

# Business Discourse: Analyses of Adherence of Cooperative Principle in Sales Personnel-Customer Interaction

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**Abstract:** *This paper is aimed at describing the types of maxim adhered to in sales personnel-customer discourse. The objective is to find out the type of the maxims that is adhered to during sales personnel-customer business interaction and to find out how the participants do it. The study uses descriptive qualitative research method. The data is analyzed by interpreting the conversations between sales personnel and customers and analyzing them based on the types of the maxim adhered to. From the data, it was found out that there is adherence of the maxim of quality, maxim of quantity, maxim of manner and the maxim of relevance. However, the maxim of quantity is found to be the dominant type of maxim which is mostly adhered to.*

**Keywords:** cooperative principle, maxim, sales personnel, customer, discourse, business, pragmatics

## 1. Introduction

Language as a mean of communication is the way in which people interact with one another in order to represent their ideas. It is also a means through which speakers convey their thoughts and aspirations. This therefore means that it is difficult to express our intention to our listeners without the use of Language. Language is as such used in virtually every conversation. Conversation in this paper is regarded as communication which takes place between two or more people. In order to build a meaningful conversation, it is important that both speaker and listener have the same interpretation about intended meaning in utterance. In other words, the listener should be in a position to grasp and interpret what exactly the speaker means in every utterance for him/her to be in a position to give the expected response. One of the earlier philosophers of language, John Locke (1971), in his essay concerning human understanding expresses the idea of the commonality of language understanding by stating that communication is in essence a means of thought transfer where a speaker encodes his thoughts into words, transmits them through the sound waves of speech and the hearer encodes the information and thus gains a replica of the speaker's original thoughts.

In order to be able to give correct interpretations to utterances, there are a number of basic principles and assumptions that participants in a conversation must hold. The cooperative principle and related maxims of conversation is what forms the basis of interpretation of utterances. Cooperative principle which is mainly attributed to Grice (1975) presents the cooperative principle in the following terms: "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". There are a number of conventions, or maxims that are associated with this principle, which are taken from Brown and Yule (1983) which includes: Quantity, quality, relation and manner. Cooperative principle is a rule that should therefore be obeyed to achieve a cooperative communication among speakers. The

cooperative principle describes how people interact with one another (Yule, 1996: 36). This therefore means that the most important thing in using language as a means of communication is the ability to interpret the meaning of utterances in order to understand the message being conveyed. Thus language without meaning is useless. Meaning makes little sense except in the context of communication: the notion of context of communication therefore provides a good ground of interpreting meaning of utterances. Communication can be conceived as the transfer of information and response situation between speakers (Cruse, 2000: 15). Sometimes, speakers do not mean what they say and as such they utter something for different intention leaving the listener with a job of giving the correct interpretation in order to respond appropriately. If both speaker and listener or hearer do not make use of cooperative principle, they are not likely to arrive at the same meaning of the topic spoken. Otherwise, the cooperative principle helps us to understand and interpret easily what the speaker means in every utterance.

However, it is common for people to break the rule in cooperative principle while they are interacting. When speakers fail to adhere to the cooperative principle, it means that they are violating it. The ability to provide an expected amount of information by a speaker in a conversation is a concept of cooperative principle in which the participants make their contributions as informative as is required (Yule, 1996: 36). Therefore, the speakers who give less or more information than expected in conversation violate the cooperative principle which compromises their mutual goal of interaction.

Cooperation in sales personnel-customer business discourse transaction refers to the buyer and the seller working together with an aim of achieving business goals such as buying and selling. This is achieved through collect interpretation of utterance meaning, collaboration and concession-making by the participants. In business interactions such as the sales personnel-customer interaction, participants cooperate in order to achieve their transactional goals. To do so, they depend on the mutual participation of

the participants which is dependent on the interpretation of utterances. This paper contends that in order for the sales personnel and customers to carry out a cooperative and collaborative business interaction, they must adhere to cooperative principle and its attendant maxims.

Generally, conversation between sales personnel and customer is conceived as a cooperative venture that is governed by maxims which are exploited for particular conversational effects. Grice's cooperative principle (1975) is essentially a framework about how people use language in real speech situations. It is used by its proponents as providing a guideline for the efficient and effective use of language in conversation to further cooperative ends. Normally participants cooperate with each other and they assume that others are cooperating. For instance when one says something, the other person makes a response in form of a turn that is assumed by the other party as a cooperative contribution and it is interpreted accordingly. In sales personnel-customer interaction, the participants should be driven by a collective goal that makes them act together in their contribution to the transactional exchange. However the sequencing and interpretation of some utterance by the participants in this discourse is seen to be adhering to the cooperative principle in order to avoid the breakdown of the exchange.

As such, the interaction between the sales personnel and customers can be analyzed through pragmatic approach by paying attention to the obedience of the participants to the rules of the cooperative principle. This paper therefore analyses the adherence of cooperative principle and brings out the maxim that is frequently adhered to during the business interaction between the sales personnel and customers.

## 2. Statement of the Problem

In order to take into account every aspect of utterance during interpretation of meaning, Grice (1975) provided a framework that he referred to as conversational implicature that states that what is implicated by an utterance is largely determined by the context sensitive aspect and the conversational maxims. The conversational maxims specify what participants have to do in order to converse in a maximally efficient, rational and cooperative way. Thus, they should speak sincerely, relevantly and clearly while providing sufficient information. When the maxims are not adhered to, participants assume that the principle of cooperation is being adhered to at some deeper level. This paper is premised on the argument that sales personnel and customer do adhere to the maxims related to Grice's cooperative principle during their business transaction. As such, a need was felt to analyze what types of maxims are adhered to, how they are adhered to and which particular maxims is mostly adhered to and why.

### Objectives

- 1) To analyze the types of maxims adhered to in sales personnel-customer interaction
- 2) To find out the type of the maxims that is mostly adhered to and why.

### Questions

- 1) What types of maxims are adhered to in sales personnel-customer interaction?
- 2) What type of maxim is mostly adhered to and why?

## 3. Review of Literature

Pragmatics deals with the interpretation of utterances in any natural language within a normal human conversation. Pragmatists state that it is not enough to know the grammatical category of all the words in the utterance, or the conventional meaning associated with each word but by being able to ascribe a particular meaning (specifically that intended by the speaker) to any utterance. As such, a hearer must have a clear idea of the context in which such an utterance occurs. Pragmatics therefore concentrates on the study of meaning as communicated by a speaker and interpreted by a listener. It has consequently, more to do with the analysis of what people mean by their utterances than what the words or phrases in those utterances might mean by themselves. It requires a consideration of how speakers organize what they want to say in accordance with who they're talking to, where, when and under what circumstances. It is also entails the study of semantic meaning and also contextual meaning (Yule, 1999 : 3).

Pragmatics looks at how sense can be made of certain texts even when, from a semantic point of view, the text seems to be incomplete or have a different meaning to what is really intended. Pragmatics allows us to investigate how "meaning beyond the words" can be understood without ambiguity. The extra meaning is there, not because of the semantic aspects of the words themselves, but because we share certain contextual knowledge with the writer or speaker of the text. So, speakers strive to find linguistic means to make a text, perhaps, shorter, more interesting, more relevant, more purposeful or more personal. In other word, they do not speak directly to the hearer. When the listener is able to dig the deep meaning as the speakers intend, it means that they are applying the cooperative principle. The meaning of utterances will be got by understanding the context when the conversation is happening. For example: In a sitting room, an employer says to her house help, "my throat is so dry", then the house help brings a glass of water'. From this case, the house help is able to dig the meaning beyond her employer's utterances. He understood that his employer is indirectly asking for some water.

The focus of pragmatic analysis is on the meaning of speakers' utterances rather than the meaning of words or sentences. It concentrates on aspect of meaning that cannot be predicted by linguistics knowledge about the physical and social world (Peccei, 2000: 5). Recognizing the meaning in an utterance is important because it tells us what the speaker intends us to do with the content of what he/she says. In social science generally and linguistics specifically, the cooperative principle (CP) describes how people interact with one another. The CP is based on the assumption that language users tacitly and inherently agree to cooperate by making their contributions to the talk as required by the current stage of the transactional exchange or the direction it develops. This theory sees interactions as cements in social interactions. Grice's concern was to establish a set of general

principles, with the aim of explaining how language users communicate direct as well as indirect meanings. As phrased by Paul Grice, it states, "*Make your contribution such as it is required at the stage at which it occurs, by the accepted purpose or direction of the talk exchange in which you are engaged.*" Though phrased as a prescriptive command, the principle is intended as a description of how people normally behave in conversation. Thus listeners and speakers must speak cooperatively and mutually accept one another. The cooperative principle describes how effective communication in conversation is achieved in common social situations. The purpose of conversation is to have both speaker(s) and listener(s) achieve the same meaning of the utterances in order avoid any misunderstanding. Listener(s) on one hand use the cooperative principle to grasp what the speaker(s) intent is while on the other hand the speaker(s) should be able to provide information as complete as possible.

Without cooperative principle, people communication will be quite difficult because it regulates the exchange of information (turns) between the individuals that are involved in the context-based interaction. It also makes both speaker and listener's discourse meaningful by adhering to CP during conversation. People who obey the cooperative principle in their language use make sure that what they say in a given conversation furthers the purpose of that conversation. Adherence to this principle dictates that interlocutors must simultaneously observe four maxims: Maxims of Quantity: i.e. 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 Grice as cited in Yule (1996: 37). The maxim is concerned with the amount of information conveyed by a particular utterance. Maxims of Quality: Try to make your contribution one that is true, do not say what you believe to be false, do not say that for which you lack adequate evidence. Maxim of Relation/relevance: i.e. in every conversation, speaker needs to give contribution relevant with to the topic at hand and stick to the point of the conversation and should only talk of things related clearly to the purpose of the exchange and that are appropriate in a given context. The point is. Be relevant. Maxims of Manner: is concerned with how the speakers deliver their intention to the hearer or listener. Yule (1996: 37) concludes the explanation of maxim of manner as following: Avoid obscurity you should not use words you know that they are not familiar to the listeners. Avoid ambiguity Try to make your words meaningful depending on the context. Be brief you should avoid unnecessary information but be simple. Be orderly by following the natural order or events.

Schegloff (2007) contends that utterances and social actions are part of contextual features that contribute to interpretation of meaning. He points out that the contextual aspect of an utterance is significant because participants draw upon it as a resource in designing their utterances in order to make adequate sense of what is said. Thus every utterance forms the immediate context for some next action in a sequence. Grice's framework of cooperative principle is used in this study to explicate how participants in SP-C discourse adhere to various maxims. The argument is that in business discourse as in SP-C interaction, the art of

cooperation and collaboration is not just a mechanical process of taking turns but a continuing process of constructing meaning when the maxims are violated or flouted by any of the speaker. To do so, the participants draw their knowledge from the cooperative principle and thus they are able to draw a major distinction between what is actually said and what is implicated. By so doing, they ensure that the transactional agreements are mutually accomplished. The discussion is therefore based on how adherence to cooperative principle enables participants in SP-C interaction to carry out successful business transactions.

#### **4. Methodology**

This is basically a descriptive qualitative study. The descriptive method was used to find out the adherence of Cooperative Principle in sales personnel-customer discourse. The data in this study are spontaneous conversations collected from different occurring conversational settings of different sales personnel drawn from various manufacturing companies. This study describes the adherence of different maxims in different utterances and identification of the maxim that is mostly adhered to and why. The analysis of data was based on Grice's theory named Cooperative Principle and classified into four types of the violated maxim namely maxim of quantity, maxim of quality, maxim of relevance, and maxim of manner.

#### **5. Research Discussion and Findings**

Cooperation in business transaction refers to the buyer and the seller working together with an aim of achieving business goals such as buying and selling. This is achieved through collect interpretation of utterance meaning, collaboration and concession-making by the participants. In business interactions such as the sales personnel-customer interaction, participants cooperate in order to achieve their transactional goals. To do so, they depend on the mutual participation of the participants which is dependent on the interpretation of utterances and adherence of maxims.

Generally, conversation is conceived as a cooperative venture that is governed by maxims which are exploited for particular conversational effects. Grice's cooperative principal (1975) is essentially a framework about how people use language in real speech situations. It is used by its proponents as providing a guideline for the efficient and effective use of language in conversation to further cooperative ends. We note that participants in sales personnel-customer discourse adhere to the maxims of manner. They are brief and orderly and this leads participants making their conversational contributions in a cooperative manner. The following examples demonstrate how the sales personnel and customer begin the sales interaction in such a manner that brings out their cooperation and collaboration in the course of transactional encounter:

- 1a) T1SP Good morning
- T2C :Good morning to you welcome
- T3SP: I am sales personnel from Treasure Feeds industries
- T4C:Okay, welcome. I am kamau and as you can see I am a stockiest of animal feeds.

1b) T96SP: Thanks I will make a point of visiting you again.  
T97C: See you then.  
T98SP: See you too  
T99C: Bye Bye

1a and 1b above contains utterances that help the two speakers achieve a measure of cooperation. For instance the turns are paired and brief and as a result the participant's response is constrained by the first utterance. The paired turns include greetings/greetings turn 1&2, self-identification/self-identification turn 3&4. Notably, both participants exchange turns alternatively with each interpreting the others turn appropriately. This smooth transfer of turns that contain brief utterances demonstrates cooperative exchanges that enable them to carry out a conversation whose aim is to achieve the mutual goal of buying and selling.

Each of the participants is able to interpret any implied meaning through the help of cooperative principle. For instance the customer interprets turn 3 to mean that the sales personnel want him to introduce himself. The interpretation is largely contextual based. Thus SP interprets the customer's utterance in turn 3 with business context in mind and that's why he does not just take it as piece of information.

Notably, sales personnel-customer discourse, participants are cooperative even when any one of them tends to violate particular maxims of cooperative principle. This happens when either of the participant deliberately say too little or too much, is irrelevant or ambiguous. In such a case, the participants assume that whatever they say must be made to fit in the context and the listener must understand the intent rather than take what one says literally. Therefore, to interpret what the utterances imply, the participants work on the assumptions that every utterance is relevant in the context in which it has been used. For example:

2a) TC: I have faith in the feeds I sell  
SP: Try our feeds and you will not regret.  
In this incident, the customer gives very little. Instead of telling the sales personnel that he does not want to stock his feeds, he violates the maxim of manner but the sales personnel is able to interpret the brief utterance. It is noted that as the conversation progresses participants' work towards maintaining a cooperative exchange by interpreting what the utterances mean in relation to the context of the transaction and any of the four maxims stipulated by Grice (1975).

3a) TC: In that case it means that I have nothing to benefit from sales as a wholesaler?  
TSP: No No No. The company will give you a before sales service and an after sale discount. Besides, we shall deliver the products free and you will get A RAFFLE TICKET which will enable you win a Toyota Hilux Pick-Up.

In example 3a) the adherence of quality maxims enables the participants to carry out a successful bargain. This is because they jointly negotiate the prices by responding to preceding turns in a cooperative manner and ensuring that they interpret each other's utterance with the assumptions that all

of them are obeying the cooperative principle and its attendant maxims. For example, the customer truthfully airs his concern. In response the sales personnel gives a truthful explanation of benefits the customer will enjoy if he buys the product. From the above turns, it is clear that in SP-C interaction, the success of sales negotiation is dependent on the adherence of maxims that enhances the cooperation and collaboration of the participants.

4a) TSP: I am okay. I am sales personnel from Treasure Feeds and we sell all types of animal feeds.  
TC: Ooh! Pleasure I am Kamau a stockiest in animal feeds. People here call me KS Wholesaler.  
TSP: That's good. I am happy to hear that (.) at least. I can see we can now talk the same language.  
TC: Mmmh.

In 4a) a similar conversational behaviour is noticeable. The interaction opens with an exchange of greetings and followed by health enquires. These class of sequences of turns that Schegloff (2007) refers to as adjacency pairs enable the participants to carry out mutually coordinated sales interaction. It is noted that the well coordinated utterances enable participants to move the conversation from the initial introductory stage to product presentation as evidenced by the customer's utterance. The interpretation of every subsequent turn and the accompanying response is seen to be guided by the contextual knowledge and Grice's cooperative principle. Evidently, the utterances that are basically meant to create friendship adhere to the maxims of manner and quality as they are brief and factual as seen 2<sup>nd</sup> and 3<sup>rd</sup> turn in 4a above. The two utterances therefore fulfill a social function of creating friendship and they need not be interpreted further. This helps the participants to achieve a rational cooperative behaviour that enhances the transactional exchange that is geared towards achieving some mutual goals of buying and selling.

In this type of business discourse, the participants work on the assumption that each party is providing an appropriate amount of information, they are telling the truth, they are being relevant and are clear. As such, whenever there is flouting, they appeal to the business context of the utterance to interpret the additional meaning. That is why in the cited examples, it is apparent that the two participants are obeying the cooperative principle and its maxims. Notably, the conversation progresses smoothly and none of them is about to get off the transaction. This state of affairs is an indicator that the cooperative principle can be exploited as a transactional strategy that leads to a fruitful sales deal. It is noted that the two interlocutors are very open to each other. At the same time, they appear to be obeying the maxims of quantity, quality, relation and manner that states that one should be relevant, sincere brief and orderly. Evidently, both the sales personnel and the customer are keeping in line with the above maxims and also the basic concept behind Grice's maxims that states that in order to communicate with others, one has to assume that others mean what they say and anything that does not quite fit within the communication has to be made to fit by implicature. Consider the following example:

- TC: Let's go back to the policy you were introducing me to. If I heard you, you said that my child's education is guaranteed whether I am dead or alive?
- TSP: PRECISELY. The beneficiary, who is your child in this case, is entitled to receive the bonus every year and lump sum amount of money once the policy matures.
- TC: You mean, this is bound to happen even if I die the first month of my contribution?
- TSP: It doesn't matter when you die, the fact remains that you have entered an agreement with the company. For this reason, the company is completely duty bound to honour the agreement to the last letter.

For instance when the sales personnel tells the customer that his death should not be a hindrance to his buying of the policy, the customer seeks more explanation as he does not want to cast aspersions on what the sales personnel is saying. This is because the customer is trying to harmonize what he believes in with what the sales personnel is saying. The customer indirectly solicits for more information concerning the policy. The sales personnel is able to interpret this utterance to mean that the customer wants to be assured that his child will really be a beneficiary of the policy even after he dies. He gives comprehensive information concerning the said policy. These turns clearly emphasize that sales personnel-customer discourse is a strategic negotiation, and since the interlocutors are interdependent in reaching their goals, they always try to mutually cooperate. This shows that speakers have the skills of using language in a socially acceptable way as long as they appeal to cooperative principle and its maxims. In this regard, the participants in SP-C discourse are able to interact collaboratively and cooperatively as the maxims enable them to establish and interpret utterances within their context.

The analysis demonstrates that sales personnel and customers achieve and accomplish their mutual goals of buying and selling because of observing and interpreting conversational implicatures through the help of Grice (1975) cooperative principles and its attendant maxims. Also the observation of the cooperative principle allows communication between the two participants to go in an orderly manner. Since cooperation is required to hold a conversation, the data reveal that the two participants cooperate in taking turns and in making their discourse contributions as informative, relevant, brief and sincere as possible. As a result they are able to get along with each other even when their contributions to the discourse seem to flout Grice's maxims.

## 6. Conclusions

Based on the findings we conclude that both the sales personnel and customers strive to obey or interpret any conversational implicatures using sensitive context aspects and conversational maxims in case there is any flouting of the maxims. The findings also show that the art of cooperation in SP-C discourse is not a mechanical process but a continuing process of constructing meaning when the maxims are violated or flouted by any of the speaker. We observed that the adherence of the cooperative principle allows communication between the two participants to

proceed in an orderly manner. Since cooperation is required to hold a conversation, the data reveal that the two participants cooperate in taking turns and in making their discourse contributions as informative, relevant, brief and sincere as possible.

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