating in, and individuals participating in one and the same activity type will find themselves subjected to different constraints according to which role they find themselves in. Indeed, the notion of breach and hence the notion of flouting is only meaningful when seen in relation to the fact that constraints have their habitat in one or the other of these, diachronic or synchronic, dimensions, because a breach of a constraint at a time, in a culture, or activity type where it does not properly belong, or *by* a person to whom the constraint does not apply, will, naturally, either not have any effect at all, or it will at least have a different effect than the one planned (if one were indeed neatly planned). Or, in the words of Habermas (1984), “The individual actor complies with (or violates) a norm when in a given situation the conditions are present to which the norm has social application” (85).

The remainder of this chapter is devoted to the exploration and exemplification of the notion of constraints vis-à-vis these dimensions, plus a consideration of some problems with respect to such an analysis, such as, for instance, the issue of whether constraints which do not apply in a given activity type should be seen as suspended or as just not applicable, or the issue of whether it is more correct to talk about large, general constraints with a wide applicability receiving different interpretations across periods, cultures, and so on, or whether it is more correct to say that these interpretations are in fact not interpretations, but rather more specific and local constraints with a separate existence. The discussion is then rounded off with a consideration of the fact that some constraints are regarded as being of higher importance than others, either generally across time periods and cultures, or within cultures and activity types.

### Diachronic variability

In the literature, a lot more diachronic *stability and staying power* is recorded than actual variability. Grice's maxims, which have naturally constituted the centre of attention in the research, have been observed to have been in operation as far back as Antiquity: "Grice . . . proposed nothing else than the rules of classical rhetoric adapted to the modern position of speech" (Morpurgo-Tagliabue 1981:505). Poole (1988) claims to have found that medieval editors of skaldic verse were influenced by principles of clarity and relevance; Stewart (1983) shows how Old English riddles flout Grice's maxims; Haverkate (1994) shows how Cervantes has Don Quixote de la Mancha and Sancho Panza observe, violate and flout Grice's maxims in order to project certain personality traits; and Elam (1984) emphasizes how "Grice's . . . principles, particularly the latter two [the second maxim of Quantity and Be brief], resemble quite closely the . . . axioms for discursive decorum stated by ethical commentators in the Renaissance" (193).

This "*longue durée*" (Elam 1984:193) of Grice's maxims (and of course also their apparent widespread cultural and situational application) may be due to various causes; their status as possibly *universal* has most certainly been amply discussed throughout the decades (this is an issue which I come back to nearer the end of this chapter). Other intersubjective constraints on interaction, however, cannot be seen to exhibit the same kind of staying power. Several examples will be given shortly, but first we need to consider briefly the various forces which, on the one hand, preserve constraints, and on the other, destroy old and create new constraints.

As regards preservation, we hold onto norms in general again because of the need to keep up a general level of predictability, but the reason why we hold onto *specific* norms may be more diverse. According to Schutz & Luckmann (1973), the preservation of the inherited stock of knowledge may work, for instance, simply in terms of the fact that certain elements have 'proven themselves' to be useful in the general scheme of things:

There is normally no reason for the individual to seek other and “better” solutions to a problem that is already “solved,” a problem whose “self-evident” solution was socially derived. Its social demonstration tends to hinder “independent” modifications, that is, the acceptance of modifications in the social stock of knowledge. (296)

Constraints prove themselves as ‘solutions to problems’ in this way merely by creating order, by creating a general predictability, and thus may always be relatively slow to change.

Furthermore, the preservation of the inherited stock of knowledge – including constraints – may work, according to Schutz & Luckmann, in terms of various forms of authority:

knowledge can, depending on its socialization, preserve either the specific authority of a legendary (e.g., ‘historical’) origin or the anonymous authority of our ‘forefathers’ (e.g., ‘everyone’). It is thus . . . that knowledge comes to have an overwhelming and at the same time taken-for-granted independence. (284)

Knowledge-preserving, or more specifically constraint-preserving, authority may also be more ‘here-and-now’, however, than the above description by Schutz & Luckmann might indicate. There will, for instance, be institutional authorities like courts of law, and so forth, and on the more private plane there is the institution of parenting, where the parents act as authorities vis-à-vis their children, passing constraints on to new generations (backed up, of course, by the ‘anonymous authority of our forefathers’ that Schutz & Luckmann are talking about in the above quote).

As regards creative, as opposed to preservative, forces, Williams (1968) outlines three sets of circumstances in which normative change is likely to occur:

A demand for norms is likely to arise from persons who find their interactions confusing or vaguely defined; for this reason, unstructured situations often create a pressure for the development of new norms. Enduring social conflicts, when not of too great an intensity, also generate new norms, developed out of negotiation, compromise, mediation . . . Another major source of new norms lies in collective reaction to shared ‘strain’ experiences in relation to old norms. (Downes 1998:260)

We see that according to Williams, new norms may develop as a result of ‘cracks’ (in the present terminology) in the predictability grid (that

is, as a result of the loss of constraints, or a loss of the functionality of constraints, which is precisely that which causes confusion and vaguely defined interactions); they may develop as a result of conflict, the solution to which is often the negotiation forth of norms to handle them; and they may develop as a result of a dissatisfaction with and a lack of consensus on existing norms.

One example of the development of new norms as a result of cracks in the predictability grid is the addition of new linguistic conventions. At various points in the history of any language, one will, for instance, see the disappearance of certain phonemic distinctions. With enough such losses, understandability will be threatened. Thus, new phonemic distinctions will in time have to be established in order to sustain a sufficient amount of contrast so that understandability will prevail. As regards the development of new norms as a result of conflicts, small or large, the addition of new rules of law to a country's already existing body of such laws could be due to such reasons. And finally, as regards the development of new norms as a result of dissatisfaction with old norms and a lack of consensus, consider the following example:

Under foreign domination the Greeks had indeed produced New Comedy; the Romans, overwhelmed under their own Empire, gave themselves up to a merely sensual existence. In their theatres pantomime took the place of tragedy, while comedy gave way to farce. Since the sole aim was to tickle the jaded palate of the public, producers not only lavished all the resources of wealth and technique on their extravagant productions, but also descended to the lowest depths of the disgusting and the obscene. Even Livy regarded the theatre of his day as a danger to public morals and the existence of the Stage; soon sexual displays were visibly presented on the stage, and stage "executions" were carried out in reality (by substituting for the actor a condemned criminal). (Beare 1964; qtd. in Goffman 1974:54)

Here we observe the gradual 'deconstruction' of a constraint regarding public depiction of sexual activity and violence, being replaced by its opposite. Later, the old constraint tightens its grip again, and nowadays, the grip can again be seen to be loosening, at least as far as fictional depictions are concerned:<sup>17</sup> "More recently . . . the influence

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<sup>17</sup> But cf. (non-fictional) 'reality TV' like the originally Dutch series *Big Brother*, where people have live sex (if they so choose) on screen.

deriving from the increasing acceptability of hard-core pornographic films seems to foretell a new round in the competition” (Goffman 1974:55).

Another example, this time of the birth and development of a constraint regarding how to dispose of a certain kind of bodily waste, is taken from Lock (1986):

Here is an example of the kind of advice you would be given because you needed it in the thirteenth century:

Precept for Gentlemen:

When you blow your nose or cough, turn round so nothing falls on the table.

You need to remember that the usual mode of blowing your nose at this time was to close one nostril with a finger, while exhaling forcibly through the other one, thus ejecting the contents of, and thereby clearing, one half of your nose . . . By the fifteenth century the idea of a handkerchief appears to have been incipient. From *Ein spruch der ze tische Kert*:

It is unseemly to blow your nose into the tablecloth.

I am unclear exactly what ‘into’ means here . . . In the sixteenth century a much more ‘refined’ mode of clearing your snot was being railed against, and knowledge of a much more modern mode being presupposed. From *De civilitate morum puerilium*, by Erasmus, Chapter 1:

To blow your nose on your hat or clothing is rustic, and to do so with the arm or elbow befits a tradesman; nor is it much more polite to use the hand, if you immediately smear the snot on your garment. It is proper to wipe the nostrils with a handkerchief, and to do this while turning away if more honourable people are present.

If anything falls to the ground when blowing the nose with two fingers, it should immediately be trodden away.

. . . From *Galateo*, by Della Casa, 1558:

Nor is it seemly, after wiping your nose, to spread out your handkerchief and peer into it as if pearls and rubies might have fallen out of your head.

. . . from Courtin, *Nouveau traite de civilité*:

[At table] to blow your nose openly into your handkerchief, without concealing yourself with your serviette, and to wipe away your sweat with it . . . one filthy habit to make everyone’s gorge rise. (109-110)

Today, we laugh at these descriptions, which is a true indication that the constraints which society, represented by these authors, at one point worked so hard to establish have indeed become thoroughly established since. It cannot have been an easy task; what can be

gathered from these historical testimonies is that the constraint has had some problems gaining ground: the frequent references to it throughout the centuries is most likely a sign that it has been constantly challenged. What we also see, which is interesting, is that the constraint is *gradually* tightened: what begins with a precept against blowing mucus onto/into the tablecloth, only much later turns into a demand that a handkerchief be used for such purposes. At the same time, the constraint also becomes more detailed: different courses of action are described as appropriate at different times and in different situations, and more behavioural details are added (for instance, it is not proper to look into the handkerchief after blowing one's nose). This gradual tightening and development of constraints is probably not merely a result of the fact that new ideas never crop up fully fledged but grow and develop over time; it is probably also a result of the fact that this is the best way in which to introduce new constraints: too sudden changes would just end up mobilizing reactionary forces, hence jeopardizing the process.

A final example of diachronic change is found in a paper by St George (1987), investigating the Victorian England institution of Conversation. The art of conversing was defined at the time by specific, codified sets of rules and regulations, some of which are listed by St George as maxims, intended as a historical supplement to the Gricean and Leechian sets of maxims:

- (1) Make your contribution as expertly as possible . . .
- (2) Keep in mind the objects of conversation . . .
- (3) Prepare for conversation.
- (4) Respect the claims of others.
- (5) Treat conversation as a matter of performance - it can be practised, learned, and used for improving others as well as yourself. (305)

These constraints obviously no longer exist. Or rather, they no longer exist as defining features of the activity type of conversation (if we can indeed identify such an activity type today). And this is an important point. Because none of the constraints exemplified so far were/are, of course, culture or activity type independent: all constraints, as shall be

shown, are in some way associated with culture or activity type. This has been noted by both Goffman (1974) (“Obviously, what is offensive in a movie might not be offensive in a novel” (55)) and Lock (1986):

Note . . . how social status is being brought into the arena. Not all contexts are proscribed: it would not be ‘rude’ to indulge [in ‘old-fashion’ modes of mucus disposal] in the presence of certain others. Similar situational nuances hold today in relation to most bodily functions. It is, for example, often regarded as all right to fart in the marital bed, but not in a restaurant. (110)

This culture and activity-type boundedness means, among other things, that there are in principle two ways in which a constraint can be diachronically variable. One is *absolute*, that is, constraint X appears for the ‘first time’ in some culture and activity type/constraint X disappears ‘for good’ from all cultures and activity types. The other is *relative*, that is, constraint X exists both before and after the change, the change consisting in the constraint moving from one domain (culture or activity type) to another in the course of time. An example of the former could be the loss of certain culture-specific taboos of ancient cultures that have been largely lost (for instance, the Mayan taboo that the tools of a deceased person should never be employed by anyone else, but be burnt or buried with him<sup>18</sup>). St George’s constraints, on the other hand, are of the latter type: these constraints are still found in Western cultures, but they no longer assemble a unified, strictly governed activity type called Conversation. Rather, they have moved on to other activity types, such as for instance academic discussions and political debates.

#### Synchronic variability

Also with respect to synchronic variability, the focus of attention has first and foremost been on the perceived applicability of Grice’s maxims, than their potential variability. Their workings have been recorded, by the Gricean empirists (see p. 3), across a great range of cultures and activity types (see, e.g., Bouton 1998, 1994, Brinton & Fujiki 1994, Colston 1997, Donahue 1997, El-Shiyab 1995, Farghal

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<sup>18</sup> This information was found at [http://www.internet-at-work.com/hos\\_mcgrane/maya/eg\\_maya\\_project2d.html](http://www.internet-at-work.com/hos_mcgrane/maya/eg_maya_project2d.html)

1995, Gautam & Sharma 1986, Goldschmidt 1998, Gu 1997, Harris 1996, Holtgraves 1998, Kaplan 1998, Kowal & O'Connell 1997, Kurzon 1996, Malmkjær 1998, McDonald & Pearce 1992, 1996, Nair 1985, Obeng 1997, Penman 1987, Rundquist 1990, 1992, Storey 1995, and Walzer 1989). Here, however, I shall mainly be preoccupied with the variability of maxims and other constraints.

#### *Variability between cultures*

A shared, learned stock of knowledge is, of course, only shared to the extent that those sharing it have been exposed to the same or similar types of experience and knowledge. Thus, such a stock of knowledge will be different from culture to culture, however narrowly or widely we choose to interpret that concept. The same is thus true of the subset of that stock of knowledge which I have called intersubjective constraints on interaction. We only acquire those constraints to which we are exposed on a regular basis, and normally, we are exposed on a regular basis mainly to one culture (plus a selection of subcultures within that culture) and hence mainly to the set of constraints which defines that culture.

The first really influential study to bring the possible cultural variability of Grice's maxims to the attention of a wider audience was that of Keenan (1976). Keenan, as mentioned, reports on findings from a Malagasy community, where interlocutors, in, among other things, referring to people by means of generalized nouns rather than their proper names, regularly provide less information than is needed (because of a taboo to the effect that one *must* not refer to people by their proper names). Keenan herself displays considerable uncertainty regarding what to make of this fact, on the one hand suggesting that "the expectation that speakers will satisfy informational needs is not a basic norm" (70) in this particular community, or in other words, that there is no first maxim of Quantity in this particular community, and on the other, that "It would be misleading to conclude that the maxim 'Be informative' does not operate at all in a Malagasy community" (75),



since it can be seen, she points out, to operate in certain situations (76).

Keenan's study was applauded by many as a welcome devaluation of the Gricean scheme (e.g., by Gazdar 1979:54f): if the maxims do not operate everywhere and at all times they cannot be universal and hence they have no theoretical value (cf. Green 1996:100). Others, however, found that Keenan's conclusions (taking her up on the former of her two statements (see above)) were probably a bit rash (e.g., Brown & Levinson 1987:298f, Bach & Harnish 1979:299f, Green 1996:100, and Thomas 1994a:8). It was, among other things, pointed out that even though the first maxim of Quality was not found to apply in the case of third person reference, this does not necessarily mean that it does not apply in *other* situations within the Malagasy culture (which Keenan was indeed well aware of (see above)).

Keenan's study continues to be influential (Attardo 1998:631), possibly because of a curious lack of studies which further prove the lack of all-pervasiveness of Grice's maxims. If this non-presence should mean that it is in fact difficult to find evidence that the maxims do not exist in certain cultures, then this of course further testifies to some sort of special status, a status, then, which other, more clearly culturally variable types of constraint would lack. An example of this type of clearly culturally variable constraint is linguistic conventions: since languages generally speaking outline larger cultural areas, the specific variations in convention which are unavoidably different in different languages will then also be, in a manner of speaking, culturally variable (cf. Cooper 1981:5f). Hymes (1989) provides a concrete example of such cultural variation. The speakers of "the California Indian language Yokuts, as described by Stanley Newman [1964 (1940)]" (447), tend to prefer, Hymes claims, conspicuously short words and equally conspicuously simple grammatical constructions; this being a preference (rather than 'a must') because their language does contain the possibility for more complex grammatical structures (447).

The reactions of both Newman and Hymes – that is, the fact that they noticed this particular behaviour – indicate that these conventions are

not present in the culture of which *they* are part. Another indication that these conventions are in fact culturally specific intersubjective constraints on interaction is found in the reactions of the Yokuts to the investigator when he presented them with more elaborate constructions: this, according to the investigator, would invariably elicit amusement. Hymes suggested that this response might be due to the fact that more elaborate grammatical sequences are “marked for humor or pomposity” (447). There exists, however, another viable explanation, namely that these conventions are floutable constraints which when breached will create effects in the form of heightened attention (which goes hand in hand with amusement (see Chapter 6, p. 214f)) and increased interpretational activity.

Another example of a culturally variable constraint is found in Allerton (1996). Allerton observes that in a situation involving a speaker, a hearer and an overhearer (all three of them native speakers of English), where the hearer is the speaker’s superior and the overhearer is the speaker’s (close) friend, the native English speaker cannot refer to the overhearer in the third person (using *he/him*, or *she/her*) without being considered rude. In other cultures, however, this seems to be quite acceptable:

a female student speaker is addressing a visiting professor . . . and talking about a male fellow student: when speaking to the examiner alone or with local university teachers, she might talk about, say, *Mr. Robinson* or *Peter Robinson*, whereas if the fellow-student is actually present, as hearer or overhearer, then even *Peter Robinson* might seem too formal, and the student may simply say *Peter*, perhaps adding *here* in case the examiner does not know the name of the referent person concerned . . . In such cases the speaker will probably be aware that the informal mode of reference is not ideal because of her formal relationship to the addressee, but this factor will be overridden by the need to avoid the formal mode of reference because of her social ties with the (over)hearing referent person. In desperation she may say simply *he/him*, and point, but this deictic use of third person is socially disapproved of by most speakers of British English. Other linguistic communities apparently sanction it; at least non-native speakers of English from areas as far apart as India and Switzerland can be observed using *he/him*, *she/her* in this way, without any obvious awareness that this usage counts as impolite. (629)

Translated into the present terminology, this, of course, means that a culturally variable constraint to the effect that one should not refer to

one's friend, when he is present, in the third person exists in Britain, but not in India and Switzerland.

Finally, Clyne (1994) has noted cultural variation in turn-taking rules. Because of the great cultural diversity on this continent, his study of language in the workplace in Melbourne, Australia allowed a comparison between, among others, Central and South European, South and South-East Asian cultures (205f). One of the most clear-cut results was that Central Europeans tend to dwell on the unpleasant to a much larger extent than South-East Asians, and hence will take much longer turns when the speech acts are directives, apologies, complaints and commissives, which were the main speech acts studied (211). The explanation for this, according to Clyne, is the different cultural considerations of *face* (Central Europeans, e.g., striving to maintain their own face to a much larger extent than South-East Asians) (210f), and the emphasis on harmony which prevails in Confucian-influenced South-East Asian cultures (212). These values, then, have apparently given rise to constraints which in turn have shaped patterns of activity, namely the tendency of Central Europeans to issue long directives, etc., and the tendency of South-East Asians to express themselves more briefly in turns of this kind.

In the discussion of diachronic variability, I talked about absolute vs. relative variability (that is, the absolute presence or absence of a constraint at a certain point in time, vs. the movement of a constraint from one culture to another, or one activity type to another in the course of time). A similar division line can be observed as regards cultural variability. One type of cultural variability is absolute in that constraint X exists in culture A but not at all in culture B. A less absolute kind of cultural variability, however, is exemplified by the existence of constraint X both in culture A and B, but within different activity types in the two cultures. Like in the case of diachronic variability, most examples will probably be of the latter kind. Clyne's data, at least, seem to support the idea that length of turns in the case of 'negative' speech acts is not an absolute thing, either with Central Europeans (or with South Asians, who are also found to take relatively

long turns), or with South-East Asians. Both use both long and short turns, but in different situations. “Workplace conditions”, for instance, “affect length of turns, so that Tim the Fijian-Indian cook in a hostel [a South Asian, who should therefore have a prevalence of long turns] produces many short and repetitive utterances” (Clyne 1994:215).

#### *Variability within cultures*

The fact that constraints vary across cultures also means that cultures are at least partially structured and defined in terms of constraints. Any sum of differences marks a boundary, and thus the fact that the sum of constraints which pertains in one culture will be different from that of another, means that that culture is marked off as different from another at least partially in virtue of these constraints. Constraints perform, however, such acts of cross-sectioning *within* cultures as well. And one of the main entities which constraints circumscribe in this way, are activity types.

Levinson (1992), the father of the notion of activity type, may well also deserve the label father of the idea that constraints structure activity types. According to Levinson, activity types (his examples are those of “teaching, a job interview, a jural interrogation, a football game, a task in a workshop, a dinner party, and so on” (69)) are structured by allowable contributions to the activities which go on within them plus Grice’s maxims (cf. also Linell 1996:7:9). In this article, Levinson also, incidentally, supports the idea that these two types of constraint should somehow be on the same theoretical level:

What exactly is the relation between the structure of an activity and the inferences special to it? Presumably, exactly the same kind of relation that holds between Grice’s maxims and the inferences they generate. In that case the maxims set up specific expectations that, if they are apparently violated, an inference that would preserve them is derived.  
(79)

Non-Gricean constraints, Levinson claims, and Grice’s maxims, are functionally identical: the structures of activity types (that is, the constraints which shape them) bear the same relation to implicatures

as Grice's maxims, that is, breach causes inference.<sup>19</sup> Or, in other words, Levinson, too, supports the idea that both activity-type-specific constraints and Grice's maxims are *floutable* (see also his so-called general principle above (p. 135)).

The number of constraints regarding allowable contributions to activity types will naturally be very high, considering the high number of activity types we must presume there to be in the world, and considering the likelihood that at least some of these constraints will be specific to one or just a few activity types only. Levinson offers such an activity-type-specific example from a group-therapy session, where constraints (or, in his terminology, "rules of precedence") that "allow statements about feelings, especially feelings about what has been said, to supersede direct responses" (78) contribute to defining this particular activity type (or, one might guess, group of similar activity types). Another example is found in Penman (1987), where the author pinpoints 19 'rules' specifically constraining courtroom activity, among which figure "Do not ask leading questions in examination", "Do not ask double-barrelled questions" (206), "Make your responses audible to the representatives of the court" (207), and "In responding to a question, do not use generalities or draw conclusions" (209). (Note that all 19 rules are seen by Penman to fall under some Gricean maxim (cf. the section on the varying interpretation of constraints (below, p. 157ff)). Furthermore, Schröder (1987) suggests that it is necessary to "specify sets of operational rules for various institutionalized types of communication (advertising, political propaganda) as an addition to Grice's maxims" (514); Raskin (1985) claims that joke-telling is governed by special types of constraint (103), and, finally, many have noted that the global activity type of literary communication may be governed by activity-specific constraints (e.g., van Dijk 1976:38).

Grice's maxims are also seen to be present in some activity types and not others. Furthermore, Pratt (1981) points out with reference to the

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<sup>19</sup> Note, however, that Levinson talks about the breach of expectations (rather than constraints) (see above, p.133f).

Keenan study that in “almost any press conference, board meeting, classroom, or family room in the country. . . the exotic and perverse practices that Keenan found among the Malagasy are likewise routine” (12), that is, in many activity types, the first maxim of Quantity does not apply. Bach & Harnish (1979), too, claim that Grice’s maxims only apply in certain cases, referring to Grice himself in support of this opinion:

Grice nowhere says, nor would want to say, that all conversations are governed by the cooperative maxims. There are too many garden-variety counter-examples: social talk between enemies, diplomatic encounters, police interrogations of reluctant suspects, most political speeches, and many presidential news conferences. These are just some of the cases in which the maxims of cooperation are not in effect and are known not to be in effect by the participants, notwithstanding pretenses to the contrary. (299-300)

What Bach & Harnish have in mind here is most probably the lack of informativity and truthfulness, all of the mentioned activity types being relatively renowned for a lack of one or both of the two. A lack of Be brief is another possibility, as at least political speeches can be relatively lengthy.

### *Asymmetry*

Not only do constraints structure activity types, they also structure social relationships. This claim is also made in Levinson’s 1992 article, with particular reference to the use of questions among the Gonja of West Africa (from a study conducted by E. Goody (1978)). According to Levinson,

There are strong social constraints in Gonja in the use to which questions can be put in various circumstances; some of these constraints derive from the activity type in which the questions are being used, others are related more closely to the social relations between the interlocutors. (81)

An example given of a use of questions which defines a social relationship is that of a courting man jokingly asking a prospective ‘courtee’ whether she has ‘started to prepare her trousseau yet’ (whereupon he might receive an equally joking answer “How can I? You haven’t given me anything towards it” (82)).

A social relationship is almost always asymmetric; that is, the same constraints do not apply to all the participants in the relationship. Or, in other words, in a social relationship, everyone has a particular role to play, where role is defined precisely as a pre-packaged (but of course negotiable) constraints-bundle, one which defines the task and how to do it for the individuals who inhabit the roles. Each role package is different from the others contained within the relationship, and each is (more or less neatly) defined in terms of the sum of constraints it contains. In the case of the Gonja couple, for instance, *his* role, one would imagine, is that of being initiator of the relationship into which they are about to enter, and hers is that of responding and reacting, two roles which are bound to entail that they have to work on the basis of the presence of different sets of constraints structuring and defining their interaction vis-à-vis one another.

The example of the Gonja couple is an example of a social relationship which is more or less activity-type independent. Family relationships are of the same kind: a mother is a mother to her children no matter what activity type the two participants choose to enact, and the constraints that govern each role will mostly remain more or less intact during the course of this enactment although there might be slight changes due to 'interference' from the constraints packages inherent in the activity type. Other social relationships, however, for instance those of doctor/nurse/patient, chef/waiter/customer, etc, are completely activity-type dependent. In fact, activity types are most often *constituted by* such mutually dependent, often mutually exclusive or complementary role packages. This means, among other things, that to say that a constraint 'applies' within an activity type is not necessarily to say that it applies (or applies equally) to all participants in the activity type (a point noted also by Sampson 1982:209). In fact, *most* constraints probably apply *asymmetrically*, that is, who does what, who is polite to whom, and so on, is distributed according to role. A doctor, for instance, has to observe completely different constraints from a nurse, who in turn has to observe

completely different constraints from the patient, and so on. Note, however, that this does not make the constraints any less 'intersubjective': which constraint applies to whom and when will be known to all competent participants, which means that the constraint will be no less floutable than if it were to apply symmetrically.

The notion of asymmetry, as I employ it here, is in essence a value-less notion, where the focus is merely on the fact that some constraints apply to some participants in an activity type, and other constraints to others. There is, however, a strong tradition for seeing such a difference in terms of status and power relations. Mey (1987b), for instance, using as prototypicals for superordinate-subordinate relationships, the (culture-specific rather than activity-type specific) roles of poet and peasant in a discussion revolving around these aspects of interaction, concludes, perhaps a bit too strictly, that

there are no common rules for poets and peasants, since they, in the strictest sense of the word, have no common ground. That, again, means that there are no rules and values that hold indiscriminately in all spheres of society, private as well as public. (296)

It all depends, of course, on what Mey intends by *rule* here, but if we operate with the notion of intersubjective constraints on interaction, it is clear that poet and peasant indeed share at least some of these, for instance, certain linguistic conventions, which allow them to create the communicative battlegrounds for status and power differences in the first place. As long as interactants share a common language, there will always be at least minimum amount of common ground. As regards the differences between the two rule-sets, Mey points out the poet's institutionally constituted right to speak and to define the topic and the way in which it should be talked about, and the peasant's obligation to allow the poet to be in charge of the conversation between them.

For those firmly lodged within the tradition preoccupied with the distribution of status and power it probably seems clear that rather than framing such differences in terms of value-less constraints one can and should rather talk about *rights and obligations*. The fact of the matter is, however, that constraints *express* rights and obligations on



the level of values (for instance, Take charge of the conversation vis-à-vis ‘peasant’ and Allow ‘poet’ to take charge of the conversation), and hence are theoretically prior to both notions. Constraints are a fact long before they express anything in particular, and hence must be come to grips with inside a comprehensive theoretical framework *before* one goes on to consider them at the level of value. Which does not, of course, detract from the value of a subsequent investigation into the benefit and cost of being governed by constraint X vs. by constraint Y.

### Some issues

The notion of a constraint’s existing (or applying) within a culture, activity type, or role package is one which has so far been appealed to as though it was unproblematic; as though we were dealing with a simple matter of a constraint’s either belonging or not belonging within either of these domains. Things are, of course, much more complicated than that. It has been claimed, for instance, that a constraint which rightfully belongs within a domain may sometimes be *suspended*. Secondly, it has been claimed that the same constraint may receive different *interpretations* within different domains. And finally, it has also been claimed that different constraints are not regarded as equally *important*, either in general, and/or within a domain, so that, for instance, when there is a *clash* (that is, when a speaker cannot observe one constraint without breaching another (Grice 1989:30)) the more important constraint will systematically be selected for observance, and the less important constraint for breach.

### *Suspension*

A common way of looking at the non-presence of a Gricean maxim in a domain is in terms of its being *suspended* from use (see, e.g., Singh et al. 1995:106, and Thomas 1994a:8, 1995:76ff).

The one, serious problem with this view is that it presupposes that Grice’s maxims should be *universal*: the suspension argument carries the implicit claim that Grice’s maxims are ‘really’ in operation always,

in every domain, that their non-presence is just apparent, coincidental, perhaps even forced (see Singh et al. 1995:106).<sup>20</sup> Indeed, the argument may, and has been, used actively to *promote* the view that Grice's maxims are universal. Thomas (1994a), for instance, in reference to Keenan's (1976) article which, as I have pointed out, threatened to rob the maxims of their status as universal, claims that "Keenan's example does not falsify Grice's theory if they are seen as examples of instances where the maxim of Quantity is suspended" (8).

As a matter of fact, however, despite previously mentioned facts such as the *longue durée* of certain of Grice's maxims; despite the seeming difficulty of finding hard evidence that certain of Grice's maxims do not exist at all within one or more cultures (or at least the ease with which claims that they do not exist in some cultures can seemingly be refuted, cf. the ongoing 'Keenan' discussion of the present chapter), and despite claims made by certain researchers that certain maxims are much more important than others (see, e.g., Adler 1987:710, Bach & Harnish 1979:168, Bernsen et al. 1996:225f, Bird 1979:149f, Grice 1989:27, Harnish 1976:341, and Holdcroft 1979:134), there is still reason to believe that we are far from being able to claim true universality for any of these maxims (cf. Attardo 1998:631). Nor do we have to be able to do so, in order to salvage Gricean pragmatics, insofar as proving universality is to be seen as that which would achieve this. For other aspects of a Gricean scheme are most certainly universal, most significantly the previously mentioned fact that *some* constraints will always apply in all defined, properly settled domains. *Which* constraints will apply, on the other hand, is, as we have seen, culturally variable. A specific set of constraints like Grice's maxims, for instance, is a culture-specific set of constraints (one which, as we saw in Chapter 3, structures and defines cultures with a rational worldview), and hence claiming universality for this set, as pointed out by, for instance, Mey (1987a:166), and Clyne (1994:208), may well be a blatantly ethnocentric act.

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<sup>20</sup> See also Levinson's (1992) idea that the maxims form "some basic *unmarked* communication context" (78).

On the other hand, however, there is no doubt that there is some truth to all this insistence on the importance of at least some of Grice's maxims. After all, it *is* hard to imagine whole societies lacking for instance truthfulness completely. It is difficult to imagine how communication would be possible without the possibility of assuming that people generally speak, if not the truth, then at least some harmless functional surrogate to the truth (for instance white lies). In a society with a complete lack of a truthfulness constraint one could, for instance, safely assume that if the question *What did you have for dinner yesterday?* received the response *I had fish*, then the respondent either *had* fish for dinner yesterday or in fact any other foodstuff. And this does not much resemble communication as we know it. This still, however, does not prove universality for the maxim of truthfulness, especially since there exists at least one group of activity types where one of the standard role packages does not contain the constraint of truthfulness: I am talking about various kinds of activity types revolving around the activity of interrogation. Here, interestingly, the party in authority, knowing full well that this constraint does not exist in the 'interogee's' role package, generally does his or her uttermost to compensate for this by trying to *impose* this constraint on the latter, by means of such measures as making him or her swear on the Bible, by means of drawing up laws that prescribe heavy punishment for not observing the constraint, by means of threats, torture, violence, and so on. In general, however, in cultures and across activity types, truthfulness is doubtlessly *central*, but this, then, cannot be because it is universal. Rather, truthfulness (and possibly other maxims and constraints) are probably thus central because they play an extremely important role in the predictability grid: there is no doubt that a lack of truthfulness is a far more serious threat to predictability (and hence to understandability) than, for instance, a lack of clarity would be (although we must take into consideration the fact that truthfulness is (or at least can be) a matter of either/or whereas clarity is a matter of degree. Thus, whether or not the former is more of an obstacle to understanding than the latter will, of course, depend on the degree of non-clarity of the utterance: an

utterance containing a strange ('untrue') relationship to fact may perhaps be more of an obstacle to understanding than an utterance of middle-range obscurity, whereas it may *not* be more of an obstacle to understanding than an utterance of great obscurity).

Returning now to the issue of suspension, the claim that some of Grice's maxims are more central than others, in contrast to the claim that they are universal, does *not* warrant the conclusion that these maxims are always suspended whenever one is not able to detect them in a given culture, activity type or role package. Because the notion of suspension implies that these maxims are 'really' in operation, and that their non-presence is somehow something ephemeral. The previous example shows, however that the non-presence of, for instance, truthfulness in certain role packages in certain activity types is *not* a temporal but rather a relatively lasting state. Or, in other words, all we can say about the maxim of truthfulness in such cases is that it does not apply.

This does not, of course, mean that there is no need for a notion of suspension. It is just that severed from the universality idea its role becomes quite different. Rather than being a rag-bag term for all cases where some constraint is found not to apply, it now becomes a term which pinpoints the absence of constraints in cultures, activity types and role packages where it *really* normally *does* apply. What we will find, however, is that the term will be used less often, and in cases which look quite different from those exemplified by the 'universalists'. For a universalist, suspension will be something everyday, durable, implicit, and understood. For a non-universalist, suspension will, by contrast, be something less common, often temporary; it will probably often be the result of elaborate negotiation, and it will be quite explicitly signalled. Examples are relatively hard to find, which is no surprise since if specific suspensions keep repeating themselves, thus becoming more easily detectable, this might cause a permanent change in the constraints structure of a domain, which means that we are no longer talking about suspension, but (again) of real non-existence. One possible example, however, involves the

constraint Tip the waiter (belonging to the role package of the customer within the activity type 'visiting a restaurant' in Western cultures). This constraint can sometimes be seen to be suspended. When this is the case, the suspension has probably been thoroughly negotiated beforehand, and it is always quite explicitly signalled, normally by means of a written note somewhere on the menu stating that tips are included in the price of the meal, or something to that effect.

#### *Varying interpretations of constraints*

Both of the two remaining points are also problematically connected in the literature with the issue of the universality of Grice's maxims. Although not much is said explicitly, it is reasonable to believe that it is a view of Grice's maxims as universal which underlies, for instance, the widely acknowledged idea that the perceived diversity as regards constraints across cultures, activity types and roles, is first and foremost due to the fact that Grice's maxims receive different *interpretations* across these domains.

There seems to be a widespread consensus that "the pragmatic systems of different cultures or subcultures include culturally specified norms for the way in which the Gricean maxims are to be realized" (Blum-Kulka & Olshtain 1986:167) (see also Mey 1987b:291f, and Levinson 1992:77ff). Developments and exemplification of this view mainly revolve around the maxims of Quality and Quantity.<sup>21</sup> As regards the former, Sarangi & Slembrouck (1992) offer an example of intracultural variation in the interpretation of truthfulness,<sup>22</sup> where the difference in interpretation accompanies role. The story is of a woman who, having lost her wallet (believing it to have been stolen), rings the police to report this. She is asked whether the wallet is lost or stolen, to which she replies *Most likely stolen*, only to be referred to the lost

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<sup>21</sup> See also, however, examples involving politeness (Obeng 1997:52), a 'maxim of agreement' (Komlósi & Tarnay 1986:214), and a constraint regarding table manners (Allwood 1976:27).

<sup>22</sup> See Harris (1996) for an example of *intercultural* variation in the interpretation of truthfulness.

goods department, no statement of theft being taken down. Sarangi & Slembrouck explain the example thus:

for the police the terms 'lost' and 'stolen' are two incompatible categories, because each entails a different course of action. Consequently, the police required the wallet to be classified on an either-or basis, not so much to come as closely as possible to the real event as experienced by Pat, but to expedite their own action, which is further constrained by institutional routines. The reflection of this on the communicative level is that for both interlocutors the 'content' of the quality maxim is not 'shared'. Rather, the maxim applies differently for the two interactants: for the police it cannot be true that something is 'lost or stolen' at the same time, while for Pat the wallet is 'missing' (whether 'lost' or 'stolen'). (131)

This example illustrates nicely how truth is a socially defined concept. For the police, the only thing that can be true in the situation is that the wallet is *either* lost or stolen, whereas for the woman – Pat – *both* can be true. Or, in other words, the two different roles of 'police' and 'victim' in this particular situation contain two different interpretations of what it means to observe the truthfulness constraint.

The fact that it is the police's interpretation which succeeds in this situation (Pat's version of the facts is not even considered), illustrates Sarangi & Slembrouck's main point, that is, that the power invested in certain participants in virtue of the authority of the institutions they belong to also gives them the power to decide what counts as observing (and hence violating, and flouting) maxims (see also Pratt 1981:13). Sarangi & Slembrouck hasten to point out, however, that this does not mean that the road is invariably one-way, that communication participants are perpetually imprisoned within a fixed, predetermined system of 'who decides what'. "Given the potential of asymmetry", Sarangi & Slembrouck assure us, "it is clear that what counts as 'truthful', 'sufficient', 'clear', 'unambiguous' and 'relevant' may be negotiable in actual situational contexts" (141) (see also Rommetveit 1992:23).

As regards the varying interpretations of Quantity according to culture and activity type, the question has revolved around whether or not there is a difference in the amount of information regarded as sufficient information. Here, it is interesting to consider again

Keenan's (1976) example from the Malagasy community. So far, it has been suggested that the fact that speakers do not refer to third person human referents by their real names could either be a case of non-existence of the first maxim of Quantity in this culture, or a case of suspension of this maxim. At this point, however, we are presented with a third option, namely that this particular behaviour in speakers might be due to an interpretation of the first maxim of Quantity to the effect that such 'non-reference' in fact constitutes enough information to fill the informativity requirement in this culture.<sup>23</sup>

Pratt (1977:146ff) offers an example of *intracultural* interpretational variation in the use of Quantity. She draws attention to differences between natural and literary *narrative* and other genres; we expect and accept a lot more information in narrative, she points out, than in, for instance, a friendly chat (see also Chapter 6, p. 213f). In turn, however, we would probably expect more information in the fulfilment of the maxim of Quantity during a friendly chat, than we would, for instance, in a "bargaining situation" (Holdcroft 1983:504). A final example is found in Elster (1990), where the difference between the interpretation of Quantity (and Relation and Manner) in classroom vs. non-classroom situations is scrutinized. One of the observations made is that there is often a clash between the pupil's perception of Quantity, which is still governed by her knowledge of what goes on outside the classroom, and the teacher's expectations as regards 'enough' information. One example reported is that of a child filling in a written question/answer exercise. The child, following the norms for outside the classroom, answers the questions "incorporating new information, or comments, and leaving out given information, or topics" (383), whereupon the teacher, interpreting 'observing the first maxim of Quantity' from a teacher/classroom perspective as being a matter of answering questions in complete sentences, proceeds to correct the pupil's 'mistakes'.

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<sup>23</sup> For another example of intercultural variation in the interpretation of Quantity, see Matsumoto (1989, 1993).

I believe that these examples show that the idea that the maxims – and other constraints – receive different interpretations in different domains is quite a reasonable one. The problem, however, as I pointed out at the beginning of this section, is that the idea that the maxims have different interpretations can be seen to build on a view of maxims as universal. We have to be careful so as to avoid the common implication that Grice's maxims are the only maxims there are, and thus that the whole constraints-web consists precisely of maxims and their interpretations. Such a view clearly leads to counter-intuitive analyses, like the following one, found in Blum-Kulka & Olshtain (1986), regarding the Apache Indians' preference for silence rather than chit-chat in phatic situations (for instance, before actually greeting the other person on the phone) (see also Chapter 3, p. 93f). According to Blum-Kulka & Olshtain, this is a case of the Apache interpreting the first maxim of Quantity different from a Westerner, that is, to the effect that saying nothing counts as enough information (in situations X, Y, etc.). As I suggested in Chapter 3, I do not quite subscribe to this view. Silence may of course convey a whole host of information, but this is when it is the result of a *breach* of a constraint (cf., e.g., the example in Chapter 2, p. 20), because this causes increased interpretational activity in the hearer. The silence in question here, however, is – and is seen to be – silence as a result of *observing* a constraint (some interpretation of Quantity, according to Blum-Kulka & Olshtain), and when silence is the result of observing a constraint, it does not have much effect beyond confirming its own existence (that is, *There is silence, therefore there is silence*). Even for an Apache, for instance on the phone, all that the silence tells her is that somebody is there at the other end (which was brought to her attention by the ringing noise anyway); even she is forced to wait for some information to ensue (for instance, regarding the identity of the caller). Thus, little or no information is conveyed, which means that it is counter-intuitive to say that what is being observed is some version of the first maxim of Quantity, meaning that we must here be dealing with the observance of a different constraint altogether, one which



prescribes, it was suggested in Chapter 3, for the Apache Indians, a certain amount of silence in preparation for a new activity type.

The problem of far-fetched 'interpretations' of Grice's maxims, which one will experience if one chooses to see the constraints-web as consisting exclusively of Grice's maxims and their interpretations, is, of course, most easily resolved by leaving behind the idea that Grice's maxims are universal. Instead one may choose to adopt the idea, discussed above, that certain constraints, perhaps including some of Grice's maxims, are more central than others. Such a view opens up for the idea that *some* constraints – the central ones – will have varying interpretations in the different domains in which they occur, whereas others, basically because they are more strictly tied to specific cultures and activity-types, will not occur in several versions (cf. Allwood 1976:27).

#### *Hierarchies of constraints*

The notion that certain constraints should be more central than others suggests that there might be something like a *hierarchy of constraints*, where some constraints (in one or other of their interpretations) are considered to be of higher importance than others.

I have already discussed centrality to the predictability grid as one way in which a given constraint can be more important than another. This, however, is not the *only* way in which a given constraint can have priority over another (although it is in all probability the most general, most universal, generator of such importance, due to the centrality of predictability). A constraint may also be more important than the next because it is an expression of a value which is held particularly dear in a society, or because it is particularly important in the creation and regulation of social relationship, and so on. A common denominator, however, of all *strong constraints* (that is, constraints that are for some reason high up in a hierarchy) is that they will generally be more heavily enforced than other, *weaker* constraints, which in turn means that they will be more strongly floutable, i.e. that they will create a higher degree of increased interpretational activity. Another common

denominator is that in the case of a clash, the weaker constraint will normally be the one being sacrificed.

Many have assumed the existence of a general hierarchy of maxims, often situating either truthfulness and relevance (or both) at the very top (e.g., Adler 1987:710, Bach & Harnish 1979:168, Bernsen et al. 1996:225f, Bird 1979:149f, Grice 1989:27, Harnish 1976:341, and Holdcroft 1979:134). Another common claim, however, is that politeness constraints are stronger than Grice's maxims (see, e.g., Attardo 1997:767, and Lakoff 1973:303, 1981:35). White lies, for instance, constitute a classical example from Western culture of a resolution of a clash between politeness and truthfulness, where politeness 'wins' and truthfulness is the constraint which 'gets to be breached'. Even if the fact that truthfulness becomes breached so frequently in such situations that a conventional term has even been invented for the phenomenon indicates that the relative positionings in the hierarchy of the two constraints are indeed as these authors assume, this does not, of course, mean that there is no room for negotiation as regards these positions in actual situations. Normally one would, for instance, assume that politeness is more important than, for example, a constraint prescribing brevity; nevertheless, a situation of crisis calls for brevity and directness rather than polite circumscription. Consider, for instance, the following scenario: a house is on fire, and a fire constable has been assigned to ask people to get their parked vehicles out of the way. Under normal circumstances, the constable would most probably address the drivers with an utterance akin to *Would you please move your vehicle?* (or even more politely: *I would much appreciate it if you could move your vehicle, Sir/Madam*). In this case, however, the constable may perfectly acceptably shout *Move your car(s)*!<sup>24</sup>

A general hierarchy will be a hierarchy based on the strength of a constraint independent of culture, activity type and role. Constraints like truthfulness and relevance will be found at the top of such a

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<sup>24</sup> Example adapted from Blum-Kulka & Olshtain (1986:175).

hierarchy because the fact that their strength derives from their centrality precisely means that they are relatively domain-independent. Politeness will be at the top because it is very important in regulating social relationships. In addition, however, to a general hierarchy there will be culture-specific and activity-type-specific hierarchies, where the positions of central constraints may or may not be different from those in the general hierarchy. Examples of activity-specific hierarchies, for instance, is found in Stubbs (1983), where he observes that the importance of Grice's maxims of Relation and the Manner maxim Be brief will be less important in *social* than in *transactional* (or 'practical') discourse:

Since the purpose of social discourse is its own smooth going-on, to use a Goffmanesque expression, one would expect different rules than in transactional discourse. The Gricean 'be relevant' and 'be brief' maxims will be relaxed . . . on the other hand, requirements for supportive feedback and back-channel behaviour . . . will be more stringent. (101)

A further example of an intraculturally specific hierarchy may, incidentally, well be what we are witnessing in Keenan's (1976) study: as we remember, her results have been interpreted as a case of non-existence of the first maxim of Quantity or as a case of suspension. A third explanatory option, it was pointed out in the previous section, could be that the Malagasy culture indeed incorporates the first maxim of Quantity, but under a different interpretation than Western cultures. What we see here, however, is that the notion of hierarchies of constraints in fact offers a fourth explanatory path: what has been generally overlooked in the cited Keenan example, is that we are not talking about one single constraint here, but rather about two, namely the first maxim of Quantity and a taboo to the effect that people's names must not be used. Thus, what we *could* be talking about here is in fact a culturally specific – or indeed an activity-type-specific (this we do not know) – hierarchy where the first maxim of Quantity is inferior to this taboo, so that when there is a *clash* the former gets sacrificed. This, too, would also mean, of course, that the first maxim of Quantity exists or applies in this culture (and/or in this specific activity type), but with a lower priority than other constraints. To find

out for certain whether it is this one or one of the other explanatory paths which is the correct one to follow, a new Malagasy study must be carried out, however, one which takes all of these new categories into consideration from the start.

A final note on the relationship between hierarchies of different orders: the general hierarchy may influence more specific hierarchies in the sense that if a constraint is high up in the former, it will often be high up in the latter, as well. Or, in other words, the strength of a constraint carries over from the general to more specific hierarchies. As a general rule, however, domain-specific strength weighs heavier than general strength. An example of this is quite possibly to be found among the results of a study by Reynolds (1993) of American vs. Egyptian English, where the author found that in American English, more stock is placed in Quality than in Quantity, whereas in Egyptian English, sufficient Quantity is more important than Quality. Here, we detect two different hierarchies according to culture, one which (at least in certain situations) rates Quality before Quantity and one which does it the other way around. What is interesting is that in the latter, the culture (and/or activity-type) specific hierarchy may be seen to override a possible general hierarchy with truthfulness somewhere near the top, and informativity lower down. Another example of an activity-type-specific hierarchy overriding the general hierarchy is witnessed in academic discussion, where politeness – ranked by many researchers as more important than Grice's maxims in a general-hierarchy sense – may well be sacrificed for truthfulness, rather than vice versa.<sup>25</sup>

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<sup>25</sup> I owe this point to Evensen (personal communication).

## Chapter 5:

# SOCIO-COGNITIVE CONTEXT

Equipped with the notions of reciprocal response-readiness and socialized interpretational drive (replacing the notion of cooperation-as-motivation), and that of intersubjective constraint on interaction (replacing the notion of maxim) we are approaching the final stage of the present project, namely the investigation into the act of flouting itself. One preparatory task remains, however, and that is to give a working characterization of the notion of *context*.

Why this should be necessary is perhaps not as obvious as it may seem. Part of the Gricean tradition, including Grice himself, has left the notion of context completely to intuition, whereas another part, including, among others, the so-called neo-Griceans, has expected the maxims, as mentioned in the previous chapter, to do the explanatory work in a vacuum; that is, context-independently, implying, perhaps, that there is no need for a theory of context. I also mentioned,

however, that this attitude has undergone a change, with even the most ingrained formalists now taking context into consideration. All in all, however, the *status quo* as regards the treatment/non-treatment of the notion within pragmatics still leaves something to be desired.

Among those who do purport to take context seriously, there seems to be a significant division line between those who see context as mainly a cognitive matter (e.g., Sperber & Wilson 1995), and those who see it as mainly a social matter, treating it – in the tradition of some of the fields that feed into pragmatics (for instance the ethnography of speaking (see Hymes, 1989)) – in terms of lists of contextual inventory encompassing all relevant situational, institutional and linguistic features seen as necessary in order to understand how communication, or the utterance, works (e.g., Hudson 1975, Fairclough 1985, Goatly 1994).

My proposal in this chapter – intended as a first, few tentative steps towards a working model of context – is a reaction against approaching context from either a (solipsistic) cognitive or an (almost always equally solipsistic) social angle exclusively. Context, I argue in the first part of this chapter, is *socio-cognitive*. It is cognitive in the (loosely Kantian) sense that what all operable context has in common, must have in common, is that it is somehow mediated through an experiencing being's cognitive 'apparatus'. A world without experiencing beings is not a context. It is only when the outside world has been acted upon by an interpreting being that context arises in a way that makes it a meaningful topic for discussion in fields that preoccupy themselves with linguistic and/or nonlinguistic meaning. Furthermore, context is *social* in that, as shall be seen, the mentioned mediating process takes place in, and is a result of communicative interaction.

The mediation process is guided by two basic human biological endowments, namely the ability to form and remember gestalts, and the ability to focus on some things to the exclusion of others. Without these endowments, an individual's context would be completely unmanageable: he or she would be crushed under the weight of

interpretational drive (because she or he just would not be able to release tension by making sense). These two basic endowments are the topic of the second part of this chapter. First, I look at the socio-culturally structured organization of contextual content in terms of chunks, or *frames*, which will be my preferred term for a multifaceted concept known under a variety of names (*schema, script, scenario*). This discussion gives occasion to consider two important issues, namely that of intersubjective constraints on interaction as context (the latter being a consideration that invites itself by virtue of the particularly vital role these entities can be seen as playing in the creation and sustenance of frames); and that of how frames are used in interaction, via *contextualization cues* (Gumperz 1992:230), to create situational intersubjectivity.

In the second part of the chapter, I look at the shape that context assumes to individuals in actual, moment-to-moment experience, and at how individuals, in terms of their *relevance structures* (Schutz & Luckmann 1973:182ff), manoeuvre within this moment-to-moment experience (an important prerequisite to being able to say something about how speakers and hearers manoeuvre around flouts). I outline the various forms of relevance postulated by Schutz & Luckmann, and introduce the idea that flouting constitutes one form of Schutz & Luckmannian relevance, viz. *imposed thematic relevance*, a form of relevance which works in terms of establishing an unusualness which attracts attention (and stimulates increased interpretational activity). Furthermore, I make some comparisons between Schutz & Luckmann's and Sperber & Wilson's (1995) conceptions of relevance, suggesting that the former constitutes a better point of departure for a 'relevance theory' than the latter. I also discuss the possible theoretical division of labour between a general notion of relevance and a maxim of Relation, and finally I look at how findings within *grounding theory* (e.g., Hopper 1979a, 1979b) actually prove to be important contributions to an understanding of the conventional strategies available to speakers in order to fulfil the maxim of Relation.

## WHAT IS CONTEXT?

Look out of the window and you see it; turn on the radio and you hear it; take a walk in the cold winter air and you feel it; bake a cake, and you can smell and taste it. Think and/or talk, and you (re-)create it. In the most comprehensive sense possible, context is 'everything' as it presents itself to an individual at any one moment. No wonder, then, that claims regarding the impossibility of properly ensnaring the concept abound (see, e.g., Goodwin & Duranti 1992:2, and Linell 1996:7:74).

It is indeed true that the notion entails a vast amount of issues that are nowhere near fully understood. An understanding of individual issues, however, invariably depends on a dialogue between these issues and a bigger picture. Thus, choosing such a big picture as my starting point, I propose to stick with the just presented idea of context as everything, here taken to mean the dynamic totality of resources for understanding and interpretation available to an individual at any one moment, roughly corresponding to the individual's "everyday life-world" (Schutz & Luckmann 1973:3), i.e. the moment-to-moment flow of that which can be safely taken for granted, the moment-to-moment flow of 'reality' as it presents itself – or can present itself – to the experiencing human being.

In having established a correspondence between what I mean by context and the notion of life-world, I have, of course, already said something (and endorsed something) about the nature of context. The notion of life-world emerges from a well-known phenomenological tradition in which it is posited that the surrounding world is not – cannot be – taken in as 'raw data'. 'Bare' perception is a blurred, contourless continuum, it is only through "performances of consciousness" (Schutz & Luckmann 1989:3) – interpretation – that the world gains shape and hence meaning. This idea of interpreted representation is also recognized by many linguists, for instance Chafe (1977b):

What is in consciousness constitutes a kind of belief about what is in the outside world. This belief may be derived from what is presented to



the senses, but is heavily influenced by contextual expectations as well as cultural and individual predispositions. All these things combine to produce in our minds some kind of interpretation of what is going on outside. The key notion for us here will be that *perception is interpretive*. (217)

Linell offers a parallel insight on behalf of the dialogically-based socio-cognitive approach: “if we think of extra-discursive entities, such as bodies, objects, artefacts etc . . . as contextual resources, these must be cognitively apprehended in order to function as contexts” (1996:7:78). Finally, the relevant Bakhtinian term for this phenomenon is that of *authoring*: out of the fragments of reality the interpreting actor shapes a “consummated whole . . . which is transgredient to . . . particular moments or constituent features” (Bakhtin 1990:12). The dialogical subject is a planner and builder of reality, involved in “architectonically ordering the world” (Holquist 1990b:xxix). So basic is “the problem of achieving wholeness of one kind or another out of parts of different kinds” that it is seen to be “at the heart of all human action” (Holquist 1990b:xxviii).

But what exactly *is* a performance of consciousness? What does it mean to cognitively apprehend some phenomenon? What is involved in the process of shaping consummated wholes? Prying deeper into these matters, possible answers to why the life-world as context deserves the label *socio*-cognitive rather than just cognitive also emerge. At least if we leave Voloshinov (1973) to offer a tentative answer to the above questions.

According to Voloshinov, interpretation/understanding “is a response to a sign with signs” (11). On a superficial reading, this, of course, is merely a repetition of what was said above, namely that that which consciousness receives from the outside is subjected to some sort of process (a ‘response’) rather than being incorporated as raw data. But there is more to this statement than this. It says, for instance, something about the nature of that which consciousness receives from the outside, that is, that it is already in the form of *signs*.

Signs, according to Voloshinov, are vehicles of the meaning of ontological reality. An object in the outside world, for instance a dove,

does not mean anything in and of itself: "A physical body equals itself, so to speak; it does not signify anything but wholly coincides with its particular, given nature" (9). Such reality has, however, the capability of taking on meaning to the observer. Thus, to the interpreting subject, a dove can become an artistic impression, or a signifier of peace. This process of reality-becoming-sign does not, however, take place for each individual in a vacuum. Signs arise and are shaped, according to Voloshinov, in social/communicative interaction, on "*interindividual territory*" (12), rendering the sign a thoroughly *social* (to Voloshinov: ideological) entity. This process and the resulting social character of the sign is illustrated particularly well in the case of the sign's primordial representative, viz. the word:

In point of fact, word is a two-sided act. It is determined equally by whose word it is and for whom it is meant. As word, it is precisely the product of the reciprocal relationship between speaker and listener, addresser and addressee. Each and every word expresses the "one" in relation to the "other." I give myself verbal shape from another's point of view, ultimately, from the point of view of the community to which I belong. A word is a bridge thrown between myself and another. If one end of the bridge depends on me, then the other depends on my addressee. A word is territory shared by both addresser and addressee, by the speaker and his interlocutor. (86)

The process described here does not, of course, apply only to words: *all* signs are seen to be territory shared in this sense. And as such, they enter my consciousness, as pre-interpreted notions.

A sign's basic characteristic being its social-ness entails that a sign entering consciousness feeds it with social content. The next question then, is what is the nature of the consciousness thus fed. Voloshinov's answer is that it is precisely the process of appropriating signs in social/communicative interaction that gives rise to ('ignites', sustains) consciousness in the first place. Consciousness, although anchored in biological processes, is no more and no less *than* signs:

Consciousness cannot be derived directly from nature . . .  
Consciousness takes shape and being in the material of signs created by an organized group in the process of its social intercourse. The individual consciousness is nurtured on signs; it derives its growth from them; it reflects their logic and laws. The logic of consciousness is the logic of ideological communication, of the semiotic interaction of a social group. If we deprive consciousness of its semiotic, ideological content, it would have absolutely nothing left. Consciousness can harbor only in the image, the word, the meaningful gesture, and so

forth. Outside such material, there remains the sheer physiological act unilluminated by consciousness, i.e., without having light shed on it, without having meaning given to it, by signs. (13)

Thus, consciousness (for Voloshinov, the whole content of mind, not just that of which we are actually conscious in the here-and-now) is 'social', as well, and the process of understanding – the response to a sign with signs – can be construed as a dialogue between social meanings emerging on the common communicative arena and a consciousness already filled with, shaped by and perpetuated in the self-same (social) material. Thus, consciousness – which, like the notion of life-world, is roughly parallel to what I mean by context – is thoroughly *socio*-cognitive.

#### CONTEXTUAL ORGANIZATION I: FRAMES

Having established that an individual's interpretational context consists in the entirety of his or her "socially constituted" and "interactionally sustained" (Goodwin & Duranti 1992:6) life-world, it is now time to consider how such a vast amount of resources avoids becoming insurmountable to individuals. The key term is that of *contextual organization*.

Long before anything remotely akin to conscious choice comes into play, context assumes a certain shape to an individual. This shape is partly biologically, partly socially determined. First and foremost, the boundedness against the rest of the world of human communicators in virtue of the body – or in the words of Bakhtin, "the *delimitation* of a human being in the world" (1990:36) – entails that we basically perceive context as *our* context, *our* life-world, in a fundamental sense as separate from that of other human beings (but still at the same time being acutely aware that other communicators are also somehow performing on the same arena (Schutz & Luckmann 1973:4f)). The same fact also entails that we are capable of perceiving context in current conscious experience as emerging from two basic sources, namely from the inside (from – loosely speaking – memory) and from

the outside (from the world outside the body, but, of course, *as mediated by our interpretative actions*).

The first type of contextual organization with which I will concern myself in this section pertains (at least traditionally) somehow more essentially to the first of the two mentioned basic contextual sources. There is a long-standing tradition (within various fields) of regarding knowledge as represented in memory in organized chunks rather than as unrelated elements. These structures have been treated from a variety of perspectives within *frame (or schema) theory*, whose strengths and shortcomings will be briefly commented on below. My own definition of frame, which will be justified and supplemented further on, goes as follows: a *frame* is a particular kind of subsection of the life-world; it is an individual's interactionally acquired, dynamic, generalized socio-cognitive representation of a socio-culturally bounded area of experience. Two topics which are singled out for discussion in connection with frames are how intersubjective constraints on interaction play a particularly important role in the creation and perpetuation of frames, and how *contextualization cues* (Gumperz 1992) are crucial to the deployment of frames in interaction.

### **Frame theory**

Although the story of frame theory begins with Gestalt psychology (Fiske & Taylor 1991:99), and although most of it can ultimately be traced back to the early representatives Bartlett (1932), and Bateson (1972) (whose work was originally published in 1955) (Tannen 1979:138), it must nevertheless be said to have been the volume of research in the 1970s which put frame theory on the agenda. This is also the research which continues to be influential (see, e.g., Nelson 1986). For a broad overview of the 1970s trend Tannen's (1979) survey is highly recommendable; it suffices here to mention some of its most well-known representatives, which fall into two broad traditions, that is, the *cognitivist* (for instance AI researchers Minsky (1975) and

Schank & Abelson (1977), and the psychologist Rumelhart (1975)<sup>1</sup>) and the *anthropological/sociological* (for instance the sociologist Goffman (1974), the ethnographer of speaking Hymes (1989), and the cognitive anthropologist Fraake (1977)) (cf. Wennberg 1999:23ff).

A few words, initially, on a couple of main assumptions unifying the mentioned approaches: the stripped-down, basically shared point of departure consists in the stance that knowledge is organized in generalized structures in the representational system of some intelligence, structures which, in turn, impose understandings on subsequent experience. This basic stance also underlies *my* definition of frame (see above). As it can, however, also just as easily apply to the notion of *category* the point must be added that these structures are normally seen to extend well beyond the single concept; frames always involve *several* concepts or notions (and their relations), usually organized (in terms of these relations) around some *topic* (a person, a role, an event, and so on) (Fiske & Taylor 1991:118ff). The most essential type of topic is often seen to be the *event* (because of a view of memory as episodic (Schank & Abelson 1997:17ff), or because events are seen to be phenomenologically prominent (Nelson 1986:4)). Agreeing that this type of topic is somehow more essential, I mostly disregard, in the following, other types of knowledge structure and limit myself to commenting on that in the reported research which most closely resembles event-based, or, in my preferred terminology, *activity-type-based* frames.<sup>2</sup>

Apart from the mentioned basically shared assumptions, the two approaches – cognitive and sociological/anthropological – differ to a considerable degree. Put simply, the cognitivists are mostly preoccupied with the first contextual source (inner), the sociologists/anthropologists with the second (outer), and this has of course had certain consequences for the way they view the *what, why*

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<sup>1</sup> Two well-known frame-theoretical linguists, i.e. Fillmore (1975), and Chafe (1977a, 1977b), also belong here. See also Levinson (1991).

<sup>2</sup> Levinson (1992), father of the notion of activity type, also has some notion of a cognitive representation of these entities, but prefers the term *schemata* (72).

and *how* of knowledge structures. As regards the cognitivists, it is knowledge as represented within some information processing device (machine or human) – and typically its sequential organization – which is of interest; the social-ness of the knowledge thus represented or the social impact of such representation is immaterial.

Furthermore, the represented structure is seen as *static*: despite the fact that the cognitivists all somehow derive from Bartlett (1932), who placed great emphasis on the dynamic, constructive nature of memory and knowledge structures, they have all tended to depict frames as rigid structures, neglecting notions of versatility, change and adaptation to changes and developments in the situations on which they are based or to which they are applied (Fiske & Taylor 1991:174, Tannen 1979:139). As an example of this kind of approach, Tannen, in her 1979 survey, chooses to draw attention to Charniak's (1975) definition of frame: "I take a frame to be a static data structure about one stereotyped topic" (qtd. in Tannen 1979:139).

It should be pointed out that newer research in the cognitivist tradition has seen a number of exceptions to the trend of viewing frames as static entities (see Fiske & Taylor 1991:174), or as 'non-social' entities. Nelson (1986), for instance, building on Schank & Abelson's (1977) cognitively oriented script theory, focuses on how children acquire frames in interaction, and hence on frames as dynamic structures, or in her words, "holistic structures involving internal change over time" (3), and on frames as social entities:

That children gain knowledge from direct experiences by no means implies that the young child is a lone experiencer of the world . . . On the contrary, the social and cultural world provides experiential context for the child. Experience does not come to the child as raw encounters with a neutral physical world. Rather, in some important sense, all knowledge of the world is social or cultural knowledge. At the other extreme, this latter statement may be misinterpreted as the claim that cultural agents are the only determinants of what the child experiences. However, that social and cultural agents (e.g., parents) set the context for the child's learning does not imply that they determine what the child experiences. The interactive model to which we subscribe emphasizes that the developmental state of the child's cognitive system and his or her current state of knowledge at least enter into what the child comes to know of an experience and how it is integrated into the knowledge system. (5)

In a way, Nelson's approach, in its emphasis on the cognitive-ness of the knowledge structures on the one hand and the social-ness of a frame's content and organization on the other, can be seen as a balanced amalgam of the cognitivist and the sociological/anthropological traditions. Because where the former over-emphasizes the cognitive the latter tends to put exclusive emphasis on the social. Goffman (1974), for example, disregarding the biological anchorage of frames, builds his notion of "social frameworks" (opposed to the notion of natural framework) around the idea that the events on which they are based involve the active doings of participants (24). Thus frames become dynamic, revisable entities, which is also an important point in the sociological/anthropological tradition. Goffman shows, for instance, how a "primary framework" (21), e.g., the representation of any everyday event, can be adapted to serve as a frame of understanding in a completely different situation, as, e.g., when a given everyday event is translated into the language of the stage (40ff). Frake (1977), another representative of this tradition, also stresses that frames are not clearly bounded, ready-made "cognitive map[s]" (6) in people's minds but rather overlapping and intertwining *sketches* of such maps, readily revisable in meaningful interaction, whereas Hymes (1989) points out that there is no "mechanical connection" between a given frame and "a particular defining situation" (434). Thus, any frame can in principle be summoned in any situation, with a subsequent alteration of the definition of parts or the whole of that situation.

A view of frames like Nelson's is, in my view, preferable to either the cognitive or the sociological/anthropological views, quite simply because it encompasses both types of explanation, both of which are needed to be able to provide a full account of frame-related concerns. The fact that human communicators organize context in terms of frames obviously has both a cognitive and a social explanation. On the one hand, there is the idea that human memory is limited, and therefore needs to deploy some condensing (Schank & Abelson 1977:19) or deconstructive-reconstructive strategies to lower the strain

on the system, and on the other there is the idea that experience appropriates the shape it does because it reflects some prior social organization (Nelson 1986:15). Furthermore, both a cognitive and a social angle are necessary to explain certain aspects of the functioning of frames. The function of enabling individuals to predict 'what is going to happen next' (Nelson 1986:17), for instance, is on the one hand useful in reducing processing cost, and on the other enables individuals to satisfy their socio-emotional need (Fiske & Taylor 1991:97) to predict future events and happenings. Clearly, both types of explanation are necessary if one wants to provide a full picture of what is going on with frames.

Linell (1996:7), has argued at some length for (at least to a certain extent and for certain purposes) allowing some space for monological theories alongside (or even within) the framework of dialogism, claiming that

it would be a misconstrual to the dialogistic epistemology to propose that all aspects of linguistic behaviour can be described in terms directly or indirectly derived from a theory of social interaction. Some factors clearly derive from the capabilities of individuals and individuals' organisms, e.g. neurophysically based, processing constraints. (224)

Although it cannot be said that a potential 'merger' of the cognitivist and the sociological/anthropological traditions amounts to anything like a reconciliation of a monologicistic and a dialogistic approach (the cognitive tradition is quite clearly monological and the sociological/anthropological tradition is clearly social, but the latter is of course not necessarily therefore dialogical (cf. Lindstrom 1992:103)), such a merger would still reflect the principle that theories should not just be thrown to waste just because they happen to be on the 'unhealthy' side of some ideological fence.

I suggested earlier that Nelson's model could be said to constitute such a merger. Furthermore, in adding a clear interactional dimension to her approach (in her explanation of the relation of socio to cognitive), her model even shows some leaning towards the dialogical. In a more truly dialogic approach, however, there is a fundamental priority for the perspective that human beings employ their



“biological endowments . . . within cognitive projects which are ultimately socially and dialogically based” (Linell 1996:7:224), that is, for seeing the cognitive through the lens of the social, rather than vice versa. This can be interpreted in many ways; in the following it will quite simply mean that a greater emphasis will be assigned to the socio-interactional aspects of frames (and other context-organizational phenomena) than on issues emanating from their cognitivity. Two such socio-interactional issues will be considered in the following, namely intersubjective constraints on interaction as frame content, and the notion of how speakers and hearers manage frames vis-à-vis each other in interaction via contextualization cues.

**Frame content: intersubjective constraints on interaction**

Another critical remark which could be issued against at least the cognitivist trend within frame theory is the tendency to consider but a meagre few types of contextual content. What is typically considered is knowledge of the sequential ordering of events, situationally obligatory objects, and goals (see, e.g., Schank & Abelson 1977). Although this is understandable with reference to their particular concerns, it is, at least in a more comprehensive account of context, not excusable. Imagery, attitudes and emotions may not be properties of computers but they are very much properties of experiencing human beings, and there is good reason to believe that these types of contextual content display just as high a degree of organization as (that which is typically thought of as) knowledge, and thus need to figure in descriptions and explanations as well.

A further type of contextual element which has received little or no (explicit) mention – at least in the cognitivist accounts – is normative elements, or intersubjective constraints on interaction. In the previous chapter it became clear that constraints are the structuring principle of activity types (as well as of cultures and role packages), which unavoidably means that activity-type-based frames, too, must somehow be influenced by this principle and its workings. But how?

This question can be answered by looking at the exact nature of the relationship between frames and activity types. In frame theory, one tends to talk loosely about some sort of correspondence between frames and their real-world counterparts, or about how users associate frames with situations, and so on. Often, one gets the impression that the link in question is supposed to be between something *cognitive* and something *social* (or just something ‘out there’), but as was suggested already in the discussion of Voloshinov, and as I suggested in my preliminary definition of *frame*, it is rather the case that *both* frame and ‘situation’ are socio-cognitively represented. This is the case quite simply because, as was made clear earlier in this chapter, no piece of reality that is actually apprehended as reality cannot *not* be thus represented. But if both frames and the activity types which they are based on are socio-cognitively represented, then what, if any, is the difference between them?

The answer is that frames are individual-biographical representations of activity types. Borrowed from Bakhtinian terminology, *individual-biographical* refers to the fact that each individual occupies a unique spatio-temporal place in existence, which means that the individual will experience the world from a perspective unique to her (Bakhtin 1993:56ff). Or put differently, any one individual’s set of experiences, her biography, is always hers and no-one else’s (see also Schutz & Luckmann 1973:111ff). Consider the following example: two different students have both attended lectures throughout their lives as students. If they have studied in different departments, they will more than likely have attended different lectures and will therefore have rather different experiences of lectures. Thus, the two lecture frames in the respective students’ socio-cognitive contexts will contain sources for reconstruction of different elements (for example *Lectures are boring* vs. *Lectures are interesting*). Both students have an excess of seeing in relation to one another, first in actual experience and next in terms of the frame anchored in that experience. Nevertheless, however, both will have a distinct, shared impression of what a lecture is, because of certain regular, even invariant features of that situation

(for instance, there is a lecturer, the lecture takes place in a room of a certain kind, the lecturer is standing up, the students are sitting down, and so on). It is the conglomerate of those features of individuals' frames that are shared across a group of participants – or, in other words, the negotiated common understanding of a mutually known situation – that constitutes what I mean by a perceived activity type. Thus, a frame is two-faceted: there is, on the one hand, shared knowledge of a shared structure (which is what constitutes the perception of the activity type), and on the other, there is the individual's unique perspective on that knowledge, plus personal memories of single instances, personal associations, and so forth. The former, however, is the backbone of the frame; inherited through generations and conveyed to individuals in communicative interaction, it becomes a skeleton around which individuals' frames are built, and continues to take up the greater part of these frames for as long as they live.

Since perceptions of activity types actually form part of individuals' frames, it becomes self-evident that constraints – as structuring principles of activity types – will be that which structures frames, too. This argument is supported by Goffman's (1974) *Frame Analysis* in virtue of his notions of *frame limits* and *frame breaks* (49ff) According to Goffman, a frame is limited – that is, kept together – by the general acceptability of what can 'happen' within frames. Saying that general acceptability is what limits frames clearly amounts to saying that intersubjective constraints on interaction limit frames, since *acceptability* is basically the general notion around which the notion of constraint revolves.

Some of Goffman's examples of frame limits revolve around prototypical constraints, for instance taboos (e.g., limits pertaining to the depiction of sexuality in scripted productions, or to aggression and cruelty in sports and games (56, 72)). Other examples exhibit sensitivity to the broad range and detailed nature of the constraints that establish the limits of frames:

Among familiars, for example, there will be appeals to “taste”; it is not nice to make light of certain aspects of the lives of friends. In the game of “dozens” played by black urban youths, statements made about a player’s parent are seen as displaying the wit of the insulter, not the features of the parent, and so can be wondrously obscene. A mild-sounding insult that happened to refer to known features of the particular parent would be given a different relevance and cease to be unserious. Similarly, jests by an individual about his having a bomb in his bag are not tolerated by air hostesses, just as mock robberies are not by bank tellers, and certain jokes using certain words told by certain nightclub performers are not tolerated by certain local police. In Las Vegas a man in a cocktail lounge who complied with his girl’s request to scare her out of her hiccups by pulling a .38 from his waistband and sticking it into her tummy was arrested for his gallantry. (49-50)

These examples illustrate breaches of frame-limiting constraints. The mere fact that there is breach of course further testifies to the fact that Goffman’s frame limits, some of which have already been offered as examples of constraints (see Chapter 4, p. 140f), are indeed part of the web of intersubjective constraints on interaction, these precisely being defined in virtue of their breachability/floutability (see p. 126ff). Some constraints, however, as was also suggested in Chapter 4, may be too strong to be actually floutable, and this is indeed the case in Goffman’s examples above: rather than achieving implicature if/when this is intended, the pranksters here rather seem to bring upon themselves various sorts of social punishment.

Goffman’s examples are also illustrative of a further important fact, namely that breaches of constraints may have even further effects than implicature or social punishment. Breaches may cause a complete change in the prevailing frame. So far I have been talking about breaches of constraints as if they were one-by-one, solitary incidents with no repercussions beyond their own occurrence. The intimate relationship between constraints and the activity types they bound (and hence the activity-type-based frames they bound) means, however, that a breach may have quite wide repercussions. A breach always interrupts the flow of the life-world: “we can say that the taken-for-granted nature of my experience “explodes”” (Schutz & Luckmann 1973:11). Such ‘explosions’ may have smaller or larger effects; sometimes they just constitute a small in-frame departure from the norm which is quickly reconstituted into normal frame conditions,

like in the case of an innocent joke told at a cocktail party. Other times, however, as we learn from Goffman's example, the frame might be completely shattered, being replaced by another: the joke is no longer a joke after the gun is pulled and the police arrive. In conjuring up a new frame altogether, the breach of the constraint in fact functions as a *contextualization cue*, which is the next topic to be considered.

### **Frames in interaction: contextualization cues**

As mentioned before, part of what all frame theorists agree on is that the main function of context in general and frames in particular is that of being an aid to the understanding and interpretation of an action or event. But in order for context to be able to function in this way in actual interaction, it is crucial that some mutual alignment of its organized contents between and among speakers and hearers is achieved. Even though contextual content – in virtue of its social constitution – is largely shared among members of communities, we are quite clearly not mindreaders; thus, a speaker who wants to be understood needs to guide the hearer in his search for frames that will enable him to make sufficient sense out of the act or utterance. And the main tool at the speaker's disposal is the *contextualization cue* (Gumperz 1992:230).

Contextualization, according to Gumperz, consists in

speakers' and listeners' use of verbal and nonverbal signs to relate what is said at any one time and in any one place to knowledge acquired through past experience, in order to retrieve the presuppositions they must rely on to maintain conversational involvement and assess what is intended. (230)

One example of such contextualization would be the use of "respectful words" in the Samoan language for the purpose of invoking frames that hold information concerning the rights and obligations of the persons referred to (Duranti 1992:80). Sometimes just the slightest hint of a cue is necessary to bring out a desired frame, other times, a higher degree of insistence is necessary. Basso (1992) points out that sometimes participants make use of what might be termed *reinforcers* in order to draw attention to particularly important contextualization

cues, such as for instance repetition (of a feature of speech or activity) (258).

Labels like *invoking* and *bringing out* frames may suggest that there is a one-way relationship between cues and frames. Recently both Linell (1996:7:213) and Goodwin & Duranti have pointed out the importance of leaving behind the idea that there should be a unilateral movement between the *focal event* (Goodwin & Duranti 1992:3), that is, the utterances/actions to be interpreted (and the cues carried by them), and their surrounding context:

Recent work in a number of different fields has called into question the adequacy of earlier definitions of context in favor of a more dynamic view of the relationship between linguistic and non-linguistic dimensions of communicative events. Instead of viewing context as a set of variables that statically surround strips of talk, context and talk are now argued to stand in a mutually reflexive relationship to each other, with talk, and the interpretive work it generates, shaping context as much as context shapes talk. (Goodwin & Duranti 1992:31)

According to Goodwin & Duranti, then, the focal event shapes context, and context shapes the focal event. And it is my contention that this activity depends crucially on the notion of contextualization cue: the contextualization cues carried by the given focal event shape context simply by conjuring up a given frame or frames, and by focusing in on certain aspects of that frame. And then this context, in turn, will influence the selection of subsequent cues: aspects of a cued frame (details, sub-frames, and so on) not directly addressed by the speaker's cue will always constitute potential material for the hearer's next focal – cue-carrying – event.

What I have said so far could perhaps be taken to suggest that cues only emanate from focal events involving intentional agency (which is precisely what Gumperz focuses on in the quoted 1992 paper). This is, however, not the case. Focal events and their cues may well involve unintentional 'agency': the perception of a man who stumbles and falls down the stairs (without hurting himself to any particular degree) may, for instance, trigger a person-frame or frames regarding clumsiness. The frame-changing breaches of constraints in some of Goffman's examples in the previous section are other cases in point: it is, for instance, unlikely that the man who pulled out his gun in order

to try to stop his girlfriend's hiccups actually intended the joking frame to change into one involving police and arrest, but this nevertheless happened. Furthermore, focal events and their cues may even be agent-less: a strong, intrusive smell of baked goods, for instance, may trigger a role-frame or role-frames concerning, for instance, motherhood and/or grandmothers. Finally, cues also emanate from non-focal events (although it is reasonable to believe that the frames triggered by such cues generally will be less strongly activated). Non-focal frame-triggering events may involve intentional agency (for instance, an intentional but non-ostensive frown may trigger an activity-type-based frame or frames regarding quarrel and conflict), unintentional agency (an *unintentional* frown), or no agency at all (for instance a faint (as opposed to a strong and intrusive) smell in the air of baked goods). In all of the cases listed in this paragraph, I will say that frames are *evoked* rather than invoked.

The fact that cues emanating from non-focal events also influence interaction – and therefore without a doubt deserve the status of ‘cue’ – has been argued convincingly by Kendon (1992):

If I clear my throat in the midst of an utterance this is not treated as part of what I am “saying.” If I uncross my legs, take a drag on my cigarette or sip my coffee while another is speaking, such actions are not attended to by the other participants as if they are contributions to the conversation . . . these “non-relevant” aspect of each other’s behavior nevertheless can play an important role in the process by which participants regulate one another’s attention and provide information to one another about their level and focus of involvement in the interaction. (328)

What Kendon suggests is that such cues provide subtle changes within a frame (changes regarding level and focus of involvement). It is, however, also possible to imagine situations in which subtle cues like these may cause more wide-ranging changes, perhaps even exchanging one frame for another altogether. A case in point could perhaps be that of the casual meeting between two people who, starting out with a friendly chat, suddenly find themselves attracted to one another, thus beginning to employ the ‘language of flirting’ (eye contact, body alignment, and so on; all of which is most often

subconsciously generated and picked up on), hence (more or less gradually) changing the frame from 'friendly' to 'sexual'.

The examples discussed so far may seem to suggest that contextualization cues always serve to cause *changes* within frames or between frames. These are, I believe, not the only possibilities. Many – perhaps most – cues are not what one could call *provoker cues* but rather something akin to *sustainer cues*, that is, cues that do not introduce anything new to the situation but rather express some sort of confirmation that a frame still remains. *Continuing* to use respectful words, for instance, (see Duranti's example above), after the frame(s) associated with them have indeed been accepted by most participants, is an example of a cue which no longer has the function of causing change, but rather the function of keeping everyone within the frame.

To sum up, invoked and evoked cues, provoker as well as sustainer cues; these are all important resources available to communication participants in the exertion of influence over one another's socio-cognitive contexts. At the outset we all have a sense of sharing a language and cultural assumptions, and these are indeed the building blocks of intersubjectivity. But we can never be certain about what our communication partner has in mind right now. If we, as speakers, want to be understood, we need to make sure that there is at least some context available to the hearer that might provide something at least resembling the desired understanding. Communication participants take turns at thus shaping each others' socio-cognitive contexts and allowing their contexts to be thus shaped, thereby normally achieving a mutual alignment of contexts which suffices to ensure a degree of mutual understanding satisfactory to all involved.

## CONTEXTUAL ORGANIZATION II: RELEVANCE

At any one moment, an individual's moment-to-moment experientially accessible sphere, which is organized in terms of a centre – a *kernel* – from which experiential perceptibility fades towards



the edge of a *horizon*,<sup>3</sup> will (at a minimum) be filled with the remains of previously cued frames, with presently cued frames, as well as with more weakly activated content provided by the fact that a cued frame does not come alone, but with links to subframes and related frames. Thus, it is clearly the case that despite the organization provided by frames, the sheer bulk of immediately available material could still easily be in danger of creating a too overwhelming moment-to-moment situation for an individual.

Fortunately, however, nature has provided a solution, namely the ability to focus on certain elements to the exclusion of others. This is a part subconscious, part conscious selection process which shapes the experientially active sphere such that elements which are perceived as more important will be entertained in the kernel, and less important elements will be entertained between the kernel and the horizon or even be pushed beyond the horizon. But the question is, of course, why some elements are singled out as more important than others. Why are some contextual elements more *relevant* than others?

### **Subjective relevance**

Relevance has been studied in two distinctly different, but interrelated ways. One, which I propose to call *objective relevance theory*, focuses mainly on the relationship between various elements of context (for instance facts, beliefs, statements, theories, actions, propositions, illocutionary force, utterances, topics, and so on) (see, e.g., Armengaud 1984, Berg 1991, Bird 1979, Dascal 1977, Keynes 1921, Martinich 1980, Werth 1981). This is a very common view of what relevance is about; it is, among other things, the type of relevance normally referred to in dictionaries stating the etymology of the word *relevance* (see Gorayska & Lindsay 1993:311f). In objective relevance theory, *something* is relevant to *something* (a notion similar to that of *coherence*, cf. Werth 1981:145f), and the question most often asked is *What properties must X possess in order to fit in with/pertain to Y?*

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<sup>3</sup> Note that the terms *kernel* and *horizon* are also used by Schutz & Luckmann, but in a slightly different sense (1973:9).

Various interpretations of what little *Grice* had to say about relevance often puts him into the category of objective relevance theory, because “Grice is concerned”, according to, for instance, Werth, “with how B’s contribution is related to A’s contribution” (131) (see also Dascal 1977:313, Pratt 1977:147, Mey 1987b:291f). Sperber & Wilson (1995) have also been claimed to belong to this category (by O’Neill 1988/89); this I will come back to below.

A second way in which to study relevance is in terms of *subjective*, or *attentional relevance* (e.g., Schutz & Luckmann 1973). In subjective relevance theory, *something* is relevant to *someone*. Subjective relevance theory (mainly) studies the criteria by which contextual elements enter the attentional focus – and hence the locus of the interpretational activity – of individuals’ current socio-cognitive contexts, and hence one of the most frequently asked questions within this type of relevance theory is *What properties must X possess in order to be relevant to individuals?* Grice would in fact fall into this category of relevance theory as well, because as O’Neill (1988/89) points out, Grice not only talks about relevance-relations between propositions, but also about the relevance of something to the “activities, problems, needs, interests and so on” (253) of individuals: “If I need sugar as an ingredient in the cake you are assisting me to make, I do not expect you to hand me salt; if I need a spoon, I do not expect a trick spoon made of rubber” (Grice 1989:28).

A study of relevance clearly has to begin with subjective relevance, since this type of relevance is *conceptually prior* to objective relevance: relevance, always in the end, “must be to someone” (Wilks 1987:735) (see also Gorayska & Lindsay 1993:318); there is a sense in which X cannot truly be said to be relevant to Y in virtue of *any* property unless both X and Y are within a perceiver’s experiential focus. The (objective) relevance, for instance, of A’s utterance *What horrible weather we’ve been having lately* to the fact that it is raining outside is utterly dependent on both the utterance and the rain already being in

A and B's experiential focus; that is, on their already having achieved subjective relevance for A and B.<sup>4</sup>

How rain, or any other occurrence for that matter, achieves the status of being subjectively or attentionally relevant to an individual has been discussed extensively by Schutz & Luckmann (1973), whose ideas I propose to take as a starting point for a study of subjective relevance. I begin, therefore, by outlining their theory.

#### Schutz & Luckmann's relevance structures

Schutz & Luckmann's (1973) notion of relevance designates a relation between experiencing subjects and their current socio-cognitive contexts. If an element of context has a particular *property* that makes it relevant to the subject, then he or she will orient him or herself to this particular element of context to the exclusion of others. Properties that make contextual elements relevant to a subject come in patterned clusters of types. Or put differently, the subject responds and acts according to certain interrelated and largely socialized structures of relevance.

An element of context, according to Schutz & Luckmann, can have the property of being unfamiliar or unusual to the experiencing subject in a given situation. This they call "THEMATIC RELEVANCE" (186). Such an element invariably comes from the mediated outer contextual source: thematically relevant elements always come in the form of cues.

Secondly, an element of context can have the property of mapping easily onto some perception that needs to be made sense of, or it can have the property of constituting the contextual solution to a 'problem' of interpretation of an element of perception (in cases where there is a *lack* of easy mapping). This is called "INTERPRETATIONAL RELEVANCE" (197). Such an element comes from the

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<sup>4</sup> Example adapted from Dascal (1977:316ff).

inner contextual source: interpretationally relevant elements are always retrieved.<sup>5</sup>

Finally, an element of context can have the property of being particularly important or interesting to the experiencing subject in terms of his or her short-term or long-term goals or his or her attitudes (for example fear, curiosity, liking, and so on). This is termed “MOTIVATIONAL RELEVANCE” (208). Such an element may emerge from either contextual source.

Contextual elements displaying one or more of these properties will be attended to and thus enter the experiential kernel to the exclusion of other contextual elements: they are *relevant to the individual*.

#### *Imposed relevance*

The mentioned relevances are of two basic kinds. On the one hand, there is the kind that ‘forces’ itself on the subject (that is, the subject cannot help but take the element into account), and on the other, there is the kind that the subject voluntarily chooses to attend to. One type of thematic relevance (so-called “‘imposed’ thematic relevance” (186)) and one type of interpretational relevance (so-called “‘imposed’ interpretational relevance” (197)) are of the former kind. Imposed thematic relevance, according to Schutz & Luckmann, is the relevance intrinsic to contextual elements that present themselves, from the mediated outer contextual source, as unfamiliar or strange in the midst of something familiar, be it an object in the perceptual surroundings (for instance a child’s potty in the middle of a table set for dinner) or an utterance made by a co-participant (for instance, *Alright, I’ve had enough, can we go now?* uttered loudly in the middle of a theatrical performance by a member of the audience).

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<sup>5</sup> Note that it is only after an interpretational relevance has been mapped onto a perception that we can talk about *signs* in Voloshinov’s sense (see above, p. 169ff); thus, it is only after this process has been completed that we can talk about *consciousness* (again, in Voloshinov’s sense, as both that which is currently experienced, and that which is experientiable, and hence corresponding to my overarching notion of socio-cognitive context).

The notion of imposed thematic relevance is crucial to the notion of flouting: in fact, both of the previous examples are examples of flouting of intersubjective constraints on interaction, which shows that flouts in fact *are* imposed thematic relevances. This will be further discussed in Chapter 6, where I also discuss one important effect of imposed thematic relevance, namely that of stimulating interpretational activity. Suffice it here to say that imposed thematic relevance, in what could be termed a *hierarchy of relevances*, can be rather powerful: when elements of a high degree of unfamiliarity present themselves in the surroundings they are likely to immediately enter the inner circles of the kernel, hence achieving a high degree of awareness.

Imposed *interpretational* relevance is a label for elements from the inner source of context that somehow present themselves as unavoidable options for the interpretation of a perception. For instance, if you find yourself at a table in a restaurant, observing a person approaching you in a white shirt with a notepad in hand, he will probably automatically be assigned the role of waiter, even if he later turns out to be an obsessed fan mistaking you for Hugh Grant or Elizabeth Hurley, wanting your autograph.

Interpretationally relevant elements rarely enter anything like full awareness. This poses a problem in the face of the previously mentioned notion that all relevant contextual elements reside in the kernel, since the latter supposedly equals a relatively high level of awareness. The fact of the matter, however, is that interpretationally relevant elements are ‘indirectly’ conscious by virtue of the fact that the understanding resulting from the process it is involved in is conscious. In the above example, for instance, the interpretationally relevant contextual element – something akin to *Waiters look like X and behave like Y* – is not an idea that we would necessarily consciously entertain (although we could if we wanted to). The fact that a waiter is approaching our table is, on the other hand, a fact of which we are conscious. This fact could and would, however, not have entered consciousness if it had not been for the relevant contextual

element imposing itself on the perception of a man in a white shirt with a notepad in hand. Thus, the interpretationally relevant element is present in the kernel indirectly via its product, and hence the idea that all relevant contextual elements operate within the experiential kernel is intact.

*Motivated relevance I: motivated thematic, and motivated interpretational relevance*

The second class of relevances pertains to elements that the subject somehow voluntarily ‘chooses’ to attend to. This holds, for instance, for the second type of thematic relevance (“*“motivated” thematic relevance*” (190)), and for the second type of interpretational relevance (“*“motivated” interpretational relevance*” (201)).

The difference between imposed and motivated *thematic* relevance is that in the former case, the unfamiliar element in the context leaps at you, takes you by surprise, *grabs* your attention, so to speak. In the latter case, on the other hand, you *expect* the situation in question, or elements in it, to be unfamiliar, and thereby somehow willingly *turn* your attention to these elements. Or in other words: in the former case, the frame employed to interpret the situation is *filled* – the situation is thoroughly familiar to you - and thus the unfamiliar element constitutes a frame break; in the latter case, your frame needs *filling in* – you know there will be presences and occurrences you know nothing about – and thus unfamiliar elements that present themselves constitute useful information needed to expand the frame so that it will be less unfamiliar the next time around.

A second type of motivated thematic relevance is constituted by the voluntary straying away from the centre of the kernel onto its outskirts, creating there a new kernel centre. The reason given as to why the subject would want to do this, is that he or she will want to find an “explication of the implications of the current theme” (193); that is, she wants to find *further* solutions to the problems posed by the unfamiliar elements attended to by virtue of imposed or the first

type of motivated thematic relevance (or, in other words, the subject wants to find out more about something).

Motivated *interpretational* relevance is interrelated with both imposed thematic relevance and the first type of motivated thematic relevance: it refers to the relevance of those elements from the contextual source of memory that contribute to making sense out of a frame break on the one hand, and an expectedly unfamiliar element of the situation on the other. As to the former of these two cases, recall first how effortlessly the interpretationally relevant contextual element maps onto perception in cases of *imposed* interpretational relevance. This is a result of the focal element's perceived 'in-frameness': the element *Waiters look like X and behave like Y* in the above example is so easily retrievable from within the restaurant frame that the process seems automatic; when a person in a white shirt carrying a notepad approaches our table we almost have no choice but to accept as an initial hypothesis that the person approaching our table is a waiter. By contrast, when there is frame break (creating imposed thematic relevance, for instance the detection of rolling snow clouds down a hill in the course of the unfolding of a 'pleasant skiing holiday' frame) there is no comparably easily retrievable element to be found within the frame. The interpretationally relevant element must be found somewhere outside it (here, in a different frame, an 'avalanche' frame), something which, according to Schutz & Luckmann's theory, requires more of a voluntary effort (although *voluntary* here must be taken in a very loose sense).

The second kind of situation in which motivated interpretational relevance is at play is when there is an incidence of the first type of motivated thematic relevance, that is, an entire frame is unfamiliar and/or incomplete and needs filling in. As an example, consider being invited to a meal with a tribe in the depths of the Amazons. Here, no easy interpretationally relevant contextual elements will present themselves either, and again the subject will find herself voluntarily, or *motivatedly*, turning to stored elements from her experience trying to piece together an interpretation. If the meal takes place, for instance,

outdoors and in the presence of all the villagers, she may have to bring together elements from both 'private meal' frames and 'restaurant' frames to be able to cope interpretationally.

*Motivated relevance II: motivational relevance*

Certain answers crucial to the present account of flouting and flout-based meaning are lacking in Schutz & Luckmann's account, including an answer to the question of *why* the unfamiliar and hence thematically relevant (for instance a flout) should grab attention or deserve attention. Their notion of *motivational* relevance – a further kind of motivated relevance – contributes part of the answer. Motivational relevance roughly designates a voluntary advertence to elements of context that will help the subject accomplish goals and plans or to elements of context that conform to his or her attitudes or interests. How can this explain why unfamiliar occurrences are paid attention? The story goes as follows: on certain occasions, the unfamiliar (for instance, the breach of an intersubjective constraint on interaction) – in the sense of the not-understood (recall that a breach of a constraint typically creates a momentary lack of comprehensibility) – may form an obstacle, for instance, on the road to the achievement of a certain goal (for instance the goal of keeping the conversation going). In order to remove this obstacle the unfamiliar must be *understood* (that is, the speaker's utterance must be grasped before the next speaker can go on to make her contribution), and this can only be accomplished by first *fixing one's attention on it*. Thus, here, the unfamiliar gets attention because it is relevant to the subject's goal. This is so-called "*motivation in the in-order-to context*" (208): the hearer turns his attention to an act or an utterance in order to fulfil a goal (here: the goal of keeping the conversation going). The second type of motivational relevance is "*motivation in the because-context*" (215): the hearer turns his attention to an act or utterance because he has a strong attitude for or against it (for instance like or dislike), or is interested in it, or, as in the example above, in what he thinks it *might* be about. Thus, in the case of a motivation in the because-context, the hearer would lend



attention to an unfamiliar utterance because he thinks he likes/dislikes or might be interested in whatever it turns out to be about.

Motivational relevance does not, however, tell the whole story, since not all cases of the unfamiliar within the familiar are objects of someone's attitudes, goals or interests, existing or projected. Nevertheless, we are observably drawn to such occurrences (imagine, for instance, a lifeless, unrecognizable object lying in the corner of your living room). Such cases, I believe, along with so many other things, have to be explained in terms of the need for predictability: not knowing, in a potentially hostile world, is quite simply not good for you.

#### A new relevance theory?

Saying something about how context gets organized also implies saying something about interpretational processes: on the one hand, Schutz & Luckmann's relevance structures determine which elements from mediated outer or inner sources of context will directly enter attention, that is, *interpretational focus*. On the other, at least some types of relevance in Schutz & Luckmann's sense (henceforth S&L relevance) determine how intensely and deeply contextual elements will be processed. Thus, such relevance constitutes an extremely influential force in interpretative processes at large.

The fact that we are now focusing on the importance of relevance for interpretation means, of course, that we have thoroughly entered Sperber & Wilsonian turf. Thus, a discussion of the relationship between S&L relevance and Sperber and Wilson's relevance (henceforth S&W relevance) is called for.

According to O'Neill (1988/89), S&W relevance designates a relation between propositions (243). On this interpretation alone – relevance is between *something* (a proposition) and *something* (another proposition) – Sperber & Wilson's relevance theory would in fact fall within objective, *not* subjective, relevance theory, hence staying out of competition with Schutz & Luckmann's theory. I suggested, however,

in the introduction to this section that all objective relevance theory cannot help also being – in some respects – subjective relevance theory, by virtue of the fact that even objective relevance is always ‘relevance to someone’. Sperber & Wilson’s relevance theory is moreover explicit in its subjective-relevance ‘ambitions’: as I pointed out in Chapter 3, Sperber & Wilson emphasize that only propositions which have the property of fulfilling the hearer’s expectations of relevance are the ones which will get the hearer’s attention (1995:49). Thus, Sperber & Wilson and Schutz & Luckmann are indeed battling on the same ground. In Chapter 3, I criticized S&W subjective relevance (without using that term) for its ‘hedonicity’, claiming that the facts of communication as we know them do not support the view that whatever is not immediately generative of any specific conclusions will lose the hearer’s interest (see p. 67ff). Here I will expand on the criticism of S&W relevance, claiming that their notion is in addition technically flawed.

There is an intrinsic problem with most current objective relevance theory that makes an amalgam of it and subjective relevance theory potentially problematic, at least when the latter is based on the former. And the problem is that objective relevance theory most often studies elements of context that are to a certain extent already understood (for instance, truth-evaluable propositions, as in Sperber & Wilson’s theory (see, e.g., Wilson & Sperber 1988:139)). Thus, when such a theory serves as the basis for subjective relevance theory – as is the case in Sperber & Wilson – we get the situation that the theory does not explain how bare – not-yet-understood – stimuli can be subjectively relevant. The following is a case in point: A is at a board meeting when suddenly, in the middle of a speech, B, another member of the board, leans forward, starts banging his head on the table and mumbles something you cannot quite make out. He keeps on doing this for quite a while but A (or any of the others, also suddenly attentive to what is going on) still cannot make out the words. According to Schutz & Luckmann’s theory, this is an instance of something unfamiliar within the frame of something familiar, that

is, an instance of imposed thematic relevance. Within Sperber & Wilson's theory, however, this utterance would not even be a candidate for relevance-assessment (and hence for attention), because it is not yet in a cognitive shape so as to be able to join in with other elements of context in order to yield conclusions at low cost (that is, be relevant), in an information processing scheme.

By basing their subjective relevance theory on objective relevance theory, Sperber & Wilson thus seem to miss an important level. Defenders of the theory would, however, probably claim that S&W relevance is capable of holding its own at this level, too: bare stimuli will merely be subjected to the same criteria for receiving attention as propositions; if they yield conclusions at a low cost in conjunction with elements from cognitive context they will be relevant, and hence attended to. But such an argument neither manages to mask the paradox that in order for a contextual element – be it bare stimulus or fully-fledged proposition – to prove its relevance in Sperber & Wilson's sense and hence to prove whether or not it is worthy of attention, it has to already somehow have entered attentional focus; that is, it has to already have achieved subjective relevance. You cannot assess a proposition for relevance without having at least tried to process it. And if you have at least tried to process it, then you have already fixed your attention on it, at least momentarily.

The fact is that S&W subjective relevance theory does not explain how or why elements of context *enter* attentional/interpretational focus. At best, it explains why they are likely to *remain* (or not remain) there, which is a relatively value-less explanation, however, without the former. Schutz & Luckmann's theory, by contrast, explains both: the notion of thematic relevance, for instance, explains how not-yet-interpreted stimuli may enter interpretational focus, and motivational relevance may explain why such stimuli may (or may not) continue to be held in focus after the element has been figured out. Note, however, also, that even with respect to the explanation of why elements of context are likely to stay within attentional/interpretational focus Sperber & Wilson's theory fails. For instance, it makes the wrong

predictions in cases like those in the board-meeting example: in the absence of any conclusions at all as to what the person is actually saying, and – one must assume – a relatively high processing effort expended in trying to figure this out, the conclusion is that the speaker's utterance is not S&W relevant. Thus, according to Sperber & Wilson's theory, hearers and/or bystanders would rather quickly withdraw their attention. Not much introspection is required, however, in order to realize that this is not likely to happen.

The whole problem-complex outlined so far is anchored in a deeper problem with basing subjective on objective relevance theory. In objective relevance theory, what matters is the properties of the contextual elements to be assessed for relevance (to the extent that these determine whether or not there exists a relevance relation between the elements), and, in some cases, the 'output' resulting from the coupling of contextual elements possessing the right properties. When such an approach is taken to account for subjective relevance, then, we may easily get the result that what is important in the relationship between the contextual elements becomes equalled with what is important to the experiencing subject. This is exactly what we see in S&W relevance theory: what is required for a *proposition* to be relevant – yielding a satisfactory cognitive outcome at a low cost when conjoined with an element of context – becomes equalled with what the *subject* requires for his or her (attentional) satisfaction. And although it is not exactly wrong to say that the interpreting subject cares about being able to effortlessly draw a number of reliable conclusions on given evidence (S&W theory might actually help to explain in more formal terms some of the criteria involved in the selection of S&L interpretationally relevant contextual elements), this narrow focus seriously underestimates the experiencing subject's range of concerns. Sperber & Wilson's Solus Ipse – their human information processor – is, naturally, just not interested in that which does not yield immediate processing gratification. Homo Socius, on the other hand, also has attitudes and interests which he shares with members of the social groups to which he belongs, both being non-

propositional entities, thus falling outside of an information processing scheme.

O'Neill (1988/89) and Gorayska & Lindsay (1993) are authors who have criticized Sperber & Wilson's relevance for the lack of concern for so-called motivational factors. In an attempt to rectify the situation, O'Neill proposes a new, "broader concept of relevance" which should take into account our "needs, values, problems, interests, projects, and the like" (243). His new concept of relevance is, however, not *quite* broad enough, since he, in focusing exclusively on these motivational factors, misses out on both thematic and interpretational relevance. Even more seriously, however, O'Neill's account suffers from a lack of clarity as to whether or not he proposes to leave behind the purely objective relevance theoretical scheme with the introduction of these new, motivational aspects. The problem with this is that if needs, values, problems, and so on are studied, as they can be, exclusively as propositional entities (for example as *I really need a new hat* rather than as a non-propositional urge to turn one's attention to a red hat on a nearby shelf) there is no need to go beyond a purely objective relevance theoretical information processing scheme. Since O'Neill does not indicate whether or not this is what he intends, his account does not signal whether or not any major steps towards a better understanding of relevance will be taken. It is actually quite common for objective relevance theorists to talk about the relevance of, for instance, an utterance, to a person's goal (a subjective relevance notion). But as in O'Neill, the problem is invariably that goals are dealt with as propositional entities, or that it is not clear whether or not there is an intention to go beyond the propositional level.

In contrast to O'Neill, Gorayska & Lindsay take an explicit and definite step away from the objective relevance theoretical stance: "*The ordinary notion of relevance*" – which they propose as a better starting point than S&W relevance – "cannot be accounted for", they claim, "as a relation between two knowledge sets. It *requires a motivational anchor*" (303). Gorayska & Lindsay, however, in proposing to keep relevance theory, merely 'adding' a motivational anchor to it, fail in

this respect precisely: it is hard to see how Sperber & Wilson's theory can be mended merely by addition and subtraction as long as the theory's problem resides in the core from which all the details of the theory spring. Motivation is not a property of isolated, information processing individuals. Our attitudes, values, wishes, interests, and so on are products of a socialization process; just consider the extent to which the precise content of these factors is shared throughout and across communities (for instance, A likes designed artefacts in the home because he is western, middle-class, educated, and so on; the desire to keep such artefacts in his home does not spring from him personally). My point is that encompassing such concerns into a theory of Sperber & Wilson's leaning requires more than just simple arithmetic. It requires a full, qualitative shift, one which Gorayska & Lindsay do not provide.

In conceiving of the notion of motivational relevance, which creates explicit headroom for the social aspects of relevance, Schutz & Luckmann further elevate their theory in relation to that of Sperber & Wilson. Clearly, however, some spelling-out work needs to be undertaken in order to convert this basically philosophical-sociological theory into a methodological tool useful for pragmatics. Having said this, it is equally clear that the fact that their theory is *not* essentially a linguistic/pragmatic theory is actually an advantage. Social interaction being, as mentioned earlier, prior to linguistic interaction (Schutz & Luckmann 1973), Schutz & Luckmann's relevance theory precisely allows us to take social, non-linguistic action as a starting point, which makes it much easier to see connections which are otherwise not easily seen, such as the fact that there is a similarity between, for example, the occurrence of an avalanche and the occurrence of an unusual utterance (both are (breaches of constraints and thus) thematically relevant).

#### **A guide to relevance: the maxim of Relation**

But what becomes of Grice's maxim of Relation, then, in all this? Upon discovering the important part that the notion of relevance plays in

attentional and hence interpretational processes, it has, as is well known, been customary to dispense with the notion of a *maxim* of relevance, alongside other maxims, altogether. In the words of O'Neill (1988/89),

The concept of relevance has become increasingly central in work on pragmatic inference stemming from Grice's theory of conversational implicature: in the original theory the maxim of relation – 'be relevant' – is one of four which together are taken to provide an inferential bridge between what speakers explicitly say and what they tacitly suggest or implicate when they make an utterance. However, in recent pragmatic theory there has been a trend towards the view that all the maxims might be replaced by a single principle of relevance, the most significant contribution being that of Sperber & Wilson (1986). (242)

Such a move is clearly wrong, insofar as the maxim of Relation can be seen to do a completely different, albeit no less important job than the notion of relevance on which it depends.

#### A division of labour?

An account of subjective relevance consists of an explanation and a description of individuals' partly intrinsic, partly socialized responses to certain elements in their interpretational environments. An account of objective relevance basically consists of a description of perceived relationships between elements in socio-cognitive context. Whether or not we have, at the present moment, wholly satisfactory explanations and descriptions of these phenomena, is, I presume, a question which does not have a unanimous answer. No matter one's position, however, the story of relevance would most certainly not be complete without an account of how relevance is socially regulated. It is this aspect which is covered by the maxim of Relation, an intersubjective constraint on interaction to the effect that the speaker should both cater to the hearer's subjective relevance structures, as well as provide him with objective relevance.<sup>6</sup> This means that the maxim of Relation prescribes a number of *different* things, for instance, the utterance should be thematically relevant to the hearer, it should be motivationally relevant (i.e. it should be directed towards the attitudes

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<sup>6</sup> It is interesting in this connection to note that "Most dictionary definitions relate the etymology of 'relevance' to the Latin 'reliever [sic], 'relevans', 'relevant', which means 'raise up', 'relieve', or 'help' and 'assistance' (OED)" (Gorayska & Lindsay 1993:311-312).

and interests of the hearer), it should aid the hearer's interpretational relevance (i.e. it should be shaped with an eye to what the speaker assumes the hearer's context to contain at the moment of utterance, thus easing the interpretation process), and it should provide objective relevance; that is, the various elements of the contributions should be relevant to one another. This might in fact mean that it is wrong to talk about one single constraint regarding relevance. Perhaps it would be more correct to posit several constraints, one regarding thematic relevance, one regarding motivational relevance, and so on. This certainly makes sense in the light of the fact that not all kinds of relevance seem to be equally strongly required in each and every activity type (some activity types, such as for instance the making of a radio show, requires a lot of attention to the hearer's motivational relevance, whereas others, such as for instance teaching a foreign language, (traditionally) requires more attention to the fact that the message should be easily understandable, that is, that it should provide 'pointers' to interpretationally relevant contextual elements, or that it should provide objective relevance). For reasons of simplification, however, I shall nevertheless in the following largely be talking about a maxim of Relation, or 'the relevance constraint' as if it were one unified entity.

The relevance constraint has two main functions. One is speaker-oriented: it functions as a tool for the speaker in that he or she can choose to abide or not to abide by it, with different effects vis-à-vis other communication participants. The other is hearer-oriented: the assumption that the speaker has or has not observed the constraint functions as a potential premise in the hearer's interpretative process (see also Chapter 2, p. 15). Accounts that focus purely on relevance as a phenomenon, like subjective and/or objective relevance theories, cannot account for either of these functions. Relevance-as-phenomenon, for instance, cannot be breached by the speaker (see Chapter 4, p. 114), which is perhaps natural, because it is the shoulds and should nots regarding the ways in which we relate to other communication participants' relevance structures and needs that are



breachable, and hence floutable. An account that disregards these shoulds and should nots will of course be unable to explain the peculiar, observable relationship between breach and underlying meaning (see p. 114f). Furthermore, such an approach cannot account for an important part of the hearer's interpretation process, namely the point where he notices whether or not the constraint regulating 'exchanges of relevance' has been breached. On the face of it perhaps an insignificant occurrence in the process at large, it is nevertheless one that has major repercussions. In the case of observation – the default event – there is normally no processing beyond the recovery of routinized, standard meanings. In the case of a breach, however, we have a thematically relevant event, with subsequent, major repercussions in the form of increased processing activity.

Finally, and interrelatedly, an account which does not take the relevance-governing social constraint into account will also be unable to distinguish between different types of interpretationally active contextual elements based in relevance. There is a big difference between a processual premise based on a constraint (for instance, *The relevance constraint has been breached*) and a premise anchored in relevance as a phenomenon (for instance, *I don't find what X has to say particularly interesting*). The former is anchored in an intersubjective preoccupation with whether or not a social constraint has been observed or breached and whether or not the speaker may have meant something specific by it, whereas the latter is a 'socio-private' judgement, which may or may not be accompanied by further interpretation.

This suggests that an account of relevance, to be complete, must encompass all factors: subjective relevance, objective relevance, and the social regulation of these relevances in interaction. But what the field has seen so far is rather a theoretical division of labour, between accounts focusing on the maxim of relevance, that is, on how relevance is regulated socially, on the one hand, and subjective/objective theories on the other. This kind of division of labour might give rise to ideas concerning the compatibility, actually,

between a Gricean and a Sperber & Wilsonian framework (see also Ziv 1988), to the effect that a Gricean account could take care of the former aspect, Sperber & Wilson's framework the latter. A union between the two should, however, be advised against. As we have seen, Sperber & Wilson's theory has no room for Homo Socius; it does not give a satisfactory account of relevance, and in the next chapter it will be suggested that its account of inference does not hold water, either.

#### Foregrounding as conventionalized subjective relevance

As I mentioned in Chapter 4 in the discussion of Leech's (1983) maxims (see p. 117ff), the consistent workings of intersubjective constraints on interaction create regularities in interactional patterns. By the same token, it is reasonable to believe that these consistent workings and regular patterns in turn should create regular linguistic patterns (cf. Evensen 2000:11, and Hopper & Traugott 1993). Findings within *grounding theory* (see, e.g., Hopper 1979a, 1979b, Longacre 1976, 1981, Wallace 1982, and Weber 1983) strongly indicate that such linguistic patterns exist, at least with respect to the relevance constraint in its function of regulating *subjective* relevance.

Theories of grounding build on the "general gestalt principle" (Evensen 1992:115) that certain stimuli stand out perceptually as figures against a ground. This principle is made to account for the observation that in discourse, certain elements constitute *foreground*, and others background (with a graded scale of more or less foreground and more or less background elements in between (e.g., Longacre 1981:338ff)). Grounding theory typically studies (written) narrative (but see, e.g., Evensen 1992:113), and there seems to be general agreement that what normally constitutes foreground in this genre is the main-line chain of events (see e.g. Depraetere 1996:699, Evensen 1992:114, Hopper 1979a:214, and Weber 1983:9ff). The main concern of grounding theory is how this perceived saliency (as well as the perceived non-saliency of the elements in the background) is conventionally signalled by means of certain linguistic structures.

Foreground has among other things been said to be signalled by extra options within the grammars of certain languages, for instance particles or special morphology, and furthermore by the perfective aspect as opposed to non-perfective aspects, by assertion as opposed to presupposition (see Weber 1983 for an overview), by main clauses as opposed to subordinate clauses (see Depraetere 1996:699) and by nonrestrictive relative clauses (see Depraetere 1996:699f).

The parallels between grounding theory and the present approach should be evident: in grounding theory, things that stand out perceptually as figures against a ground attract attention, which is basically saying the same as I have been doing in this chapter, namely that certain elements (for certain reasons) stand out in the perceptual surroundings and therefore are subjectively relevant (note that because we are talking about elements in the perceptual surroundings we are therefore excluding interpretational relevance, since interpretationally relevant elements come from the inner source of context). The main difference between the two approaches is one of focus: grounding theory, as explained, focuses on linguistic elements conventionally used in foregrounding, whereas subjective relevance theory focuses on the general properties of all elements – conventionalized as well as non-conventionalized – which are relevant in different ways. Thus, this is where grounding theory has something to contribute to subjective relevance theory.

As already mentioned, grounding theory has mainly been interested in narrative texts, and in how conventionalized structures are used to foreground the event-by-event backbone of such texts; or, translated into the present terminology, how conventionalized structures are used to provide subjective relevance (subjective relevance in this case equalling motivational relevance, since this is the only kind of relevance likely to be associated with main-line chains of events). Because of the parallel between the two notions of foregrounding and subjective relevance, identification, within grounding theory, of conventionalized items which foreground elements of texts equals

identification of conventionalized items which provided subjective relevance in texts.

This does not, however, mean that findings within grounding theory can be entirely unproblematically applied within an account of subjective relevance. One has to take into account, for example, the problem within grounding theory of the insufficient explanation of the way such conventionalized structures arise. Because within grounding theory, the generation of conventional ways of expressing foreground and background is explained by reference to the principle of figure-ground itself. In the words of Weber (1983),

the F-B [foreground-background] distinction is one (NOT the only one) universal principle underlying the organization of language, and it can therefore help to explain certain aspects of language structure. And indeed, it has been invoked, under various "subforms," to explain a large number of linguistic phenomena, such as noun-verb agreement; subject and object marking; potentialities of noun phrases being agents, subjects or topics; certain types of morphological and syntactic change. (3)

It is, however not entirely correct to say that the figure-ground principle in itself is responsible for the development of corresponding language structures. This principle can basically be construed as stating that the perceiving human being does not pay equal (or the same type of) attention to everything in its surroundings, a phenomenon which is actually quite independent of the existence or non-existence of structures to support it; that is, no matter how chaotic and unsupported by conventional structures the outer surroundings, we will nevertheless focus on some things to the exclusion of others. Thus, the phenomenon itself is somehow 'disinterested'. The community of individuals that live by this phenomenon, by contrast, are more than likely to be interested in having their propensity supported. And this is a type of common concern which typically gives rise to a mutual constraint on interaction (in the case of narrative texts, a constraint prescribing the provision of subjective (motivational) relevance). And with the advent of such a constraint, an attendant social pressure to fulfil it (see Chapter 4, p. 131ff) will lead to the emergence of a number of strategies that will help the speaker achieve the goal of fulfilling it.

Some of these strategies – if they somehow fulfil a collective need (Evensen 2000:11, Hopper & Traugott 1993:95) – will become conventionalized. The same might happen if they are adopted by particularly influential communicators in a society (for instance, popular/powerful speakers/writers, etc.). On the basis of this line of reasoning we can hypothesize the following development for conventionalized elements in narrative: a motivational relevance – that is, main-line events are more interesting than other elements – gave rise to the constraint that main-line events should somehow be explicitly pointed out to the addressee. This constraint, in turn, led to the emergence of a number of different strategies for achieving its fulfilment, all probably based on breaches of previously existing constraints (regarding how to ‘put things’), which created imposed thematic relevance and therefore secured attention for the motivationally relevant elements. Then, later, these strategies became conventionalized so that today, the use of certain particles or special morphology, the use of the perfective aspect, main clauses, and so on has become an unmarked way of facilitating the singling out of the motivationally relevant main-line chain of events in narratives.

Interestingly, there is a marked two-sidedness to foregrounding, or, what we could also call it, the use of *conventionalized subjective relevance design*. On the one hand, as has been seen, such conventions mark what the speaker/writer believes – correctly or not – to be subjectively relevant for the hearer/reader. It can also, however, be used to mark what the speaker/writer *wants* the hearer/reader to pay attention to, whether subjectively relevant to him or not. In other words, not only may these structures focus in on already relevant elements (for example, the main-line events of narratives), it may also impose relevance on elements that are not in themselves relevant. The following is an example from Weber illustrating this point: “This bucket, a large one, had been kicked over by a man who had hanged himself up by the neck, . . . “ (the second sentence of T. F. Powy’s short story *The Bucket and the Rope*, qtd. in Weber 1983:5). Here, in Weber’s words, “The important information about a man committing suicide is

tucked away in the subordinate clause, whereas the bucket takes over the stage as the topic of [sic] sentence” (1983:5). In the present terms: what we would normally expect – that is, what would have fulfilled the requirements of the relevance constraint here – would be for the information about the man, which qualifies far better than the bucket as main story-line material, to be put into the main clause, and the bucket to be relegated to the subordinate clause. The fact that the default situation is turned on its head means that relevance is assigned to an element which would normally not be motivationally relevant, and in this way the writer redirects his readers’ motivational-relevance-based attention. Weber calls this and similar phenomena a *subversion* (of elements on opposite ends of a foreground-background scale (5)), reporting that it is also known as *frame breaking*. I would not be opposed to either label since both reflect the fact that what we have here is a flout (of a genre-specific relevance constraint to the effect that typically main story line elements should be foregrounded, that is, signalled as subjectively relevant, by conventional means). Indications that this view is correct are found in the fact that the subversion leads not only to a desired redirection of motivational relevance and hence attention,<sup>7</sup> but also to a likely increase in interpretational activity; that is, the reader will ‘speculate’ more intensely in a case like this, for instance along the lines of *The man who hanged himself will probably be brought into the main story line shortly, The author is trying to be clever, Hey, what an interesting twist, What on earth does this mean*, and so on.

As it turns out, then, grounding theory in fact presents two different (but interrelated) mechanisms for foregrounding. One is *foregrounding by unmarkedness*, that is, the pointing out of relevant elements by conventional means. The other is *foregrounding by markedness*, which can also be used for pointing out of elements

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<sup>7</sup> Note that the motivational interest in something like a conventional story line may, in cases like this, still cause the construction of such a story line by the hearer/reader. See grounding theorist Depraetere (1996) for a discussion of whether or not such attempts are made because of an assumption that the speaker/writer is observing Grice’s maxims (704f).

which are not necessarily relevant in themselves. In the present terminology, the former consists in the *observance* of a constraint to the effect that subjective relevance should be provided by means of a conventionalized strategic structure, and the second in *flouting* of constraints in general, or of that same constraint, producing imposed thematic relevance (which, as we saw, in turn may lead to the conventionalization of expressions of this strategy, going full circle back to foregrounding by unmarkedness). It is nevertheless first and foremost in virtue of the notion of foregrounding by *unmarkedness* that the findings of grounding theory become interesting in an account like the present. Because insofar as I am correct in claiming that these unmarked structures are conventionalized expressions of subjective relevance, these findings have begun to contribute to the next logical step in a study of subjective relevance, that is, the study of the concrete ways in which a relevance constraint is observed by speakers. Clearly, however, we are nevertheless merely at the beginning, since the contributions of grounding theory so far are mainly focusing on what we here call motivational relevance, and only on a narrow kind of object for such relevance as well, namely narrative structure.

## Chapter 6:

# THE FUNCTIONS OF FLOUTING AND THE MEANINGS OF FLOUTS

Several more or less explicit suggestions have been made in previous chapters as to the nature of flouting and flout-based meaning. The time has come to address this issue directly. In so doing, I am in fact joining quite an exclusive club. Because despite the fact that it was presented by Grice as rather central to the theory – as that which typically generates implicatures – flouting *per se*, as a concept, as a phenomenon, has not received very much attention in the ensuing literature. The neo-Gricean tradition, as we have seen, is mainly concerned with the observance of maxims. Sperber & Wilson's (1995) relevance theory simply groups flouting together with a range of dissimilar phenomena seen as explicable with recourse to the principle of relevance. And even those who *do*, to a certain extent, concern themselves with flouting – notably the Gricean empirists – most often merely take Grice at face value, rarely delving into the



implications of the notion, with the result that not much new insight regarding the phenomenon has been gained here, either.

It is interesting to ask why flouting has been thus overlooked. A general answer – that flouting does not waltz well with a monological dancing partner – was suggested in Chapter 1. There may, however, also be more specific answers. The general idea behind flouting is that if there is a rule, there is also always the dichotomy observance vs. breach, and if there is a possibility for breach, then human beings will sometimes use this possibility, and when this happens, the effects in the world will be different from when there is observance. Could it be that, for some, this idea is somehow too uncontroversial to be interesting, too unproblematic to be eligible for attention? If this is indeed part of the answer to the above question then one should perhaps pause to ask oneself whether a lack of controversy could not in fact rather cover up undiscovered problematical issues, or whether the fact that no problem is perceived does not mean that we are dealing with a theoretically *sound* notion, both being excellent reasons for pursuing it further rather than leaving it behind. Be that as it may, however, for it is most probably not a case of flouting being ‘overlooked’ that we are dealing with anyway, but rather one of flouting being overshadowed, by the notion of *implicature*: flouting is an act; implicature – traditionally speaking – is the (linguistically transcribable) product of this act. Clearly, the former is relatively peripheral to the concerns of a tradition generally interested in acts only insofar as their products are of any interest.

The general question underlying the present chapter is this: What happens if this perspective is eschewed, if attention is distributed more evenly between act (flouting) and (alleged) product (implicature)? This change of perspective is generally motivated by the idea that any change of perspective invariably enables one to look at old problems with new eyes; but more specifically it is, as always, inspired by ideas from dialogism and the dialogically based socio-cognitive approach regarding the primacy of the meaning-establishing, part-orchestrated movement between and among

constituent elements in communication, or in other words, regarding the primacy of the *act*. This is a notion which points to the necessity of studying the dynamics and repercussions of acts rather than confining oneself to performing autopsies on victims of linguistic road accidents. Thus, in this chapter, I ask, for instance, the question *What (more or less conscious, more or less determinate) communicative functions does flouting serve, and how are these functions performed?* rather than some version of the more common *What must have happened since an implicature is now lying there dead and still?*

The claim made in this chapter is that flouts serve two basic, communicative functions. The first is that of attracting the hearer's or an audience's attention. This, it is claimed, is achieved in virtue of the fact that flouts are instances of imposed thematic relevance. In the first part of the chapter, I elaborate on this notion. I introduce, among other things, the notion of *prototypical flouts* to show that flouts can be more or less efficient in carrying out the function of attracting attention, and that they are so according to certain parameters, the two most important being those of *degree of blatancy* and *degree of sedimentation* of the act of flouting.

The second, but interrelated, basic communicative function of flouts is to involve the hearer (more strongly than when there is no flouting) in negotiative processes of meaning construction. This, it is claimed, is achieved by virtue of the fact that imposed thematic relevance in general, and flouts in particular, always cause a certain measure of *increased interpretational activity* in the hearer. In the second part of this chapter I explain how this notion, for which interesting evidence is to be found in social psychology, links up with previously discussed interpretation-motivating forces (that is, reciprocal response-readiness and socialized interpretational drive (see Chapter 3)), before running a rudimentary comparison between notions inherent in existing models or model-sketches of flout-based implicatures (or *flouting implicatures* (Lee 1993:7)) and the notion of increased interpretational activity. The main argument is that the former is based on a wrongful view of the process as a meticulous act-by-act

procedure with a single-minded eye on the implicature, and that it needs to be replaced by a view of the process as a dynamic and dialogical one, and moreover one which is *more* than a means to an end, among other things since this process can be shown to be productive of communicative resources over and beyond the implicature, resources which can also be seen to influence the interaction, too.

Throughout I try to show how the ideas regarding the two major, interrelated functions of flouts converge on a view of flouts as powerful and dynamic tools in the service of creativity and linguistic evolution. Flouting is an activity which finds its true habitat in the *border zone of convention* (a term borrowed from Evensen 2000:2). On this arena, it constantly cracks open new areas of experience. A successful flout mildly (or less mildly) explodes the intersubjective field between speakers and hearers, waking them up to what is going on, providing further communicative and linguistic energy. Then in its wake, the communicative and linguistic debris may create new shapes that might become *sedimented* (Schutz & Luckmann 1973:121), thus leaving a permanent mark in the shared stock of knowledge.

#### FLOUTS AS IMPOSED THEMATIC RELEVANCE

In the previous chapter (see p. 187ff) I presented and discussed Schutz & Luckmann's (1973) notion of relevance, including the notion of thematic relevance. A contextual element is thematically relevant to the individual, it was said, when a contextual element from the outer contextual source has the property of being somehow unfamiliar or unusual to the experiencing subject in the given situation. One main type of thematic relevance, it was pointed out, is imposed thematic relevance – also called “*Forced attentiveness*” (Schutz & Luckmann 1973:186) – a notion which designates a situation where something unfamiliar or unusual takes place within a familiar frame. This description, it was claimed, coincides with the description of flouting. Thus, a flout can (and should) be viewed as an instance of imposed

thematic relevance. My aim in this section is to expand on, and qualify, this claim.

### **Flouts as imposed thematic relevance, and attention**

Every activity type has the potential for being enacted more or less straightforwardly, that is, more or less in accordance with the constraints which structure it. A flout – as imposed thematic relevance – is a more or less strongly intended contravention of such an activity-type (and thus frame) structuring constraint, thereby being a way of causing a departure from some aspect of the straightforwardness of the situation, a way of creating *unusualness*. On a general level, this may constitute a more or less serious obstacle to the fulfilment of the need for predictability (whereas on a more specific level it may (or may not) constitute an obstacle to the satisfaction of some motivational relevance (see Chapter 5, p. 192f)), and as such it will attract the hearer's *attention*, thus pulling the act or utterance in question into interpretational focus.

As an illustration, consider the lecture-room activity type which is governed by a relevance constraint prescribing that you should cater even more strongly to the hearers' motivational relevances than is normally required, or in other words, the focus should at all times be on the students' needs. If the lecturer then enters the room one day, and rather than offering the sort of other-directed discourse he is supposed to be giving, instead begins to talk about himself, about what he did this morning, about his plans for the holidays, about the inability of his infirm sister to come along on a trip like the one he is planning, and so on; then this would most certainly cause more than the normal number of faces to be turned towards the blackboard so early in the morning.<sup>1</sup> The reason why attention is so efficiently arrested in a case like this is of course that the situation 'as is' is potentially unnerving: has the lecturer gone mad? Could *everything* familiar suddenly dissolve into this unmanageable amorphous shape

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<sup>1</sup> Provided, of course, that the lecturer has not previously cancelled this relevance constraint with respect to his own lectures and replaced it with a locally established constraint that this is precisely what *does* get talked about in his lectures

which we cannot handle? Breach has the effect of attracting attention because in presenting at least a momentary lack of comprehensibility it challenges our need for predictability.

Reciprocal response-readiness lying behind predictability, the need for predictability, too, manifests itself experientially as some sort of discomfort (see Chapter 3, p. 84ff). The relief of such discomfort is partly achieved in the act of turning one's attention to the phenomenon; this is in a sense some sort of a preparatory phase, which may restore some sense of being in control. A full recovery of control is, of course, achieved by the subsequent act of interpretation, whereby the discrepancy between the world as we (would like to) know it and the world as it presents itself to us is satisfactorily resolved, in the above example by means of some interpretation to the effect that the lecturer is trying to make some point over and beyond what he is saying, or that he is not being himself today, perhaps because he is ill; interpretations which may be more or less successful in providing relief for the discomfort.

**Related notions: tellability and interestingness**

The general idea that unusualness attracts attention has been present for a while in pragmatics under various names, accompanied or unaccompanied by a consideration of flouts or flout-like occurrences. It resides, for instance, in Pratt's (1977) notion of *tellability*. Tellability – which is actually even characterized as a form of relevance – is seen to be the property of assertions that “represent states of affairs that are held to be unusual, contrary to expectations, or otherwise problematic” (136), and therefore create a stronger response (that is, provoke a higher level of attention) in the audience than ordinary assertions (135f). One particularly interesting observation Pratt offers in this connection is that a high degree of unusualness licenses the *right to elaborate* (cf. also Watanabe 1996:89). A statement, for instance, made by A, to the effect that she has heard about the hearer's neighbour, a well-paid, successful businesswoman, that the latter has just given away all her money and has gone off to join a monastery on

an island off the coast of France, may indeed earn A the right to the floor for quite a long time. Whereas if she had *not* been in possession of this – tellable – type of information, and kept the floor for the same amount of time, she would more likely than not have found herself in breach of some constraint to the effect that one should not be too informative, that one should be brief and concise, and so on.

Examples like these, Pratt suggests, indicate that

the standards of quantity, quality, and manner for display texts differ from those Grice suggests for declarative speech acts in his maxims. “Informativeness,” “perspicuity,” “brevity,” and “clarity” are not the criteria by which we determine the effectiveness of a display text, though there are limits on how much elaboration and repetition we find worth it. (147)

Although it may well be that Pratt is right in claiming, as she does here, that Grice’s maxims do not apply to the activity type(s) covered by Pratt’s notion of *display text* (texts that display tellability), and thus that the right to elaborate is a genre-governed phenomenon, I believe that there is an alternative explanation which is equally viable: imposed thematic relevance, being a rather powerful type of subjective relevance, may in many cases be powerful enough for its effects – here, the effect of securing attention – to last for a while after the ‘blow’ has been ‘struck’. (This effect may, of course, also be augmented by an anticipation that more unusualness is to follow, in which case the imposed thematic relevance has become a *motivational* relevance for the hearer(s), securing a heightened level of attention even when the imposed thematic relevance begins to leave off). The lasting effect of imposed thematic relevance may in fact turn out to be the reason why at least some of the activity types that are characterized by being full of the tellable precisely seem to lack these particular constraints: the presence of imposed thematic relevance may temporarily suspend these constraints (see Chapter 4, p. 153ff), which, then, come back into operation once the effect has run out.

Another term which has been used is *interestingness*. Thomas (1995:143f), for instance, uses it for the amusing and entertaining effect of the use of indirectness (143f). Amusement is an effect which is bound to involve an increase of the attentional level, since its main

characteristic is engrossment (a particularly high level of attention), which indicates that she is talking about the same phenomenon as the one we are interested in here.

Note here that Thomas is actually not talking about flouts (breaches), but rather of their potential products (indirectness) as that which is productive of interestingness.<sup>2</sup> This point actually raises an important issue, because if it is correct to assume, as Thomas seems to assume here, that it is indirectness which for some reason possesses some sort of general attention-capturing force (for instance, as has been suggested, because it is cognitively more interesting than straightforwardness), then it is perhaps wrong to say that it is the act of flouting that provides the relevance?

Experimental studies in psychology like that of Robert W. Frick (1992) in fact seem to suggest that indirectness – or general implicitness – is *not* interesting in itself. Frick worked, among other things, from the hypothesis that more background information on a topic would make subsequent statements about those topics more interesting to subjects (114). This, among other things, because more background information allows more inferences to be drawn when presented with the statements, their own inferences, one must presume, being assumed to be more interesting to subjects than the statement contributing to their emergence. What Frick found when asking subjects to read background material and then rank subsequent statements for interestingness, was that whether or not it was possible to form a high number of implicit propositions on the basis of background knowledge + statement had no effect whatsoever on whether or not the subjects found the statement more interesting.

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<sup>2</sup> Note that since much less attention has been devoted to the act of flouting than to its product, the present question *Why do people flout?* has been radically overlooked by comparison with the question *Why do people use indirectness/implicature?* The following are accounts which have offered answers to, or constitute comments on, the latter issue: Brown & Levinson 1978, Holtgraves 1998, Obeng 1997, (people use indirectness/implicature in order to be polite); Bell 1997, Bramley 1997, Burt 1992, Green 1987, McCornack et al. 1996, Obeng 1997, Pullum 1985 (. . . in order to manipulate and to 'try to get away with it'); Green 1987, Levinson 2000 (. . . in order to achieve communicative efficiency); Altieri 1978, Chen 1996, Haverkate 1994, Schaubert & Spolsky 1981 (. . . in order to project their identities, or those of their literary characters). See also Thomas 1995:142ff.

What mattered was whether or not the implicit content was interesting *in itself*: “background knowledge would increase interest indirectly by allowing *interesting* propositions to be formed” (117). This suggests that indirectness in itself is *not* relevance inducing. What it also suggests, of course, is that indirectly conveyed meaning *can be* just as interesting (that is, thematically or motivationally relevant) as other communicative occurrences. Which means that it can play a *supportive* role with respect to the imposed thematic relevance emanating from the flout, as regards attracting attention. Or put differently, contrary to what Thomas (above) seems to believe, being relevant is not part and parcel of the definition of indirect meaning, whereas it *is* part and parcel of the definition of the act of flouting.

Strangely, Thomas’ example and gloss – as opposed to her explication – actually clearly *testify* to the point just made:

I once heard a news item in which a World War II pilot described a Shackleton aircraft as, ‘20, 000 rivets flying in loose formation’. He could have described the aircraft as ‘a very poorly constructed machine’. This would have conveyed his proposition perfectly effectively, but would have been extremely dreary, especially for people who, like me, are bored rigid by the subject of military aircraft. Although I had no interest at all in *what* he was saying, I was entertained by the way in which he said it. (143)

This example shows precisely how the breach alone may be an attention-getting force, with no help from the underlying message: what the author claims to find interesting in this example is the way in which the speaker said what he said; that is, she was attracted to its divergence from a non-breached, conventional, frame-straightforward version, *not* to the message, literal *or* indirect. In fact, she claims to be bored rigid by the subject in its entirety (that is, it holds no motivational relevance for her).

#### Imposed thematic relevance as an independently exploitable function

Another important point can be gleaned from the above example; I said in the introduction to this chapter that flouts serve two basic, interrelated functions. One is to attract attention, the other is to involve the hearer in meaning processes. What the above example shows us is that the two functions are – at least to some extent –



independently exploitable in communication. Thomas happened to be entertained by the way things were said. The actual message just fell to the floor after merely a default amount of processing because of a lack of support from other (notably motivational) relevances to keep the process going. Sometimes, however, it is *satisfactory* for one or both interactants that the breach is merely noted, that the hearer turns his or her attention to the verbal or non-verbal act. Because attention is a valuable commodity in itself. Attention means, among other things, power, which may be one of the reasons why men seem to flout more than women (Rundquist 1990, 1992). According to Rundquist (1992), at least some instances of the flouting carried out by men “could be interpreted as men’s attention getting strategies. When these men flout the maxims they continuously reassert their control over the conversation by getting everyone’s attention” (446) (see also Bramley 1997).

Attention can also mean cash in the bank. This is something that makes attention a very valuable commodity for, for instance, the media, where one often sees some weird phrase or crazy gimmick exploited first and foremost for the purpose of ‘stealing’ the audience’s attention for a programme or a show in general, or a channel/newspaper/magazine in general, rather than for the purpose of propounding some meaning or other.<sup>3</sup>

*Advertisements: a case in point*

Emphasis on attention-getting properties rather than on the message is a typical feature of the present-day advertising genre. For, as Stewart (1994) puts it, “There is no response to advertising if there is no attention to it at some level” (3).

The advertising genre makes use of a number of different strategies for attracting attention, and one of them is creating imposed thematic

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<sup>3</sup> An example where the reverse is true is perhaps poetry, a genre which often uses flouting, but where convention breach is generally looked upon as secondary to the underlying message. See, however, Lee (1993), where he suggests that the flouting of the maxim of Quantity “may be a common feature of Hebrew poetry as an attention getting device” (8).

relevance, that is, flouting. A similar point is made in Lakoff (1981): “the PD [persuasive-discourse] need for [attention-getting] novelty alone is responsible for many instances of violations of the maxims” (35). Lakoff points out (and shows) that Grice’s Manner maxims in particular are typically flouted in advertising (36ff). And a very common flout indeed seems to be that of the Manner maxim Avoid ambiguity. Consider, for instance, the full page magazine advertisement for the video version of the film *The First Wives Club*, where the copy – in large, lipstick letters – reads: *Make him pay for it*. Or another full-page advertisement for American Airlines, where the first part of the copy, *New York from a new angle*, is set at an unusual angle across the page, the second part of the copy announcing that from a set date, the airline will fly not only to JFK airport, but also to Newark.

There are a number of different reasons why flouting is a good strategy in advertising. But the *main* reason will be that it creates imposed thematic relevance, which is a relatively sure-fire form of relevance, by comparison with something like for instance motivational relevance. The ‘blowing up’ of a culturally shared, intersubjective constraint on interaction is visible from miles and miles away. Motivational relevance, on the other hand, is often more dependent on individual likes and dislikes, and thus does not do the job of turning a large number of heads equally easily. Or to put it this way: by flouting some well-known constraint (in the right measure), you can attract almost everyone’s attention to almost anything, whereas almost anything is rarely ever, in itself, interesting to almost everyone (cf. Tolley & Bogart 1994:75). The importance of offering relevance which is both general and strong becomes even more clear when one considers the tremendous competition each individual advertisement has to enter. In the words of Myers (1994), “when there are many ads competing for the audience’s attention, there is an enormous premium on finding patterns of language that are unusual or memorable” (3), patterns that have the additional effect of making readers “look for some interpretation . . . that makes sense of this deviation” (57).

Although unusual and novel and hence interesting language is common in ads, flouts in ads need of course not necessarily be linguistic. Take, for instance, the infamous Benetton advertising campaign (see Myers 1994:9f). The ads were simple and striking: a large photograph representing some aspect of human or animal suffering (for instance a real-life murder victim, an AIDS patient, a bird covered in oil, and so on), was coupled with the slogan *United Colours of Benetton* (sometimes accompanied by very brief copy). These ads somehow crossed a moral barrier; they represented a typical Goffmanian breach of frame limits (Chapter 5, p. 179f): exploiting the suffering of living beings to sell clothes is just not acceptable to a large number of people. Interrelatedly, but on a different level, these ads also represented a case of “attracting attention by . . . [a] break from advertising tradition” (Cook 1992:105): the Benetton ads revolved around unpleasantness, whereas most present-day ads, at least those for consumer goods, seek to sell products by means of a focus on (the very general motivational relevance of) pleasantness and well-being.

The flouting of these two constraints (and maybe more) contributed to the marvellous success of the campaign (see Myers 1994:9f), which precisely testifies to the power of just attracting attention. Consider how the campaign fostered two major types of response: the first was *Benetton exploits human (and animal) suffering*, and the second, *Benetton is socially conscious* (Myers 1994:9f). In other words, the first camp responded to the breach in the form of a rejection of the advertisement and whatever it might have ‘meant to mean’, whereas the second camp resolved the breach by means of an interpretation to the effect that Benetton’s motives are sound (that is, they worked out an implicature as an excuse for the act (see p. 132f)). That is, the first camp perceived the constraint as too strong to be breached (see Chapter 4, p. 132f), hence refusing to accept any perceived message, offering punishment instead; whereas the others did not perceive the constraint as that strong, and presumed the breach to be a signal of an underlying message.

On the surface of it, one might think that the former camp's response would rather have counteracted the intended effects of the ad, and that its success would be ensured by the latter camp, who actually chose to work on the basis that there was an acceptable message. But the fact is that it was the members of the *first* group who probably ensured the success of the ad: the moral outrage – thoroughly covered by the media, of course – *added* so much (imposed thematic and/or motivational) relevance, and hence rounded up so much attention on behalf of the ad, that this in all probability was the most important factor of all in ensuring the success of the campaign.

#### *Prototypical flouts*

Note how this example shows how a one-sided exploitation of the function of attracting attention is in itself bounded by constraints: the response of the first camp – that is, those who found Benetton to be exploitative – is in some respects a response not only against the constraint that you should not exploit human and animal suffering, but also against trying to attract attention for attention's sake (that is, there is a perception of multiple breach (see p. 21)). This kind of response may, as we have seen, work favourably for the sender in cases where attention is all that is required, or when this is more important or at least just as effective as the strategy of creating a favourable impression of the product. In most situations, however, clamorous attention-seeking may not be the most effective of enterprises. In some cultures, like for instance the British, and to a certain extent, the Norwegian, it is often the case that the more subtly the communicator manages to get his or her points across, the more sophisticated and hence socially successful he or she is perceived to be.<sup>4</sup> If we were to formulate a constraint at work here it would possibly be something along the lines of One should not aggressively seek attention. Attention should be earned, according to this constraint, by fulfilling an ideal of subtle eloquence. Thus, the loudest flout may not

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<sup>4</sup> I owe this point to Jenny Thomas (personal communication).

always be the most effective flout, even if it does in effect manage to grasp the attention; it all depends on what one wants to achieve.

The term *prototypical flout* will, in the following, be used to express the idea of a flout whose odds for success – measured here by whether or not the flout manages to attract attention *and* involve the hearer or reader in a non-rejective, meaning-generating process – are for some reason higher than the odds for its failure. Or in other words, a prototypical flout on the one hand optimizes the chances of getting attention, and on the other the chances that some message will get through.

#### The interest principle

We may note as a final point in this section on thematic relevance, tellability and interestingness that Leech (1983), in accordance with his own particular brand of Gricean pragmatics, not surprisingly has chosen to turn *his* observations regarding the latter into a pragmatic principle:

A conversational principle which seems to underlie such cases [e.g., “*Her eyes nearly popped out of her head; It makes my blood boil; He was all ears; That’ll cost the earth*” (146)] is the principle which enjoins us to

‘Say what is unpredictable, and hence interesting.’

At the risk of proliferating too many pragmatic principles, I shall tentatively propose, then, an Interest Principle, by which conversation which is interesting, in the sense of having unpredictability or news value, is preferred to conversation which is boring and predictable. (146)

Unfortunately, Leech is, I believe, mistaken in relating his cited examples to his principle: utterances like *Her eyes nearly popped out of her head; It makes my blood boil; He was all ears; That’ll cost the earth* and so on are not particularly unpredictable and certainly not very interesting; they are rather classical examples of utterances that probably once *were* unpredictable and interesting, so interesting in fact (and/or societally useful, see p. 204f) that they at some point became candidates for sedimentation (a notion which is related to those of generalization and conventionalization and one which I will come back to later in this chapter). But that said, the principle itself is indeed an interesting one, since in using unpredictability as a defining

feature of interestingness, what Leech is in effect saying here is that there exists a 'principle' to the effect that one should use imposed thematic relevance; or, in other words, that one should use flouting!<sup>5</sup> Thus, Leech's principle represents one possible formulation of one aspect of the more general intersubjective constraint on interaction that subjective (and objective) relevance should be provided.

The principle, or rather, constraint, that Leech brings to our attention here points to the potentially paradoxical situation that an act – flouting – which is basically defined in terms of the notion of constraint-breach, *itself* is constraint-governed. This fact, together with previously mentioned examples such as how the constraints-reliant process of getting attention is in itself governed by constraints (p. 220f), testifies to the deep complexity of the present subject matter, and also to the impressive depth and complexity of the constraints-web. Two facts support the claim that a constraint regarding flouting actually exists. First of all, certain activity types seem to be defined entirely in terms of whether or not their participant(s) flout. Secondly, such a constraint can be shown to be at least potentially floutable. Take the case of a stand-up comedian, for instance, who by virtue of the kind of activity she engages in, as it were, is under an obligation to flout.<sup>6</sup> Her job is precisely to break frames. She may of course fail to do so, or, more rarely, choose not to do so, and instead offer trite, boring, dull, well-known gags and jokes. In both cases, the constraint 'You should flout' is breached, and attention, at least, will be achieved. The response will, however, be one of two different kinds. Since flouting is part of the comedian's job-description and the constraint thus must be considered to be of the strong kind, the response will most likely be outright rejection and very, very bad reviews (that is, there will be social punishment). The only way in which to avoid such a response would be to breach the constraint in a clever enough way, that is, being unfunny in a way that the audience would find funny. This

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<sup>5</sup> See also Ryan's (1981) maxim "be creative and unpredictable" (34).

<sup>6</sup> For an interesting comment on the connection between breaches of maxims/social rules and comedy, see the last section of Chapter 6 (The Comic and the Rule) of Umberto Eco's (1973) essay collection *Travels in Hyperreality*.

would, however, not be an easy task. But if a comedian actually *did* manage to pull it off we would be facing the interesting paradox that non-flouting in itself creates a flout: the comedian has *not* flouted (any constraints), and has thereby flouted (the constraint that you should flout). Because in a situation where flouting has become a norm, the latter of course becomes potentially floutable.

### **Is a flout really that unusual?**

The idea that there should in fact be a maxim of flouting is particularly illuminating in the countering of one possible misgiving as regards flouts as imposed thematic relevance, namely *are* all flouts necessarily that unusual? We rather expect flouts, do we not? Frame breaking activity is in fact quite common (see, e.g., Evensen 2000:2ff). Thus, how can flouts be said to represent the unfamiliar, the unexpected? And hence be attention-arresting, be instances of imposed thematic relevance?

The main argument in defence of the view that a (prototypical) flout is indeed an imposed thematic relevance is one that has already been referred to from time to time and it goes as follows: a flout is not unusual in the sense that it is uncommon. Rather, a flout is *in principle* always unusual because it is always a deviation; it is always a marked event against an unmarked background, it always stands out as a figure against a ground. This is, of course, old news (see, e.g., Altieri 1978:95, and Levinson 1992:78). What is rarely commented on, however, is *why* a flout should always constitute a deviation.

We have to start by recognizing that the very basis for the existence of constraints rests on the idea of their observance. They are created to be observed and not to be breached (cf. the notion of normativity in Chapter 4, p. 128ff). If you make a rule, you do so because you want the world to unfold in accordance with that rule, not in order to 'have something to infringe'. Because of this basic trait of constraints we may get one of two scenarios: either, the constraint actually *is* observed more often than not (presumably the normal scenario), and therefore forms a statistical standard or backdrop; or it is *not* observed

more often than not, in which case it will *still* form a standard or backdrop, but this time not be a statistical but a phenomenological one, anchored in the mere idea that the constraint is (because it should be) observed more often than not, the latter being no less real to individuals than the former. And against either of these two backdrops, the breach – the unavoidable side-effect of constraint-ness – stands out in its capacity as antithesis, as flip-side of the coin, as situated on the dark cheek of the Janus face constituted by the observance-breach symbiosis entailed by the normativity of constraints.

This means that whether or not a hearer or an audience should more or less strongly expect flouting (that is, whether or not there is a perceived constraint prescribing the occurrence of flouting in a given activity type), has nothing to do in principle with the flout's capacity for creating imposed thematic relevance. Such expectations do, however, nevertheless play a role, in measuring out the strength of each individual imposed thematic relevance. Because in activity types where flouting is strongly expected (because of the existence of a constraint to the effect that there should be flouting) there also, naturally, often happens to *be* a high degree of flouting. And although flouts, no matter how many of them there are, will always stand out to a certain extent against the occurrences which are *not* flouts, there will nevertheless, when there is a high degree of flouting, naturally be a certain degree of competition among the flouts. This competition might end up cancelling some of the attention-getting potential of each individual flout because the ground – here, constituted by occurrences which are not imposed thematic relevances – in such cases will be so cluttered with 'figures' that the visibility as regards each single instance of imposed thematic relevance is impaired, or these figures end up forming a ground in themselves.

A way for the flouter to combat such an effect of context on the visibility of each individual flout is of course to make some flouts stand out more strongly than the others – that is, make them stand out against a ground of other flouts – by pumping up the individual level



of imposed thematic relevance for those flouts. And two major factors that play a role with respect to the degree of subjective relevance of a flout are *degree of blatancy* (that is, relative degree of relevance as a function of the strength of the breached constraint) and *degree of sedimentation* (that is, relative degree of relevance as a function of the routinization of the performance of a given flout).

### Blatancy

Imposed thematic relevance is a gradable concept. Consider, for instance, the breach of a quite ordinary and everyday textual constraint, one that prescribes that one should stick to the point (or not be too wordy). Adapting (again) Grice's 'Home Sweet Home' example (1989:37), let us say that rather than straightforwardly reporting *Ms X sang Home Sweet Home*, some local newspaper music critic decides to write something like *Ms X produced a series of vocal noises that seemed to somehow correspond to the score of Home Sweet Home*. Some such utterance would probably be found 'attractive', at least by people with a sense of humour (that is, people who have a (sub)culturally-based motivational relevance geared towards language play), and it will certainly in general and in principle stand out among the – one might hypothesize – other, *non-witty* remarks of the music critic's column. That is, it will have at least some default degree of attention-getting force. Next, however, recall the Benetton advertising campaign. Intuitively, the breach of *this* constraint – the constraint that you should not exploit human suffering for the fulfilment of your own, mundane, selfish schemes (like getting rich from selling your products) – has an infinitely higher attention-catching potential, seems infinitely more relevant than the breach of one of the maxims of Manner.

The question is why this should be so. The simple version of an answer to this question is that the Benetton constraint is so much stronger than the Manner constraint, where constraint-strength – that is, the constraint's position in a given hierarchy – is defined as a function of the intensity of the social punishment which would ensue if the

constraint was breached, or perceived as breached, within a given culture or activity type (see Chapter 4, p. 161f). That is, the breach of a strong constraint involves strong social punishment, the breach of a weak constraint involves weak social punishment. A strong constraint has a lower threshold of response (and a stronger response) than a weaker constraint because the emotional spring wound up in preparation of larger offences is more tightly wound than those wound up in preparation for smaller offences, and hence the former will go off more easily when touched, and have a stronger effect. Thus, the response-threshold will be lower for that of breach of constraints like the Benetton constraint than for that of constraints like the Manner constraint, which confirms what we have seen in the above examples.

Strength of constraint is a crucial factor with respect to flout-generated degree of imposed thematic relevance. Therefore, I propose to use a separate label for cases where the degree of imposed thematic relevance is a function of the strength of the constraint breached. The term I choose is borrowed from Grice, namely *blatancy*. For Grice, blatancy is one of the defining characteristics of flouts: “[the speaker] may *flout* a maxim; that is, he may blatantly fail to fulfil it” (1989:30) (see also Thomas 1994a:2ff, 1995:65). Blatant can here mean ostensive (that is, (easily) observable intention to communicate something) or just loud (that is, strongly noticeable, or, in fact, thematically relevant). As usual, it is difficult to pin down exactly what Grice meant. Whatever Grice may or may not have meant, however, I shall here, as I said, narrow down the use of the term to cases where the degree of imposed thematic relevance is a function of the strength of the constraint breached. That is, I will be saying that the breach of a weak constraint is *less blatant* than the breach of a strong constraint, and hence that the breach of a strong constraint is *more blatant* than the breach of a weak constraint. A *prototypical* flout will be relatively blatant; but it is never, according to its definition, so blatant that the odds for its success are lower than the odds for its failure. As has already been suggested, if a constraint is too strong, its breach will be *too blatant*

and hence fail in involving the hearer in non-rejective meaning-processes.

### Sedimentation

Strength of constraint may well be a central parameter in regulating the degree of imposed thematic relevance, but it is of course by no means the only parameter. What we could call *strength of breach* is another: there is most often more than one way of breaching a constraint, and one or more of these may be considered more outrageous than others. Again I would like to refer to the Benetton example: it is reasonable to assume that for most people, the picture of the bird covered in oil in an advertising context would be less offensive than that of the real-life gunshot victim in the same context (and, arguably, still both the same constraint, viz. The suffering of living beings should not be exploited commercially). A prototypical flout will by definition avoid any of the extremes of a non-outrageous – outrageous scale, because a position too far to the left will mean not enough relevance, and one too far to the right will bring with it the danger of rejection.

A third parameter regulating the degree of imposed thematic relevance of flouts is *frequency of breach* of a particular constraint: if a constraint is rarely breached, it will probably be more thematically relevant than when it is often breached. This because the more often a constraint is breached, the more predictable its breach will be, and thus it will be less of a threat to predictability.<sup>7</sup> Again, a prototypical flout will avoid the extremes positions on a scale, here one ranging from infrequent to frequent breach.

A fourth parameter, one which is arguably equally central as blatancy, revolves around the *degree of sedimentation* of a flout. This notion also in a sense involves the frequency of flouting of a particular constraint; the difference is however that in the previous case, we were talking

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<sup>7</sup> Note how these parameters are closely interrelated. A strong constraint, for example, is naturally likely to be breached less frequently than a weak constraint, blending the two parameters of blatancy and frequency of breach. The result is a cumulative effect: the breach of a strong constraint will be even more thematically relevant because of it.

about a high frequency of breach of a given constraint in general, whereas in the case of sedimentation of flouts, we are talking about repeated breach of a given constraint in the same, or similar context, to the extent that relevant processual elements involved in the flout and the outcome of the flout (the implicature) have become part of the *meaning potential* (below, p. 234ff) of the focal contextual element (the utterance). At this point, the original flout has ceased to be a flout and thus no longer carries imposed thematic relevance.

Typical examples of sedimented flouts are dead metaphors, clichés and old jokes. A case in point is the well-known amusing/sarcastic formulae for answering yes-no questions – for instance *Is the pope Catholic?* (cf. Green 1996:101f) – which is generally taken to convey something like *The answer is self-evidently 'yes'*. One might speculate that in the beginning, there was a first occurrence of one of these utterances (since it is impossible to say exactly which one, I choose *Is the pope Catholic?* just by way of illustration). This would, then, be a fresh flout. The flout would involve a focal element, that is, the utterance *Is the pope Catholic?*, and the frames cued by it (containing a variety of factual elements, for instance *The pope is X, has X, does X; Catholicism is Y, has Y, does Y, etc.*, and relationships between them, for instance, *The pope is Catholic*). Moreover, also as a result of the cueing of these frames, the flout would involve a particular set of constraints (for instance, some turn-taking constraint to the effect that agreement/disagreement should be expressed in terms of simple yes/no; some sincerity constraint; some informativity constraint, and some constraint regarding what one should and should not make fun of), constraints which would then be perceived as breached, with the effect of either rejection or meaning generation.

Each and every flout involves these three classes of contextual element (focal element, factual elements and constraints), and more. The difference, however, between most flouts and this particular flout, is that most flouts are only performed once, in the sense that all of the above-mentioned elements (and other relevant elements) coincide only once. In this case, however, the flout – which must have been

accepted rather than rejected – came to be repeated; that is, the same focal element was chosen over and over again with the result that the ‘same’ frames<sup>8</sup> were cued, and thus the same constraints were also (at least potentially) involved. And with this basis kept constant, similar interpretational results could also be expected, despite inevitable minor contextual differences across individuals and time. After a few repetitions – the exact number depending on whether or not the flout answered some sort of collective need – the processing pattern of the flout would no longer be implemented in the normal sense, but rather largely be recalled. Or in other words, the process which would formerly rely on motivated interpretational relevances would now – via a transitional phase – rely on imposed relevances (see Chapter 5, p. 188ff).

This view of things entails that the event that started the process, the constraint-breach, which is equally much a part of the process as any of the other contextual elements listed, is equally much at this point merely a *memory* of a constraint-breach and has become part of the meaning potential of the expression in question. This also means that its imposed thematic relevance has waned and in most cases disappeared completely. It follows from this and from the above definition of a prototypical flout that the latter is one that is rather fresh and new, that is, rather *un*-sedimented.

There are at least two kinds of indication as to whether or not a flout has become completely sedimented. If the contextual pattern defining the meaning contours of the sedimented flout has become so solid as to be transferable to other, but similar, contexts and still be relatively intact, then we are dealing with a highly sedimented flout, an example of which would be the spawning by *Is the pope Catholic?* (if this was indeed (one of the) original flout(s) of this type) of examples like *Does a bear shit in the woods?* When this degree of sedimentation has been achieved, then the flout has gone full circle and has become floutable

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<sup>8</sup> I find it unlikely that frames are identical each time they are summoned. Because of the dialogical give-and-take between elements of context in interpretational processes, each ‘use’ will modify a frame to a certain degree. But the frame will however in most cases retain, loosely speaking, its identity.

in turn (one well-known example of the flouting of both previously mentioned examples is *Is a bear Catholic?*). Both of these examples, incidentally, testify to a tendency to *resist* sedimentation. The phrase *Is the pope Catholic?* probably amused people quite a bit when it first arrived. Then, when it lost this ability, we invented related expressions based on it which had a certain temporary freshness to them (the *bear* one), or we flouted the sedimented flout (the *Catholic bear* one) in order to re-claim some of the lost imposed thematic relevance. This illustrates, of course, the interesting dynamics between the need for predictability and a certain amount of need for *lack* of predictability.

*Generalized, standardized, short-circuited and/or conventionalized flouts*

A certain resemblance will be detected between my notion of *sedimented* flouts and a whole host of concepts revolving around a similar idea, viz. *generalized* and *standardized, short-circuited, conventionalized* or *grammaticalized* conversational implicatures or inferences. Many post-Gricean accounts rely on some such notion (e.g., Atlas & Levinson 1981, Bach & Harnish 1979, Brown & Levinson 1987, Carey 1990, Cole 1975, Davis 1998, Dimmendaal 1996, Grandy 1990, Grice 1989, Horn & Bayer 1984, Levinson 2000, Morgan 1978, Sadock 1978, Traugott & König 1991, Wierzbicka 1991, and Wilkins 1986). Despite the fact that most of these accounts are concerned with implicatures relating to the *observance* of maxims (a significant number of them belong to the neo-Gricean tradition), the similarities and differences between them and my account are nevertheless relevant, at least insofar as they, as I am, are talking about a path from some first occurrence of an (observance-based or flout-based) implicature – a particularized occasion with new and fresh constellations of context – and some subsequent occurrences where the implicature has come to be “normally carried”, to use Grice’s expression (1989:37), by a given vehicle.

It must be pointed out, first of all, that as regards the relation between the ‘original’ notion among all of these (that is, the notion of generalized conversational implicature) and the present one (the

notion of sedimented flouts), there is not even evidence of this much common ground: Grice's original account does not let us know whether or not a generalized conversational implicature is supposed to have developed from a first occurrence; this simply does not seem to be an issue, either with Grice or his (neo-Gricean) followers. An exception is, however, to be found in the most recent neo-Gricean contribution, viz. that of Levinson (2000), where he explicitly claims that generalized implicatures do not depend on any form of "routinization" (24), holding that the implicatures that do are not true generalized conversational implicatures. Thus, the original idea of generalized conversational implicature may turn out to have relatively little in common with the idea of sedimented flouts.

More related to this idea are notions conceived in later accounts that revolve around some process of *standardization* (Bach & Harnish 1979:xvii), or *conventionalization* (e.g., Atlas & Levinson 1981:5, Cole 1975:273f, Morgan 1978:262, Sadock 1978:287). One deeply-rooted difference, however, between some of these accounts and mine is that many of them – like Grice's own – tend to focus on the ('frozen') product of the inference process, that is, on the implicature. Exceptions are the works of Morgan (1978), and Bach & Harnish (1979) where the term *short-circuited inference* or *implicature* is used to capture the idea that at least part of the inferential job-description is somehow still present in each subsequent act of interpretation: "short-circuited inference is still inference – inference compressed by precedent rather than by meaning or convention" (Bach & Harnish 1979:xvii).

One monumental difference, however, between the accounts of short-circuited implicature and the present one is the concern of these accounts with 'keeping the implicature out of the linguistic soup', that is, with guarding the boundaries between pragmatic and semantic meaning (see also Chapter 3, p. 107) In these accounts, short-circuited inference or implicature is not to be seen to be part of the meaning of words and expressions. This is of course an originally Gricean concern as well; as is well known, what Grice first and foremost wanted to

achieve by means of his theory of implicature was to be able to keep at an absolute minimum the number of senses for words and expressions (“Grice’s Razor” (Davis 1998:20)), which was what occasioned the split between *said* and *implicated* in the first place, and hence what gave rise to the CP.

There do of course exist accounts which – as I do – *do* admit conversational implicatures into the semantics of the word or expression it is related to (e.g., Cole 1975:273ff, Sadock 1978:286f, Traugott & König 1991:193ff, Wilkins 1986), but in such accounts a weak or strong view of semantic meaning as fixed and invariable is often still lying there as a backdrop, on the one hand contributing to a rigid view of what should constitute the object of study, that is, highly, as opposed to not so highly, standardized/conventionalized conversational implicatures, and on the other contributing to a rigid view of the object of study itself, that is, a view of the standardized/conventionalized implicature as *as* fixed and invariable as the semantics into which it is incorporated.

The problem with this view is that implicatures – particularized *or* standardized/conventionalized – are so obviously not fixed in any way. As Grice pointed out, all conversational implicatures are, for example, explicitly or contextually *cancelable* (1989:39). Consider the following example:

A: It’s cold in here

B: I’m not your servant!

A: I didn’t mean that you should go and shut the window! The room needs the fresh air. I was about to propose that we went to bed.

B: (growl).

Here, A, in his follow-up turn, explicitly cancels the (partly sedimented?) meaning of *It’s cold in here*, that is, *Do something about it* (e.g., *Shut the window; Shut the door; Turn the heating up*, and so on).

Note that cancelability is often used as an argument *against* allowing the ‘frozen’ implicature into the semantics of the word or expression. This argument, however, crumbles in face of the fact that when it



comes down to it, *most* meaning, semantic *and* implicatural meaning, is contextually cancelable. It is relatively difficult to find examples of radical cancellations of the most core meanings of words and expressions, but the following might be an example: a colleague was watching a television advertisement for a pan flute CD. The purring voice in the background announced that the CD *Features cover versions of the greatest hits of the 90s*, whereupon my colleague, in a similar purring voice, added *All equally irritating as the original ones, only more so*. Here, the meaning of *equally irritating* is explicitly cancelled and replaced by the notion *more irritating*, without so much as the drop of a hat. Less radical cancellations (which are nevertheless cancellations of non-implicated material) are easier to find. Consider, for instance, the expression *Did I say that it Xed? Well, I lied. It (absolutely, totally, etc.) Yed*, which can be seen to be a sedimentation of a cancellation strategy. Consider first *Did I say it rained? Well, I lied. It absolutely bucketed down*. Here, the core meaning of *rain* – *running water falling from the skies* – is certainly not cancelled, but important accompanying *aspects* of the default interpretation of *rain* – for instance, that the amount of water falling from the skies should be considered to be an average amount of water (with respect to a given region) – is cancelled and replaced by a notion of *vast amounts*. And one can of course go further. In the following example even more aspects of the meaning of *rain* are cancelled: *Did I say it rained? Well, I lied. It hailed! It snowed!* Here, the cancellation indeed eats into the core meaning of *rain*, since the idea of *running* water has been cancelled.

These observations seriously weaken, of course, the case of those who want to include implicatures within a semantics relying on the idea of fixed, invariable meanings,<sup>9</sup> because if all meaning down to the very core of a word or expression's meaning is potentially cancelable, then *all* meaning – core meaning *and* implicatures – is less fixed than generally believed.

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<sup>9</sup> It also, of course, seriously weakens the case of the cancelability test as a 'test for implicature' (see Grice 1989:39f, and Levinson 1983:114ff).

### *Meaning potentials*

To sum up my position: conventionalized/standardized, that is, non-particularized sedimented flouts should be seen as part of the meaning of the word or expression they are associated with, but they should not be seen as part of a meaning seen as fixed and invariable (in a word, context-free). Rather, they should be seen as belonging to the open, dynamic, contextually constituted *meaning potentials* (see Voloshinov 1973:79ff) of words and expressions. Although there does not as yet exist a fully-fledged theory of meaning potentials, a preliminary, workable characterization of the phenomenon is found in Linell (1996:7):

Whereas monologic theories would tend to treat lexical meaning as fixed and given (in a metaphorical sense, at least) in the language system, dialogists would stress the dynamic and open properties of word meanings, and that they are negotiable (redefinable) by actors. Words, and other linguistic components of utterances, are available as resources with potentials to be interpreted (in interaction with contexts) in certain preferred (or routinized) ways. The actual situated understandings of course emerge as results of communicative work “there-and-then”, in the situations themselves (Marková, 1992, with reference to Mukarovsky’s theory of meaning). On this view, lexical knowledge, just as any other kind of knowledge, is ultimately relational, residing in relations between knower (who is a member of a culture) and known. (205-206)

As I find little to add to this description, I content myself here with trying to explain why, in the present scheme, lexical meanings (in the sense of meanings which have nothing to do with intersubjective constraints on interaction) and sedimented flouts (meanings which do) should have the same status, that is, why both should belong within such meaning potentials (rather than, according to tradition, the former on the inside, the latter on the outside of semantics). What do they have in common, which the latter does not have in common with non-sedimented flouts? The story begins with how meaning is seen, within dialogism, to be acquired and how it is seen to evolve.

According to dialogism, embedding a word or expression in context is a bit like dipping a candle in wax: the context leaves something sticking onto the word or expression. Or in the words of Lähteenmäki (1998) (with reference to Voloshinov 1973),

the meaning of a linguistic expression comes from the actual uses of the expression that we have come across in various speech events . . . the meaning of a linguistic expression is constructed on the basis of knowledge we have obtained in the course of social interaction, and therefore, is, at least to some extent, determined by the linguistic biography of the person in question. (82)

As an illustration of this phenomenon, consider, for example, the word *bad*, and a child's first encounters with it. The core meaning potential – something akin to *negative valuation* – is learned first, by repeated exposure to the term in different contexts. Then, as the time passes, the notion will be inserted in a variety of different contexts, for instance, *Pulling the cat's tail/Intruding on the neighbours at the dinnertable/Beating your little sister*, and so on, *is bad*. For each new context, the child will incorporate into her frame for the word *bad* new examples of bad-ness, which widen, for her, the meaning and significance of the word *bad*. Note that so far, the core meaning of *bad* has been 'left alone'; only shades of new meaning potential are added (relating to possible depths, extents and kinds of negative valuation). At one point in the history of this word, however, its core meaning *was* challenged, and to a considerable degree at that. It began in the USA in the 1960s with black activists appropriating the slave owners' term *bad nigger*, a term used for a misbehaving black person, using it in a *positive* sense as a term for someone who had the courage to stand up and fight for their rights; in effect, as a term for a *non-bad* black person.<sup>10</sup> Eventually, the meaning potential *positive valuation* came to stick with the word *bad* also when used in isolation, surviving, as we know, well into the present day.

When the core of the meaning potential is *not* challenged by the context, the process of augmenting meaning potential is furthered at a steady but unimpressive pace. By contrast, when the core of the meaning potential *is* challenged, like in the latter case, and indeed in all cases of truthfulness-flouts, which is in fact what it is; the meaning-potential adjustments demanded of the hearer might be so great that there might in fact be a certain measure of *resistance* to incorporating the new meaning. Since flouts create imposed thematic relevance,

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<sup>10</sup> Evensen (personal communication).

there will also be a heightened degree of attention and hence possibly a higher degree of socio-cognitive censorship. Thus, challenging contextual constellations may have difficulty in finding their way into the meaning potentials of words and expressions. So why do they nevertheless succeed in doing so?

The answer to this question is partly that there could be, as mentioned before, a collective need for the given meaning, in that, for instance, it creates a new perspective on the world, one which was previously lacking, like in the case of *bad nigger*. Here, the strongest motivation was in all probability a shared need for seizing some of the enemy's most cherished weapons – their biting words – and annihilating them. This was done by reaching straight into the core of those words, transforming them from hurtful instruments to sources of pride, self-esteem and thus empowerment. In this way, the annihilated weapons became weapons anew, but this time aimed at the oppressors.<sup>11</sup>

Note that the notion of collective need points to the larger issue of subjective relevance, since it in fact equals nothing but a strongly culturally shared motivational relevance. Other relevances are, of course, also at play in determining which meanings are accepted into meaning potentials. Flouts, for instance, always possess at least one type of relevance, namely imposed thematic relevance. The presence of this type of relevance does not, of course, in itself guarantee that the implicature *good*, for instance, should become admitted into the meaning potential of *bad*, even though imposed thematic relevance is a powerful kind of relevance. A strong impression, which is the hallmark of a prototypical imposed thematic relevance, is, of course, intrinsically more lasting than a less strong impression and will thus normally be more easily remembered. But there is a difference

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<sup>11</sup> *Bad* turning *good* is of course only one example of such appropriation. It is quite common within many subcultures. The most famous examples stem, perhaps, from the gay communities (e.g., *dyke* in English, and *homse* (i.e. *gay male*) in Norwegian). Another example: a few years ago, everybody (at least in Anglo-American cultures, and in Norway), and perhaps especially blondes themselves, would tell so-called 'blonde-jokes'. The trend seems to have ceased, but the process was at least partially successful insofar as blonde women now often refer to themselves as blondes without embarrassment, and perhaps even with a bit of pride.

between remembering that something meant something on a particular occasion and actually incorporating what was meant into the meaning potential of a word or expression. For the latter to take place, a certain amount of practical recycling is necessary: the meaning-event has to be *repeated* in its basic structure across various contexts, among other things in order to be exposed to most of the relevant members of the speech community, so that the requisite *negotiation* can take place. Because the meaning must be up for rejection or acceptance; and if accepted, for adjustment and readjustment until it achieves a relatively stable position among the previous meanings. If this process does not take place, the 'new meaning' will remain private and hence never become *meaning* in the usual sense of shared, socio-cultural meaning.

There is yet another respect in which relevance is important to the acceptance of new meanings into meaning potentials: it determines differences in status within the meaning potential of the various elements of the incorporated contextual conglomerate that constitutes the flout. What I am aiming at is that what has traditionally been understood by *implicature* (that is, some end product of a process of inference<sup>12</sup>) will be much more salient than other elements in the process insofar as it coincides with what the hearer assumes to be the speaker's (more or less strongly intended, more or less precise, negotiable) *point*. Because such an element holds *socially imposed thematic relevance* (Schutz & Luckmann 1973:187ff) for the hearer. This type of relevance, a subtype, in fact, of imposed thematic relevance which I have postponed mentioning, is described thus by the authors: "The actions of fellow-men (indeed, the courses of acts as well as their results) place themes before the individual to which he must turn himself" (190). This description shows that this is a type of relevance which is in fact due to reciprocal response-readiness: it is only natural, of course, that the primal urge to orient oneself to others should give rise to an actual cognitive interest in their actions.

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<sup>12</sup> But see Sperber & Wilson (1995) who talk about implicated premises as well as conclusions (195).

Considering the primacy of reciprocal response-readiness, the fact that socially imposed thematic relevance stems from it means that in a hierarchy of relevances, socially imposed thematic relevance will be the most important, overriding most of the other relevances (except, of course, for relatively extreme cases of imposed thematic relevance, such as the obvious sound of a car crashing outside one's window while one is in the middle of entertaining guests). This is why the implicature – the manifestation of what is perceived to be the speaker's point – is likely to receive a higher status within the meaning potential of the given word or expression than the other elements of the flout. This in turn probably also means that it will be actualized more frequently in context, which will increase its status even further vis-à-vis these other elements. This does not necessarily mean, however, that the other elements necessarily become 'deemed' completely uninteresting and left behind totally: it is always safer to keep the recollection of the steps that led to the implicature; after all, some day one might be asked to stand up for one's interpretation, that is, one might be called on to defend one's stake in the common heritage of linguistic meanings.

#### *Flouting as creativity*

As will probably be clear, I have been exploring the notion of sedimented flouts at some length not just in order to justify the claim that the degree of sedimentation of a flout is a measure of the strength of its imposed thematic relevance. A 'hidden agenda' has been that of preparing the ground for the claim that flouting constitutes one of the most important tools in the service of *creativity*.

In his interesting book on the origins and evolution of language from the perspective of human labour, Mike Beaken (1996) observes that

Language at any point in time is in a state of dynamic tension as the result of the interaction of . . . two tendencies – the innovative tendency that creates new forms of language in association with new social activities and functions, and the counteracting tendency to consolidate and regularise these disparate forms in a single, unified, learnable language code. (42)

In generating new meaning in the border zone of convention (Evensen 1999, 2000:2) flouting plays a major part with respect to the mentioned innovative tendency. As a strategy, it distinguishes itself from other types of innovative strategy (such as for instance the coining of new words for new phenomena), by being a rather eruptive, almost *subversive* kind of strategy. Because of normativity, even the most innocent breach has something of the felonious about it, and as with felony proper, we tend to either loathe and reject or secretly admire the felon. If the flout fails, we loathe him for rocking the boat or for a despicable lack of success at a grand enterprise, whereas success implies cleverness and elegance and thus inspires the opposite emotion. And the risk of failure *is* indeed ever present insofar as a flout always *is* a greater enterprise than other types of communication: to flout is to use tools to the maximum of their capacity.

In cases where the flout is a success, however, the groundwork has been laid, as we have seen, for a next possible step in the process, namely sedimentation, or, as Beaken puts it in the above quote, the consolidation and regularization into a single, unified, learnable language code (the latter formulation I would of course substitute by something like *stabilized, learnable meaning potential*). Flouting is like taking an icebreaking ship through pack ice; leaving a pattern of debris in its wake, which may or may not end up forming new, relatively stable shapes. But if these patterns do end up forming stable shapes then this of course creates new ground which can be cracked open in turn. Or, in other words, flouting is involved in an eternal cycle of creation and recreation of meaning: breach – sedimentation – new breach. Whatever else can be said about the phenomenon of flouting, whatever detail can be piled upon detail, this is the true nature of flouting, and its deepest significance.

#### INCREASED INTERPRETATIONAL ACTIVITY

Up until this point the discussion has revolved around ideas generated by the issue of the relationship between flouts as imposed thematic

relevance and the function of attracting attention. In the course of this discussion it has been unavoidable to anticipate at least some questions regarding the relationship between flouts as imposed thematic relevance and the function of proliferating meaning, which is the second major topic to be addressed in this chapter. The claim to be expanded on in the following is that imposed thematic relevance in general and flouts in particular, instigate a process of increased interpretational activity in the hearer. How does imposed thematic relevance do this and what do I mean by increased interpretational activity? Before I answer this question, let me sum up the various things I have said previously about what motivates the interpretation of flouts.

### **The motivational conglomerate**

A flout, in creating a momentary obstacle for understanding, and in requiring more roundabout processing, requires more work, relatively speaking, than more straightforward utterances. Thus, it has been assumed that some kind of interpretational drive is needed. In Chapter 2 I argued that the motivational mechanism (implicitly) assumed in Grice's original work is the belief that the speaker is being cooperative. I showed, however, that flouts become interpreted even in cases when it cannot possibly be assumed that the speaker is being cooperative (see p. 17ff). Thus, I argued that rather than a rational belief in cooperation, what can be seen to be at play is reciprocal response-readiness, a default drive which works for all interpretation, and which therefore lies at the heart of the motivational conglomerate in cases of flouting. This, it was claimed, is furthermore in principle strong enough to account for all interpretation *including* flouting. I stressed, however, that various kinds of assumptions, like an assumption that the speaker is cooperative (and, it could be added, like an assumption that conspicuous breach normally means that the speaker wants the hearer to figure out some underlying meaning (cf. (certain versions of the notion of) *triggering*, e.g., Levinson 1983:157; *signalling*, e.g., Goffman 1983:25f; and *invited/authorized inference*, e.g., Blum-Kulka & Olshtain 1986:167f, Colston 1997:44, Geis & Zwicky



1971, and May 1981:46ff)), more often than not run alongside and work together with reciprocal response-readiness in creating interpretational drive. In addition, there exists, then, a third member of the motivational conglomerate, one provided not by general existential conditions nor by pre-existing assumptions, but by the act of flouting itself. I am, of course, talking about imposed thematic relevance. Contrary to what one might have thought without having been introduced to the notion of reciprocal response-readiness, this third and most flout-specific member of the conglomerate is not the crucial motivational factor, but rather merely an added extra, which takes processing from a level of (barely) sufficient processing to a level of surplus processing relative to the level of imposed thematic relevance emanating from a given flout. In a sense, it is even wrong to talk about imposed thematic relevance as a form of motivation, since it is in fact an epiphenomenon, an unavoidable side-effect of the breach of constraints. Nevertheless, however, it is indeed an epiphenomenon we have learned to exploit.

#### Cases of increased interpretational activity

A good, albeit unintentional, illustration of increased interpretational activity can be found in Green (1990):

Suppose a stranger were to approach me in a public place, and after introducing himself, ask the time. I would surely think this very strange, and wonder why he introduced himself.

1. Excuse me, I'm Sterling Ryznich. Can you tell me the time?

Why did he think I would care who he was if all he wanted was the time?

...

maybe he wants to use me as an alibi (I'd certainly remember bizarre behaviour like uttering (1)). Maybe he is trying to terrorize me psychologically, and just wants me to worry about why he said what he said. On the other hand, maybe it is relevant to some goal he imputes to me. Maybe he (mistakenly) thinks I am someone who was supposed to meet him. Maybe he thinks he is such a celebrity that even though he never expects to see me again, I would want to know whom I had befriended. Maybe he just wants to know the time, but believes that the injunction against speaking to strangers will inhibit me from answering

him unless he introduces himself, making him no longer a stranger.  
And so on. (414-415)

In this example it is obvious that the speaker has breached some turn-taking constraint (regarding what constitutes a proper ‘conversation opener’ in this particular type of situation). Whether the breach was intentional or unintentional is difficult to say (it often is),<sup>13</sup> but notice how little this is of any consequence to that which is seen to ensue, namely a rich and somehow unusually intense effort to try to make sense, not only of the utterance, but also of the event as a whole.

Another good illustration of the phenomenon is found among Wilmeth’s (1992) observations concerning the main character of William Faulkner’s *Snapes* trilogy – Flem – and the response of the other characters to his behaviour. Throughout, Flem is seen to “effectively and devastatingly” use “the uncooperative speech act of silence” (165) with the effect of leaving the other characters in a state of eternal “speculation” (166). Silence, as we know, and as Wilmeth acknowledges (168f), may in effect constitute flouting of some constraint (and is therefore, contrary to Wilmeth’s claim, not necessarily uncooperative at all, cf. Chapter 2, p. 20ff), and the ensuing ‘speculation’, as Wilmeth calls it, clearly points to the increased interpretational activity in its wake.

In addition to being an example of flouting and increased interpretational activity, the story about Flem illustrates nicely how flouting, a moment-to-moment phenomenon, is also something which can be drawn out over time, for instance if the point of the given flout never becomes clear. In choosing silence as his way of conveying his message, Flem refuses to enter the usual negotiative arena with the result that people’s hypotheses regarding what might be meant are never confirmed nor disconfirmed. This long-term lack of resolution creates tension and fear on the part of these characters, with the result that nobody dares to challenge Flem to enter the arena, either. The fear seems to channel the interpretational activity into “speculation

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<sup>13</sup> See, e.g., Blum-Kulka & Olshtain (1986:167f), and Thomas (1995:88f) on distinguishing between intentional and unintentional breaches.

about what Flem might do” (166). Indeed, according to Wilmeth, “Faulkner portrays entire communities unnerved by the silence of a single character – fears defined only by a collective inability to predict Flem’s potential actions” (165).

A final example of increased interpretational activity is found in Attardo (1998). In recounting the following example, Attardo suggests that the observed increased interpretational activity (which is, of course, not thus termed) may have other causes than the ones I have outlined here. What he seems to suggest is that more intense inferential activity is quite simply due to the presence of more inferential possibilities than usual. Attardo recounts:

I was raised and socialized largely in Italy. My wife was born and raised in the American Midwest. In Italian, bare imperatives in unmarked situations (i.e., with no extenuating circumstances present in the context) are not considered impolite, while they are considered impolite in the United States.

When I utter a blunt imperative of the type “Give me the salt”, my wife has access to the information that in my cultural environment such behavior is not impolite, whereas it is impolite in her background. She can thus fairly straightforwardly derive the implicature that, despite all appearances, I am *not* being rude. So far, so good. However, my wife is also aware that I am aware that in her cultural environment bare imperatives are impolite, and that in her cultural environment a woman of her generation is likely to resent being given orders by a man. She therefore needs to factor in this information, which opens a set of problematic possible inferences: am I deliberately trying to be rude and demanding? Am I fatigued or otherwise impaired in my judgment? Have I forgotten the above facts about bare imperatives and her background? Am I practising a sophisticated form of cross-cultural teasing? Am I being ironical? Naturally, if she replies “Get it yourself”, I am now faced with the same complex tangle of possible inferences based on her meta-knowledge about Italian cultural facts, her present state of mind, etc. In conclusion, while the introduction of different cultural backgrounds complicates the inferential process significantly, the inferential process remains the same (i.e., are bare imperatives impolite? Am I acting within the Italian or the Midwestern ‘culture’?). The difference is purely quantitative, not qualitative. (630)

Doubtless, one can indeed say that there are more interpretational possibilities in cases of flouting than other cases, principally because of a more intense response to contextualization cues, which is in fact, as shall be seen later in this chapter, part of what is intended by the notion of increased interpretational activity. This does not, however, automatically mean that all of the active material will actually be used. The emergence of a large amount of contextual elements does not in itself ensure an increase in combinatorial activity (at least not one that

is high enough to produce any workable interpretation of the flout). Rather, in addition to reciprocal response-readiness and imposed thematic relevance, it is here the insecurity within the situation – that is, the underlying question of whether or not something offensive has been expressed (a socialized interpretational drive) – which drives the process on, and actually causes that activity.

#### The proper place of intersubjective constraints on interaction

Several researchers have had hunches which echo (but which do not fully capture) the point made here, namely that constraint-breach has stimulatory properties, like we have seen in the examples above. Bach & Harnish (1979), for instance, as about how conversational implicatures are “aroused by flouting a maxim” (171). Lakoff (1981) talks about how any breach of the CP “forces the audience to interpret” (36). And finally Dascal (1977) puts it thus:

Although this step is not explicitly formulated in Grice’s pattern, its role is fundamental in the argument. It triggers the whole process of searching for an implicature (if there is any . . .). And in so doing, it triggers the process in a certain direction; it creates, so to speak, guidelines for the search. (323)

Clearly, Dascal cannot emphasize strongly enough the importance of the first step – the breach detection – in Grice’s pattern for the working out of conversational implicature (see also Coulthard 1985:74, Fauconnier 1990:391, and Lyons 1981:215f).

More prominent, however, has been the idea that the really important job, and the minimum job the maxims should be able to carry out in order to warrant their right to life, theoretically speaking, is that of providing the hearer with an unambiguous inferential path from breach to implicature (something which is, in fact, faintly suggested even above, in the second half of the Dascal quote) The fact that they do no such thing, has given rise to an abundance of criticism (see, e.g., Bilmes 1993:389f, Davis 1998:2, Harnish 1976:346f, Holdcroft 1983:506f, Hugly & Sayward 1979:19, Levinson 1983:158, Sperber & Wilson 1995:37, Panther & Thornburg 1998:756).

This criticism can, and should, be counteracted by recapitulating and emphasizing the role of the event of the breach of maxims (or, rather, intersubjective constraints on interaction), a role which is much more important than normally assumed. Equipped with the notion of increased interpretational activity we are now in a place where we can more satisfactorily fathom this importance. For whereas breach has formerly mostly been seen as a neutral beginning of a step-by-step, programmed 'reasoning programme', it is now seen as the necessary and sufficient cause of an observable effect (increased interpretational activity). That is, without the breach, none of the phenomena studied in the following would take place whatsoever. It should also be pointed out that even where breach has been seen as trigger, the question of why it should function as trigger is rarely addressed, as is the question of what exactly it is supposed to trigger (the label *search for an implicature* may perhaps be telling but it is not particularly descriptive). The present account has offered such an explanation, namely that breach constitutes a frame break which threatens predictability; and as for the descriptive potential of the notion of increased interpretational activity, its content shall be filled in as we progress with this chapter.

One question remains to be asked, however, and that is whether being there for the breach, however important this is, is *in fact* the only task that intersubjective constraints on interaction can be said to perform in the process. The answer to this question is, of course, no. We have seen, among other things in Chapter 2, that the hypothesis that the breached 'maxim' is observed on a deeper level may (but does not necessarily have to) be entertained as a hypothesis in the process. It is possibly this fact which has led to the undue (and subsequently disappointed) expectation that the maxims should somehow point the hearer in the direction of the implicature. For, the fact is that this kind of hypothesis rather functions akin to other kinds of socialized interpretational drive in the sense that it enhances reciprocal response-readiness. The implicature has to be sought elsewhere within the frames cued in the context. The point is, however, that this

fact does not make the maxims, or constraints, any less important or interesting theoretically. It just forces us to look at them differently.

### **Flouts, increased interpretational activity and explanation**

The idea that *schema-inconsistent occurrences* (Fiske & Taylor 1991:124) – that is, imposed thematic relevances – should stimulate interpretational activity has indeed not been conjured up out of thin air. The phenomenon has long since been noted within social psychology.

The most general-level observation made within the field is that schema-inconsistent behaviour or occurrences is something that people “think about and remember” (128) to a larger extent than other types of behaviour. Secondly, it is something which generates more, and more finely-grained attention than other types of behaviour and occurrences (124). The observation which is of most interest here, however, is the more specific one that unexpected/schema-incongruent/deviant behaviours and occurrences triggers increased causal attribution (e.g., Pyszczynski & Greenberg 1981, Hastie 1984, Hewstone 1989:43ff, Read 1987:296f, and Weiner 1985). That is, unusualness stimulates a greater propensity to gather information for and to carry out a process of explaining to oneself (or others) why some event took place, or why someone did what they did. Moreover, unusualness is seen to be *the* factor among a number of factors studied that trigger such explanation:

The notion that unexpected events elicit causal reasoning appears to be conceptually the most basic of the conditions that have been hypothesized to instigate causal reasoning, in the sense that other specific conditions (with the possible exception of outcome dependence) may be seen as subordinate to the unexpectedness condition. Furthermore, empirical research has provided the most direct and substantial evidence for the role of the unexpectedness condition in instigating causal reasoning. (Hastie 1984:53)

The consensus in the field is in fact so great that it leads Weiner, in a 1985 review article, to talk about an *expectancy principle*: “There is reasonable consensus in the reviewed research . . . that search is elicited by an unexpected event . . . One’s belief in an expectancy

principle is certainly enhanced by the great variety of specific contexts that have been examined” (81).

What, then, is the relationship between the observation that schema-incongruent behaviours and events trigger causal attribution and the present claim, that breaches of intersubjective constraints on interaction – in virtue of possessing imposed thematic relevance – cause increased interpretational activity? The question is not as rhetorical as it may sound, as the studies reported here do not state explicitly that unexpected events trigger more processing in general, only that it triggers more of one particular kind of processing, that is, causal attribution. In virtue of the fact, however, that causal attribution is seen to constitute “special processing” (Hastie 1984:54), that is, processing which comes in addition to other, more default processing, it is nevertheless reasonable to see it in terms of a form of ‘increased activity’. Furthermore, more than one Grice-commentator has precisely characterized Gricean processing as explanation. For these researchers (e.g., Brönniman 1998:89f, Dascal 1977:322, Green 1996:102, Leech 1983:31, Traugott & König 1991:193, and Welker 1994:5f), an implicature is more or less casually defined as the end product of a quest for the reason why some maxim/constraint was not observed. Green (1996), for instance, puts it thus: “In cases of genuinely disregarding a maxim . . . the addressee is intended to infer that the speaker is not conforming to a maxim, and to figure out why” (102). The implicature is seen as the justification of the breach (Brönniman 1998:89), either in the sense that *The speaker breached maxim X because he wanted to communicate something (this something being Y)*, or more directly, *The speaker breached maxim X because he wanted to communicate Y*.

The idea of implicature as explanation has a certain appeal within the present scheme for three main reasons. Firstly, the idea that a breach should have to be justified goes well with the idea that all breaches are somehow subversive (see above, p. 239). Secondly, however, and more importantly, the idea of implicature as explanation is eminently compatible with the notion that it is a need for predictability – a

“motivation to achieve a degree of control over the physical and social world . . . anticipating future occurrences” (Hewstone 1989:61) (see also Hastie 1984:52ff, Pyszczynski & Greenberg 1981:32f, and Weiner 1985:81) – that lies behind the activity-increasing effect of imposed thematic relevance. Because the represented shape of the non-representational emotional tension caused by this need for predictability must clearly be a *why*. Which naturally instigates the quest for a *because*. And finally, this way of looking at things has the benefit of enabling us to see the interpretation of flouts as part of a bigger scheme of “Exploratory behaviours” designed to “promote adaptation and survival (functionalism) or to better understand oneself and the environment (mastery)” (Weiner 1985:81).<sup>14</sup>

There is, however, good reason to remain at this level of abstractness, not trying to realize the notion of implicature-as-explanation literally in a scheme of implicature interpretation. Because firstly, it presupposes a view of the quest for implicature as a quest to restore the maxim that was breached. (I have discussed the flaws of this sort of view before (see Chapter 2, p. 17ff), and shall not do so again). And secondly, it most often presupposes a view of the quest for implicature as a single-minded quest for the speaker’s intentions. More reasons to avoid it shall be given below.

### **Aspects of the hearer’s interpretational process**

To unveil further flaws in the implicature-as-explanation scheme, flaws which furthermore seem to be present in most proposed models (or model-sketches) of implicature, we shall have a look at two aspects of the notion of increased interpretational activity in detail.

First of all, there is the important point that the increased activity, because it is an instant response, begins already at the level of *cueing* of interpretational resources. Most accounts presenting models, sketches and suggestions (henceforth just *schemes*, for short) revolving around anything resembling prototypical flouts (e.g., that of Grice

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<sup>14</sup> Cf. also Zuñiga (1995), who views the interpretation of implicatures as a constituent part of the everyday, ongoing hermeneutic practice.



himself (1989), the mentioned implicature-as-explanation accounts, Airenti et al. 1993:310ff, Bach & Harnish 1979:169, Leech 1983:30f, Levinson 1983:157f, Sperber & Wilson 1995:193ff) overlook, skip, or at least seriously neglect this level, which, as I show later in this section, leads to a situation in which certain aspects of the interpretation of flouts cannot be fully accounted for.

Secondly, the notion of increased interpretational activity embodies the idea that the socio-cognitive activity of combining interpretational resources to yield interpretational outcomes is an intense dialogic activity where meaning, both on the straightforward and on the implicatural level, is shaped and kept temporarily in check in processes of *cross-referencing* between focal elements and the surrounding context. Most existing schemes, it is claimed, depict the same process as static and one-way, with the implicature at the end of it; final and non-negotiable.

The remainder of this chapter will be devoted to these two aspects, which will be dealt with in turn.

#### The emergence of interpretative resources

Most of the mentioned schemes take as their point of departure context which is somehow already there and show how these elements combine to yield outcomes. A case in point is, for instance, Grice's famous testimonial written for a candidate applying for a philosophy job, a testimonial which, contrary to expectation, comments merely on the candidate's level of English skills and his excellent attendance record at tutorials. Grice's 'gloss' then goes as follows:

Gloss: A cannot be opting out, since if he wished to be uncooperative, why write at all? He cannot be unable, through ignorance, to say more, since the man is his pupil; moreover, he knows that more information than this is wanted. He must, therefore, be wishing to impart information that he is reluctant to write down. This supposition is tenable only if he thinks Mr. X is no good at philosophy. This, then, is what he is implicating. (1989:33)

According to Grice, the interpreter of the letter has at his disposal various contextual elements, for example, *The writer of the letter*

We were told the  
best way to sell more Sprite  
would be to get some big  
names behind the product.



**OBEY  
YOUR  
THIRST**

"Sprite" and "Obey Your Thirst" are registered trademarks of The Coca-Cola Company.

*cannot be unable, through ignorance, to say more; More information than what is in the letter is wanted*, and so on. What we do not get to know from this example, however, is where these elements come from, and how they were selected from among a number of *other* available elements. What I will show in some detail in the following, is that by not paying (enough) attention to this phase, the phase which enters context into the interpretational picture in the first place, one risks missing out on something essential regarding the interpretation of flouts.

Flouts begin their work by stimulating a more intense response to the contextualization cues presented by the speaker and emerging from socio-cognitive context at large. What I mean by this is that in the case of flouts, *more* of the available cues will succeed in invoking or evoking meaning potentials and other frames, because of the heightened attention resulting from the imposed thematic relevance.

Furthermore, frames thus invoked and evoked will be accessed more *fully*, that is, more of their contents will be easily available. Finally, more of their sub-frames and neighbouring frames will become more easily accessible. All of this means that at the outset of the interpretation process, the interpreter of a flout is presented with more interpretational resources than interpreters of focal events which are not thematically relevant. This in turn means more options for further interpretation for the interpreter of the flout, something which enhances the possibility of the flout's being sufficiently understood, since the meaning of a flout is always more deeply embedded within the interpretative process than that of other acts.

Let me illustrate this point by way of a more in-depth analysis of an example, an advertisement for the soft drink Sprite (see opposite page):<sup>15</sup>

Background: plain black, on top of which (but still in the background) are printed in Sprite's blue-and-green colour-scheme a number of relatively ordinary first names (*Melinda, Richard, Billy*, etc.) in large typescript.

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<sup>15</sup> Reproduced with kind permission of Coca-Cola Norge AS.

In the middle of the page there is a large photograph of a can of Sprite.

In the top left corner there is the copy *We were told the best way to sell more Sprite would be to get some big names behind the product*, and in the bottom left corner, the slogan *Obey your thirst*.

What I am concerned with here is the interpretation of the copy, which flouts the advertising constraint(s) that you should not openly refer to the fact that you are trying to sell a product or to the tricks commonly used to sell it (a constraint which exists, perhaps, because trying to make someone buy something is coercive and thus a bit 'naughty', so that referring explicitly to the fact that this is what they are trying to do somehow spoils the effect).

The flout is a relatively prototypical one: it is blatant, but not too blatant, and it is not sedimented. A certain amount of repetition of breach of this particular constraint in different contexts may however perhaps subtract somewhat from its prototypicality (at least to Norwegians, who will have in mind a row of ads for a different soft drink, that is, *Solo – sannsynligvis den eneste brusen som ikke hjelper mot annet enn tørsten*, translated into English<sup>16</sup> as *Solo – probably the only soft drink that cures nothing but the thirst*). In spite of this, however, I shall henceforth presume that this particular flout did, at the time when it was launched, stimulate heightened attention and hence an increased interpretational activity, at least for a subsection of the target audience.

Any attention whatsoever to the copy of the Sprite advertisement will cause some basic-level, automatic cueing of the most subjectively relevant core meaning potentials and other frames. I am henceforth focusing on two examples, namely the expression *big names* in the copy and the large, general advertising frame containing the experience that a layperson will have collected with respect to advertising and advertisements. As regards the former, the expression *big names*, we can expect that what will emerge at this superficial stage is the core reading *celebrities*, an interpretation which is promoted by the presence of the advertising frame. What could easily happen next,

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<sup>16</sup> Presumably by the advertising agency or their overseas collaboration partners.

however, is that since the advertisement contains no photos of celebrities or anything else which may indicate that one particular celebrity or group of celebrities are meant, the whole advertisement somehow fails to make sense: where on earth are these 'big names' that they are talking about?

And here the story might have ended, with the reader choosing to turn his attention to something else (*à la* Sperber & Wilson, see Chapter 3, p. 66f). This scenario is, however, unlikely, because the added motivational thrust of imposed thematic relevance causes a larger area than usual within socio-cognitive context to be within easy view, thereby furnishing the reader with two further, crucial contextual elements. There will, for instance, be an emerging realization of what the pattern in the background consists of, namely common, everyday first names in large typescript, a contextual element which might easily have been missed in the absence of any enhancing relevance because of its pattern-like, and hence ground-like status. Secondly, further processing of *big names* as two units with their own meaning potentials together form another possible core reading, namely *physically large names*, which, incidentally, because it brings ambiguity to the attention of the reader, causes the realization that there is multiple breach, forcing the interpretative process further at a stage where the effect of the original imposed thematic relevance might have begun to recede. Interpretational impulsion is sustained by such *chains of relevances*. A warranted question in this connection is, of course, when does it stop? Most schemes, and notably Sperber & Wilson's relevance theory, assume some principle of economy, which in most cases is defined as a tendency to settle for "the first hypothesis that offers a solution to the problem at hand" (Adler 1987:711). This, in my view, is too simplistic; there are too many situations which a human being may find him or herself in which require 'finding out more'. In fact, there are entire vast fields of experience which exist precisely in virtue of this sort of concern: the study of literature, science, law, mathematics. It is reasonable to believe that the question will find a better answer in the notion of *running out of relevances*

presenting themselves to us in virtue of certain properties of the surrounding stimuli or certain properties of contextual elements of the inner contextual source. Some focal events may not provide many relevances and hence we will dismiss them after a short while. Other such events will douse individuals with relevance, causing them to stay with the interpretational task for a long time.

Returning to the analysis of the example, it should be pointed out that only at this point – the point where the two added contextual elements have joined the others in interpretational focus – does it actually become possible for the reader of the advertisement to find some point to the utterance *We were told the best way to sell more Sprite would be to get some big names behind the product*. The advertisement contains no *big names*, that is, celebrities. Instead, it contains *big+names*, that is, perceptually large, common, everyday first names. The presence of merely the former of the two would, as we have seen, probably have brought the process to a halt, because of the absence of a further interpretative road ahead. The presence of *some* occurrence of *big names*, however – that is, the big names patterning the background – allows the process to go on, because there are now some *big names* to work with. And the process might go on in something like the following fashion: one plausible reason why the addresser did not provide any *big names* but rather *big+names* is that he or she feels that there is no need to use *big names*. And if there is no need for *big names* this must be because the product is so brilliant that it virtually sells itself (or alternatively, that the product itself is a *big name*. It certainly is *big*; the name *Sprite* on the photo of the can rather dominates the page).<sup>17</sup>

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<sup>17</sup> This is, of course, only one out of several possible interpretational paths and interpretations. Another possible interpretation is that the names in the background refer to the buyers of the advertised product (Evensen (personal communication)). In this case, the *active element* – that is, that which works towards enticing the reader to make a purchase – becomes that of flattering the customer, since an associative link between *big names* (celebrities) and ordinary customers is established.

### The nature of the 'subsequent' process

In the course of the discussion of the emergence of interpretative resources the next point, that is, what happens once the requisite interpretative resources are available, was anticipated. Naturally enough, one might say, since what we are talking about is of course not a step-by-step, one-way process, that is, *first* the conjuring up of contextual resources and *then* the performance of processes on this material, although there is of course a certain inevitability to the fact that at least some useable contextual resources have to be present before interpretation can take place at all. But then of course there always is some. The focal element will always be embedded in a maze of “retentions and protensions of proximal phases, as well as memories and expectations” (Schutz & Luckmann 1973:119), as well as, we could add, half processed and fully processed elements from the surrounding physical environment. The (relevance-governed) combinatorial processes taking place between and among these resources in turn gives rise to new resources in an in principle endless stream of activity (one whose limits are basically drawn by the availability of relevances (see previous section)). Procedural elements “interact constantly with context” (Linell 1996:7:206) in a process of meaning-arresting (‘hold-and-let-go’) cross-referencing between the elements involved, a process of constant checking and re-checking of the appropriateness and sufficiency of interpretations as the socio-cognitive contextual field unfolds.

Alongside this inner dialogue proceeds, of course, the ‘inter dialogue’. Often not trusting of our ‘inner vision’ of things, we frequently overtly consult the context regarding the appropriateness and sufficiency of our interpretations, asking for explicit confirmation or disconfirmation or support for our interpretations; or we seek to have them challenged to test their strength (cf. Bird 1979:152, and Goffman 1983:17f). Meaning is the “*effect of interaction between speaker and listener*” (Voloshinov 1973:102-103), and doubtless, the dynamic, draft-like nature of interpretations provides one kind of explanation for the negotiative character of communication.

This, of course, is a picture of the hearer's interpretative process which stands in stark contrast to the one emanating from Grice's original account, which many, if not most, other flout-concerned accounts in all essentials resemble. In Grice, in addition to a depiction of the process as if it were always a matter of conscious, deliberate reflection on the part of the hearer (see p. 65), we get a description of a process which is step-by-step and one-way. Here, again, is the general pattern for the working out of a conversational implicature:

He has said that *p*; there is no reason to suppose that he is not observing the maxims, or at least the Cooperative Principle; he could not be doing this unless he thought that *q*; he knows (and knows that I know that he knows) that I can see that the supposition that he thinks that *q* is required; he has done nothing to stop me thinking that *q*; he intends me to think, or is at least willing to allow me to think, that *q*; and so he has implicated that *q*. (1989:31)

Many later schemes involving flouting are versions of this pattern (e.g., Bach & Harnish 1979:169, Levinson 1983:157f), or they have turned to abductive inferential schemes (see, e.g., Dascal 1977:322f, and Traugott & König 1991:193; see also Leech's 1983:30f problem-solving model). In these later schemes, one-way directionality and a strict ordering of processual events are often emphasized even further by chopping up the process in 'stages', as in "The three stages of this inference are . . ." (Leech 1983:31), and "it may be helpful to reformulate Grice's general account of how an implicature is worked out, in terms of a two stage process" (Levinson 1983:157); or by ordering events in numbered steps, like, for instance, Bach & Harnish (1979) have done:

1. S said that *p*.
2. If S's saying that *p* is his total contribution to the conversation at this point, his saying only this is not consistent with the presumption that S is observing the conversational maxims (or Coop).
3. There is no reason to suppose that S is not observing the conversational maxims (or Coop).
4. Only if S thinks that *q*, is S's saying that *p* consistent with the presumption that S is observing the conversational maxims (or Coop).
5. S knows that I can figure out 4. (169)



Even schemes that depend less on Grice's original pattern, or should I say *in particular* these more modern, computational schemes which no longer talk of 'reasoning' but of 'processing' and 'computing', also portray the process in this way. Airenti et al. (1993), for instance, "distinguish five logically chained phases . . . in B's mental processes" (310), and Sperber & Wilson's (1995) approach is, of course, based on step-by-step deduction.

This production-line approach to the explanation of interpretation is of course very much the child of a long tradition based in a view of human beings as isolated message-producers and interpreters, deliverers and receivers, a tradition which I have criticized in an earlier chapter (Chapter 3, p. 64ff). I would still like to briefly mention just one example which alone should illustrate why such an approach to the explanation of interpretational processes does not hold water. It has to do with the fact that the production-line approach presupposes perfect propositional input as a starting point. What we saw, however, in the Sprite-advertisement example was that initial input is precisely *not* perfect. The meaning of individual contextual elements within interpretational focus – in other words, the platform for combinatorial activity – is, to begin with, rough and rudimentary. This meaning then becomes filled in, becomes more 'complete', or changes altogether as the process unfolds, thus also changing the platform of the combinatorial activity, thus influencing the direction of the process and hence its outcomes.

### Implicatures

Outputs are of course not perfect either. And judging from what they are *saying*, researchers concerning themselves with flouting, including Grice himself, could not agree more. Most of them assure that implicatures are in some way or other open-ended and "probabilistic" (Leech 1983:30) (see, e.g., Dascal 1977:322ff). But when the time comes, however, to discuss concrete examples, most of them present a different picture. For there it stands, carved in stone: "S has implicated

that *q*" (Bach & Harnish 1979:169). Or: S has quite simply implicated the "opposite" of what he said (Airenti 1993:316), and so on.

The ideological reason behind this lack of focus on the often very rich interpretational possibilities in the wake of a flout is identical to the one sketched above: the view of the human mind as a mechanistic production line has created an unduly tidy view of the *product* as well as of the process. There is, however, probably an additional reason why the product (and process) always seem to end up being portrayed in this way, viz. because there is a need to simplify: 'real' implicatures – here understood loosely as the non-straightforward,<sup>18</sup> negotiable *point* of the utterance – are elusive and messy, and difficult to deal with. What, for instance, is/are the implicature(s) of the utterance *We were told the best way to sell more Sprite would be to get some big names behind the product?* Here is a list of some not too unlikely possibilities at the disposal of the analyst:

Sprite is the name of a product which is so good in itself that it needs no celebrities to promote it.

Sprite tastes so good that it needs no celebrities to promote it.

Sprite is so famous that no big names are needed in the advertising campaign.

The fact that it needs no celebrities to sell well indicates that Sprite an excellent drink.

One should drink Sprite.

Sprite is a very good drink.

Sprite is the name for an extremely good product.

Etc.

All of these are invented examples designed to 'show off' a confusingly large array of analytical alternatives (see also Kovalyova 1995-1996, and Zhang 1998), but note that the real world may well turn out to be even messier. For instance, when I asked a friend to give me his version of the point of the utterance, he – after a long string of processing out loud – produced the conclusion that *If you like the drink then you'll drink it, but not because it is liked by some big names,*

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<sup>18</sup> That is, not straightforwardly emanating from the options that emerge from the meaning potentials associated with the elements (and the combination of elements) that make up the utterance.

which made perfect sense to both of us, but which does not exactly much resemble your average textbook implicature. The problem here is, of course, that a holistic understanding (that is, a processually conclusive, more or less steady, active constellation of arrived-at contextual elements and their relationships in a pre-verbal form) of, for instance, an utterance, and its reportable, verbalized version do not stand in a one-to-one relationship. The holistic understanding can be expressed in different ways.

Although this may be well and good in the real world, it presents the linguist with a major problem, of course. For, with such a large array of different, all intuitively equally correct possibilities, which one(s) is/are the correct implicature(s), that is, which one(s) should be selected as *the* object of study? This is the dilemma facing every analyst working with examples of flouts and their associated implicatures. It is, as we know, quite often solved (in inferential accounts) by positing a set logical procedure which will derive a specific option, thereby 'justifying' that option. This is, however, only a pseudo-solution insofar as if a different procedure had been selected, *another* option would have been derived. One does not solve the problem by pushing the act of selecting into a prior domain.

#### *A methodological consideration*

How, then, *to* solve the problem? According to Corliss (1981), there are three possible perspectives on what constitutes the implicature:

G. E. Moore, Paul Edwards, C. K. Grant and H. P. Grice have argued that what it is reasonable to believe about the intentions of a speaker determines what is implied. Nowell-Smith and Isabel Hungerland have claimed that what an audience is entitled to infer about the mind of the speaker determines what is implied, and I have defended the view that it is the intentions of the speaker that determine what is implied. (38)

The possibilities, then, are the analyst's perspective (on the speaker's intentions), the hearer's perspective, and the speaker's perspective, and as Corliss correctly points out, accounts alternate between which perspective they choose. Grice's, and hence Gricean, accounts, working with posited inferential procedures and their predestined outcomes, assume the full authority of the analyst to determine what

the speaker's projected processes and results were, and hence what the object of study, the implicature, is. They work on the assumption of the all-knowing, all-seeing analyst, who is able, through training, to 'guess' the speaker's intentions so precisely that it is possible to isolate one, 'correct' inferential procedure, yielding one, 'correct' and hence *objective*, implicature.

There are (at least) two problems with this. The most self-evident one is that clearly, the analyst clearly does not have anything like direct access to the speaker's mind, so even if her guess may be educated, it is still just a guess. The analyst must still make a choice between a number of different, possible speaker-projected interpretational paths which, then, will have different – often widely different – projected outcomes (see, for instance, the above list). The second problem, however, is that, as I have suggested before, speakers' intentions are not the be all and end all of meaning. This is illustrated by the fact that even if the analyst, leaving *her* perspective at home, so to speak, went on an 'honest' search for the speaker's own perspective (intention), for instance by means of conducting an interview, it would still be difficult to make a precise assessment. First of all, people often have difficulties remembering exactly what they meant, and, secondly, if they do remember, they may find it difficult to verbalize this meaning (which may often constitute the reason why they tried to convey that which they meant indirectly in the first place). Thirdly, if they do succeed in verbalizing it, that verbalization may not be the same that they would have come up with 'yesterday', and finally, the verbalization may be so rich and tangled that distinguishing between processual elements and actual outcome-elements may be exceedingly difficult. The same problems would arise, of course, if the analyst should attempt to isolate the *hearer's* perspective, that is, the hearer's actual interpretational path and outcome (as opposed to the speaker's projected interpretational path and outcome), insofar as the only methodological option is the interview.

It can only seem like adding to the problematic of the situation, then, to revive the point that the implicature is not a function of the speaker

or the hearer, but rather the result of *in situ* negotiation *between* speaker and hearer (which adds a fourth option to Corliss' above list of what can be seen to determine an implicature).<sup>19</sup> For, how does the analyst deal with this amalgamated perspective? Any intrusion into it in the form of attempts at eliciting reports from both parties at the same time would not only face the problems outlined above, but also the problem that an interview situation is a communicative situation, which means that the analyst may well end up opening or re-opening negotiations over meaning, thus probably generating new and different meanings from the one the analyst was after in the first place.

In sum, we have so far seen an analyst trying to be objective in two ways, both relatively unsuccessful. One involves more or less haphazard guessing (at what goes on in someone else's mind, at which implicature was intended), the other undue – according to the 'objectivists' themselves – intrusion into the process, leading to possible re-opening of negotiations over what the point of the utterance was. This is, of course, the by now age-old story of the analyst as hindrance to his own task. The analyst could, however, easily become methodological resource instead. What it takes, is perhaps merely the acceptance of, and a positive valuation of, the fact that objective authority is a fiction and that the analyst cannot help, whatever task it is that he or she involves him or herself in, being an active dialogue-participant in ongoing meaning processes. The analyst brings his own voice to the task, a voice which becomes added to and mingled with the other voices in the choir, creating a completely different timbre to the whole. In the guessing case, for instance, the analyst – in interpreting what might be meant by someone other than himself – brings with him his own imposed interpretative relevances, his own motivated interpretative relevances, and all his other relevances, because without them he quite simply cannot perform a

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<sup>19</sup> It should be pointed out that more and more (Gricean or Grice-inspired) pragmatics precisely agree that meaning is not solely the function of speaker intentions, but somehow a function of speaker and/or hearer and/or context (see, e.g., Arundale 1999, Hickey 1994, Rasmussen 1997:256, Schröder 1987:513, Verschueren 1995, and Tanaka 1997).

guess at all. Thus, the outcome of this process, although it may well end up being in relative harmony with what the speaker (thought he) meant, it will never be identical. And in the intrusion case, the influence is even more obvious, since the voice we are talking about also 'speaks out loud', either in the form of written questions on a form, or as spoken questions and/or comments in an open dialogue situation.

In this perspective, the *introspective method*, which has been given such a hard time, so often, and by so many, may perhaps be seen in a new light. The fact that the analyst always co-constitutes his own object of study in the way just described actually puts non-introspective methods on an equal footing, so to speak, with the introspective method. For an analyst also merely co-constitutes his own mind, in virtue of the dual makeup of cognition (see Chapter 3, p. 77ff): we cannot take both the perspective of *I* and *the provisional other* simultaneously. A further similarity is that whereas non-introspective methods rely on an active intrusion into someone else's processes, the introspective method relies on an active intrusion into one's own processes. And no-one is to say that the latter is an intrusion of a less serious kind than the former. Here, too, the intrusion may irretrievably influence the direction and outcome of the process. Finally, as Lähtenmäki (1999) points out in a defence of the use of the introspective method in dialogism, the analyst's intuitions are, of course, just as much social constructions as those of speakers and hearers out there. There will always be a considerable degree of intuitive agreement and closeness of interpretation across speakers and hearers in a given community in any given case, and the analyst's interpretation is one among these, and hence is as equally viable as anyone else's.

In conclusion, then, rather than being rejected for possessing alleged disadvantages based on the fiction of objectivity, the introspective method should perhaps rather be commended for its definite, number one *advantage* in studies of processes like the ones we are talking about here, namely direct access. Note, however, that direct access

does not guarantee an easy pinning down of the implicature, either. The difficulty of verbalizing the “unitary “natural” experience” (Schutz & Luckmann 1973:120), that is, the profound, intuitive, felt understanding of an utterance’s meaning in context – the difficulty of rendering it in a form that best matches the feeling – applies, of course, if not with equal force to a trained analyst as to non-trained speakers and hearers, then at least with enough force to make it quite a bit of a struggle sometimes.

*From product to process*

According to Levinson (1983), “The notion of **conversational implicature** is one of the single most important ideas in pragmatics” (97). It is difficult not to agree with him in that, insofar as the quest for the implicature, like the quest for the holy grail, has led researchers through many an interesting terrain. I have, however, in this chapter, both on and between the lines, tried to provide some arguments as to why it would be a good idea at this point in time to change the perspective from *product* to *process*, that is, from implicature to increased interpretational activity; especially since, as we have just seen, the implicature is *not* an objectively assessable, easily graspable, easily circumscribable element.

On the other hand, one should, of course, not expect any suddenly lucid moment of complete resolution to arise from shifting the emphasis from product to process, either. This proposal definitely holds no such promise. On the contrary, such a change of perspective probably rather means adding to the difficulty of the task. Processes and entities within increased interpretational activity are, as I have tried to show, extremely manifold and dynamic. Embracing such a scheme would definitely entail – if not presuppose – a shift from a paradigm where everything revolves around a painstaking taming of complexity to a possible new paradigm where headlong delving into and welcoming of that same complexity becomes method.

Such a shift would, of course, have to be accompanied by considerable gain to be worth it. That gain, as I have tried to show, would be the

ability to see new things. As yet another illustration, let me finish with the following point, which also links up with one I have made before, regarding flouts and creativity.

We have seen in this chapter how flouts as imposed thematic relevance have the effect of increasing the level of attention and interpretational activity, which helps to ensure the flout's communicative survival by providing added interpretational impulsion. What I have not so far commented on directly is how this heightened activity is bound to produce a good deal of superfluous and leftover material, that is, unused cued contextual resources and partially processed resources trailing in the wake of the interpretational process, both of which will remain in the accessible presence of interpretational focus for a while. The question is what sort of effect this has on socio-cognitive activity and communication. Contrary to what one might think, this material, too, does an important job: subjective and intersubjective fields of vision – from kernel to horizon (see p. 184) – will be more richly filled than usual, meaning that the paths to all sorts of frames, even frames quite deeply embedded in memory, are more strongly 'lit up' than usual. Thus, we will be more likely than we normally would to be reminded, for instance, of 'that funny episode that happened last year', or of 'that important message we forgot to pass on last Friday'. We will be more likely to suddenly find ourselves in possession of a pointed comparison, a funny illustration of the topic under discussion, a story to add to the unfolding web of communicated matter . . .

I have already postulated a link between flouting and creativity, a link which, in virtue of its being directly related to the flout's work as a flout, is a function of the effect of a flout of stimulating its own interpretation. What we see here, however, is a further link between flouting, creativity and spontaneity, in virtue of the flout's general effect of stimulating socio-cognitive activity, of stimulating thinking and communication at large. This, in my opinion, is one of many interesting considerations worth exploring further. And it is one which



could not have been borne out by anything but a preoccupation with the dynamic *process*.

## Chapter 7:

### CONCLUDING REMARKS

My general aim in this work has been to provide an alternative, socio-cognitive perspective on Gricean pragmatics in general and on flouting and flout-based meaning in particular. My specific aim has been to take some fundamental steps towards a *theory* of flouting and flout-based meaning. In fulfilment of these aims, I have deconstructed certain basic theoretical notions which are central both to Gricean pragmatics and to the specific issue of flouting and flout-based meaning, and reconstructed them from within Bakhtinian dialogism and the dialogically based socio-cognitive approach. During this process, the notion of cooperation as interpretational drive has been replaced by the notions of *reciprocal response-readiness*, *socialized interpretational drive*, and *imposed thematic relevance*; maxims have been re-interpreted and subsumed under a general notion of

*intersubjective constraints on interaction*, and context has been explicated as *socio-cognitive context*. Finally, flouting has been defined as providing *imposed thematic relevance*, and the effects of this type of relevance on the hearer, that is, *heightened attention* and *increased interpretational activity*, have been explored.

I began, in the introductory chapter, by claiming that the monological vein in Gricean research is running dry. The general point I hope to have been able to put across in this work is that immersing the CP in socio-cognitive soil makes the theory develop new shoots as if spring were just around the corner. It is my hope that having seen this, pragmatics will be less indifferent in the future to oppressive declarations of the theory's demise, and less ready to limit themselves to token references to a 'father of the field' or to *festschrift* statements of the CP as 'valuable contribution'. Furthermore, if the present exercise has also awoken anyone to the idea that a paradigm shift like the one demonstrated here might in fact be profitable also in other corners of pragmatics, then this would, of course, be only all the more pleasing. And why indeed should such an idea not arise? The dialogically based socio-cognitive approach is doing it for Grice; it should be able to do it for others.

A second, and more specific point I hope to have been able to put across is that the notion of flouting is indeed the cornerstone of Gricean pragmatics, in virtue of its exclusive connection with increased interpretational activity, since the latter is, according to the present account, the (only) ground where fresh implicatures are forged. An acceptance of this point would hopefully stimulate further research into the notion. Furthermore, I believe I have shown that even the apparently very field-specific notions of flouting and flout-based meaning have implications beyond Gricean theory, perhaps even beyond pragmatics: in providing both non-verbal and verbal examples I have tried to make the case that the idea of a border zone of convention where old meanings are demolished and new ones arise is by no means limited to fields where language and language use are studied. Indeed, I have on several occasions propounded the view that

meaning is a property of general communicative interaction *before* it is a property of linguistic interaction, and thus it would seem that a study of non-verbal flouting and flouts would in fact be a natural antecedent to a study of verbal flouting and flouts.

What I have done here, however, is to provide an outline of an account which *integrates* the study of non-verbal and verbal flouting and flout-based meaning, because I believe that these two aspects inform one another in ways too important to miss. Among other things, such an approach allows one precisely to demonstrate the important connections between the non-verbal and verbal realms. I am, however, aware that the outline I have provided here is merely a starting point: a lot remains to be done before one can properly say that a theory of flouting and flout-based meaning has been established. The catalogue of remaining tasks is ominous and I shall not list it in full; suffice it to say that the two most important theoretical challenges at present, as I see it, are the following: 1) the development of a theory of subjective relevance based on Schutz & Luckmann's (1973) account of relevance structures, not only for the purpose of a theory of flouting, but also for socio-cognitive theory in general, and 2) the development of a dialogically based socio-cognitive model of hearer interpretation in general, and of the interpretation of flouts in particular.

As regards the former task, I envision more detailed descriptions of each individual relevance category than those provided by Schutz & Luckmann, descriptions which will also take into account the special case of relevance in linguistic communication and interpretation. In connection with the latter, it might, for instance, also be interesting to try to identify linguistic inventories of conventional ways of providing/expressing/signalling relevance (for instance: *Booh!* (thematic relevance), *Now listen, this is interesting . . . / I know you normally don't like accordion music, but listen to this . . . / This is so scary . . .* (motivational relevance), and so on), to complete the picture which can be gleaned from findings within grounding theory, as mentioned at the end of Chapter 5.

As regards the task of developing a dialogical model of hearer interpretation, this first of all, of course, depends on the job done in developing a theory of subjective relevance. An account of thematic and motivational relevance will explain why this element rather than that in the mediated outer source of context is singled out by the hearer as the focal element, whereas an account of interpretational relevance (quite possibly together with an account of motivational relevance) will explain why this element rather than that is extracted from the inner contextual source in order to make sense of focal elements. Secondly, the development of a dialogical model of hearer interpretation will depend on the further development of the dialogical notion of meaning potentials. The questions that need answering are, among others, *What is the exact difference between saying that meanings are fixed to form and saying that they are attached to form as meaning potentials?*, *What kinds of meaning are (can be) attached to form as potential meaning?*, *Are there kinds of meaning which cannot form part of meaning potentials?*, *Which aspects of context govern the actualization of potential meanings in situ?*, and finally, *How does context govern the actualization of potential meanings in situ?* This latter point is particularly pertinent to the final major sub-task in the development of a dialogically based, socio-cognitive model of hearer interpretation, namely that of developing a notion of *processing mode*. I suggested in Chapter 6 that rather than a step-by-step deductive process, meanings are first sought, then kept in check, in virtue of a continual dialogical movement between relevant elements of context (that is, in virtue of some sort of complex and reciprocal process of hypothesis testing). This notion is, of course, badly in need of further modelling. Finally, it is, in my opinion, quite likely that the performance of tasks 1) (the development of a theory of subjective relevance) and 2) (the development of a dialogically based socio-cognitive model of interpretation) will yield as a by-product a fuller and more satisfactory characterization of the nature and role of implicature.

Those were the main theoretical challenges as I see them. It need hardly be pointed out that empirical challenges also abound: there is, for instance, a pressing need for further exploration of the socio-cultural variability of maxims and other intersubjective constraints on interaction. Here, I have tried to provide some more finely sharpened analytical tools for such enterprises. Some of these tools, however, are still not sharp enough (see, for instance *Some issues* in Chapter 4), and would benefit greatly from encounters with empirical reality. The task of building a dialogical model of the hearer's interpretational process, too, would, of course, benefit greatly from such an encounter. Deeper levels of processing are, of course, difficult to pinpoint empirically, at least in the context of pragmatics and the study of communication and language. More surface levels, however, where forms have begun to become verbalized, are, of course, more easily accessible. The method which I envisage as perhaps particularly useful here, is that of *verbal protocol* (see, e.g., Cohen & Hosenfeld 1981, and Voss 1988), that is, a method which revolves around asking subjects to write or talk out loud to themselves during the solving of an interpretational task, whereupon this writing or talk is recorded and analysed. Although I do not believe that such a method will satisfy purists out to document exactly what is going on in the interface between consciousness and biology, I nevertheless believe that it might tell us something useful about the general character of the process, something which it is at least possible to build on. Furthermore, despite the fact that purists of the *socio-cognitive* conviction might well object to any other data than those emanating from natural, spoken, face-to-face interaction, verbal protocol must in fact be seen as constituting the gateway to a very fascinating dialogical issue indeed, namely that of the dialogical constitution of mind: a verbal protocol is a specimen of socialized individuals in dialogue with their socialized selves, the precise point of departure for a basic principle of a socio-cognitive model of interpretation. This is not to say, of course, that analysing conversation would not also yield important insights into the interpretational process. Studying, for instance, hearers' replies to speakers would tell us a lot about this process, since such replies often

reflect hypothesis testing and attempts at negotiation and are thus at least informative of the product-oriented levels of the process.

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