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Intercultural Communication & Grice's Principle

Abstract

Grice's theory of implicature has been considered ethnocentric, but this paper will argue that it is highly relevant to intercultural analysis. The Principle of Cooperation, and its subordinate maxims, focus on the rationality of discourse, but Grice also includes linguistic and nonlinguistic context, conventional meaning and "other items of background knowledge" in the inferential process. This notion of background knowledge is radically refined by Sperber and Wilson. Within a theory of relevance, interlocutors share only some contextual clues in a "mutual cognitive environment". In intercultural negotiation a high level of awareness of assumptions about what is "mutually manifest" is of central importance to performance.

Teachers of intercultural communication skills attempt to establish a balance between providing meaningful practice and a useful rationale for improving theoretical awareness of the inferential process. This paper uses recordings of a classroom simulation involving foreign and Japanese students of intercultural communication taking part in a traffic accident insurance negotiation. Two data extracts are examined in detail, in which the failure by a foreign student to recognize radically different background assumptions had a decisive negative impact on his ability to negotiate, but a positive impact on his ability to analyse his own intercultural performance.

While Grice's Cooperative Principle (and the subordinate maxims) are much cited, Grice identifies four other important factors that influence the inferential process. To work out that a particular conversational implicature is present, the hearer will rely on the following data: (1) the conventional meaning of the words used, together with the identity of any references that may be involved; (2) the Cooperative Principle and its maxims, (3) the context, linguistic and otherwise, of the utterance; (4) other items of background knowledge; and (5) the fact (or supposed fact) that all relevant items falling under the previous headings are available to both participants and both participants know or assume this to be the case. (1989: 31)

Grice's retrospective explanation of "implicature" also includes reference to "the psychological state or attitude which needs to be attributed to a speaker" (op. cit.: 370). This paper will consider all these factors in relation to the inferential process in intercultural communication. Number five is of particular importance for intercultural analysis in that it raises the issue of the participants' assumptions about what is available to both participants for use in an inferential process in terms of the other four categories.

Although intercultural analysis was not Grice's main concern, he defines the discourse that concerns his exploration as "concerted enterprises" (1989: 369) that allow "a high degree of diversity in the motivations underlying quite meager common objectives". Grice himself (1989: 26) makes no explicit claims of universality, using characteristically modest language to refer to a "first approximation of a general principle" and a "rough general principle". By arguing only for the existence of "some such general principle as this", we may assume that Grice is adopting what he considers to be the appropriate degree of certainty for a conversational principle. He is extremely careful not to overstate the case for "cooperation", suggesting only that "each participant recognizes in them [talk exchanges], to some extent, a common purpose or set of purposes, or at least a mutually accepted direction". (op. cit.: 26)

It is true that, if there are any universal principles in conversation, they are also necessarily in operation in monocultural settings. However, general theories cannot easily be considered as culturally neutral "universals" (See Wierzbicka, 1991) and it is difficult to imagine how any theory can be expressed without some degree of ethnocentricity. Indeed, the pursuit of universality can be something of a distraction in the search for some degree of intercultural understanding in particular settings.

Grice's Principle of Cooperation

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 1975: 45) The wording of the general Principle of Cooperation provides little difficulty for intercultural analysis. The degree of uncertainty - the apparent vagueness of Grice's Principle of Cooperation is highly appropriate for discussions of cultural diversity. Making a 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" clearly allows for the acceptance of different purposes and requirements in different contexts and does not exclude the influence of norms associated with a variety of widely different speech

communities. Whether an intercultural conversation has a mutually "accepted purpose" will, however, be questioned. While Grice is ready to express genuine doubts, he is also prepared to commit himself to his most basic principle in a more absolute manner, when he refers in his retrospective epilogue (1989: 370) to a "single supreme Conversational Principle, that of cooperativeness" as at least "an acceptable candidate" (op. cit: 371) for being the one overriding principle of conversation.

The Data Process

Researchers into intercultural conversation have to consider the status and role of general theories such as Grice's theory of implicature within a super ordinate framework of intercultural research. Schiffrin (1994: 203) suggests that a shift to real data "can have far reaching effects in Gricean pragmatics itself". The confrontation of data and abstract theory provides insights that no single perspective can provide alone.

Before considering abstract theoretical considerations of implicature in detail, we shall first present two data samples which are extracts from recordings of simulations involving foreign and Japanese students of intercultural communication in a Japanese University. One American student (AM) and three Japanese students (JP1, JP2 and JP3) played the role of insurance agents, each representing a driver in a traffic accident. Their aim was to negotiate the lowest possible percentage of blame for the driver they represented. (Numbers in the transcript represent percentages proposed by negotiators.) Common background information included a detailed description of the accident by the teacher and a short statement by each driver. Negotiators then prepared a pre-negotiation sheet (appendix one).

The method of transcription follows Foster et al. (2000), who propose common criteria for transcribing units of discourse for analysis. The students were recorded as part of an intercultural learning process. After the recording, they were asked to identify critical moments in the negotiation for transcription, discussion and analysis. In the information provided before the negotiation, the Escort driver, represented by the American student, had admitted to having "a couple of drinks". The analysis will focus on the references in two parallel extracts to the fact that the Escort driver had been drinking before the accident.

Transcript Part 1

JP1: |Why | |Ah ...I think ..{.er ...Escort..}...{you... Escort

AM: Yes.}

JP1: ::Escort is forty to fifty|

AM: |Tell me why |

JP1: |Tell me why |

AM: |Tell me what laws I broke first |

JP1: |I don't know {I don't know that, I don't know} about er the situation in other country :: but er in Japan ::especially in Japan :: er ...er You were drunk, {drunk.}|What is drunk is ...er...driving

AM: Ah

JP1: ...is most severe situation|

AM: |Okay| Where does it say ::I was drunk then |It doesn't say {er my er client does not say} :: he was drunk|

JP1: |Ah...even a little bit {er couldn't er }you couldn't admit That in Japanese law ::I think|

Transcript Part 2 (6 minutes later in the same conversation)

AM |You should be more cautious:: when you`re {when you`re} coming into this lane :: because I'm driving ... |In Japan these lines here ...:: well according to what {the VW} the representative for the VW was ...|

JP1 (Interrupting) |::Even if you are driving main road you are drunk...| you are drunk...| Okay | Er {you have} you did have a drink :: even a little bit :: so I think er your responsibility is er 40 to 50, {er 40 to 50 and er}...|

Am |{How do you} how do you know :: I was drunk though :: or my client was drunk | I mean :: how do you know |

JP1 |You said ...before|

AM |I didn't say :: he was drunk| I said :: he had a drink|

JP1 | In Japan a little bit drink means drunk:: |Okay| {... in Japanese law} | (laughter from other JP students)

Conventional Meaning, Context and Background Knowledge

The word "drunk" as used by JP1 projects us into a consideration of the importance of conventional meaning in the inferential process in relation to context and background knowledge. Downes (1984: 295) refers to the " 'inextricability' problem of deciding which part of the representation should be attached to the linguistic items as 'meaning' and which part is truly 'background' ". The Collins English Dictionary (1994: 478) defines drunk as "intoxicated with alcohol to the extent of losing control over normal physical and mental functions". If we could exclude considerations of context, there is a clear difference between being "drunk" and "having a couple of drinks". Qualifying someone as "drunk" suggests a state of confusion or disorientation leading to an inability to control one's behaviour and would definitely include an incapacity to drive. "Having a couple of drinks" suggests a much lower level of incapacity. In the context of driving the difference is, however, substantially reduced, as "a couple of drinks" might be seen as incapacitating. The Japanese student uses the word "drunk" to mean "had had a drink", something which is not just illegal, but considered a serious offence for a driver in Japan where there is zero tolerance of drinking and driving. There is hence an entanglement between the normally accepted range of possible meanings of a lexical item in one context and the background assumptions in relation to drinking and driving within a different speech community.

JP1 identifies the problem early in the conversation. AM does not. This is clear from the way JP1 explains "drunk" contrastively.

JP1 |I don't know {I don't know that... I don't know} about er the situation in other country :: but er {in Japan} especially in Japan, er ...er You were drunk {drunk} |What is drunk ...er...driving...

AM: Ah

JP1: ...is most severe situation|

The American student with his emphasis on conventional meaning rather than on background assumptions (I didn't say he was drunk, I said he had a drink) implies that the Japanese student, given his limited linguistic ability, has misunderstood the different shades of meaning between 'having a drink' and 'drunk'. However, whatever linguistic difficulty might be in evidence in this transcript, for the Japanese student, the conventional meaning is not detachable from the background context. According to Sperber and Wilson (1989: 15) "a context is a psychological construct, a subset of the hearer's assumptions about the world". In the context of a driving negotiation in Japan, there is no significant distinction between "drunk" and "having a drink". As the Japanese student affirms in the second extract: "In Japan a little bit drink means drunk OK ... in Japanese Law". For the American student, his driver's "couple of drinks" do not represent the most critical factor in determining responsibility. As Sperber and Wilson (1989: 16) suggest "a mismatch between the context envisaged by the speaker and the one actually used by the hearer may result in a misunderstanding".

The Maxims

A non-conventional implicature, according to Downes (1984: 318) is "an inference generated in the course of a conversation in order to preserve the assumption that participants are obeying the maxims". We must, however, be careful not to imply either that they are literally being "obeyed" or that they are sufficient in themselves to generate implicatures. The relationship between implicature and observing the maxims is far from simple. Implicatures are influenced, but not exclusively generated, by perceived violations of maxims in a social context. In the traffic negotiation, the assertion that the escort driver was "drunk" is at issue. If it is perceived to observe suitable norms in relation to the maxim of quality, if it is perceived as true, it is relevant. If, as the American student argues, it is not true that the Escort driver was "drunk", it is irrelevant. It is not the violation or deliberate flouting or otherwise of maxims that is important, but the perception of such violations. The perceived truth and relevance of JP1's statement are hence a central issue of this critical incident. The perception of whether the escort driver can be said to be "drunk", the perception of whether he was over the legal limit in this context, the perceived seriousness of any drink-driving offence are all central, related as they are to culturally determined values. Mey (1994: 74) suggests that the principle and maxims have no absolute form but are "always defined relative to a particular culture". What for an outsider, is a breach of his/her maxim based on perceptions of his/her own cultural norms may be seen to meet acceptable standards of cooperation to insiders in context but in relation to their own cultural norms.

The relationship between (potentially conflicting) maxims is an important part of the inferential process in context. In his retrospective analysis, Grice himself doubts the mutual independence of the maxims which his structure "seems to require" (1989: 371). He opposes, for example, the maxim of quality to the maxim of quantity, stating that "it is irrational to bite off more than you can chew whether the object of your pursuit is hamburgers or the Truth" (op. cit.: 369). Schiffrin (1994: 195) too notes that a maxim "can be violated because of a clash with another maxim". The appropriate quantity

of relevant, truthful information is negotiated, according to some perceived but not necessarily mutually accepted norm or requirement of interaction in a particular context. However, rather than seeing clashes as a weakness of Grice's system, they may be seen as an important aspect of the skill of inferencing. Cook (1992: 150/151) underlines the fact that maxims often stand in opposition to each other - "at times these demands pull in opposite directions, and one may oust another". Cook also refers to Lakoff's "Politeness Principle" which provides three further maxims: "to avoid imposing, to make their hearer feel good, to give him or her options". Cook suggests that "the balance between the two principles changes with the purpose of the communication, and the relationship between the participants". At the root of Brown and Levinson's (1989) Politeness Theory is the notion that inferences are generated by clashes between requirements of politeness and Gricean maxims of conversational efficiency.

Let us temporarily put aside the traffic negotiation to consider a strong negative claim against Grice's theory - that it is "an example of ethnocentrism" Riley (1988: 16/17). Riley suggests that Grice's Principle of Cooperation and its subordinate maxims have been wrongly treated as "universal principles". He concurs with George (in Riley, 1988: 17) who dismisses Grice's maxims as the "local aspirations of middle-class intellectuals". He cites various examples, some anecdotal, stating for example that "there are societies where truth or sincerity varies according to social status or to the chronological position in the interaction as a whole".

Grice's Principle does, however, make a specific reference to the "stage" at which a contribution occurs. This is compatible with Downes' notion of commitment (1984: 274) : "each participant has a commitment slate: that to which he is committed because of what he has stated in the course of the conversation up to the utterance in question". Downes also emphasizes that belief about what "the other party is committed to" has an important influence on the cooperative construction of conversations. In relation to the negotiation of "drunkenness", we can note that the negotiated meaning evolves as the discussion develops. JP1's contextualized meaning of "drunk" is first rejected, but finally accepted by the American student.

Schiffrin (1994: 190-203) emphasizes the cooperative construction of conversation, through the interactional nature of intentions in an inferential process, citing Grice (1975: 58): "A intended the utterance of x to produce some affect in an audience by means of the recognition of this intention". When interlocutors are from widely different backgrounds, we may initially assume that a speaker is breaking a particular maxim, but we have only limited awareness of the speaker's complex matrix of beliefs about what is required at a particular stage of a conversation in a particular context. Schiffrin suggests (op. cit.: 192) that "we can view these intentions as cycling back upon one another". If an utterance is intended to produce a response, this intention has to be recognized by the recipient. The way the recipient represents this intention will, in turn, influence the response s/he will make.

The ethnocentric case is commonly supported by descriptions of exotic ethnic communities who appear to be in serious breach of specific maxims as worded, if they are considered normatively and in isolation, such as the Malagasy "whose form of cooperation seems to consist in making their contributions as opaque, convoluted and non-perspicuous as possible" (Keenan in Mey 1994: 74). (See

also Richards and Schmidt (1983: 124) and Wolfson (1989: 59) We may counter that it would be rather difficult to imagine any context where Grice's maxims are operative as descriptive norms of real conversations. A few hours of self-critical, non-exotic personal experience suffice to show that all of us regularly provide more or less information or truth than is strictly required for an efficient exchange of information and that we do not need to look beyond our own daily conversations to notice this. The question is rather whether some such context-sensitive framework is in operation as part of an inferential process. In the case of the traffic negotiation, maxims of quality and relation are opposed to background knowledge, context and conventional meaning. We may note that it is mainly through the maxims that Grice's paradigm is challenged as highly ethnocentric and that such readings tend to take the maxims rather literally instead of viewing them as aids to making implicatures in context.

Clyne (1996: 13) proposes a revised version of the maxims "in the spirit of his [Grice's] intentions, but with more regard for the communicative patterns of non-English cultures". Clyne concedes (op. cit.: 191) that his revised maxims "do not altogether suit the needs of inter-cultural communication". They are rather intended to better reflect and respect the wide variety of norms in different mono-cultural settings. Clyne (op. cit.: 195) adds one further maxim of his own. "In your contribution, take into account anything you know or can predict about the interlocutor's communication expectations." This final "maxim" is a very useful general statement about the skill of intercultural inferencing, but may be out of place as a maxim, if we see the role of the maxims in terms of opposing notions of optimum efficiency to other considerations, whether social or psychological, in order to generate implicatures. Even before the creation of Clyne's additions, Mey (1993: 65-83) asks whether we really need "all those maxims" (77). There is less need to add further maxims to Grice's framework for intercultural analysis when they are viewed as just one aspect of a complex matrix, a network of beliefs, values and norms about what is required in conversation that influence but do not dominate the inferential process.

Assumptions of Mutual Knowledge

Grice's fifth point is critical in understanding an intercultural process in that it evokes participants' awareness of what they share in terms of the other four factors. Sperber and Wilson (1989: 45) argue that "assumptions of mutual knowledge are never truly warranted". In Sperber and Wilson's view, mutual knowledge is a "philosophers' construct with no close counterpart in reality"(op. cit.: 38). However, they suggest (1) that "the communication process itself gives rise to shared information" and (2) "some sharing of information is necessary if communication is to be achieved".

The perception of shared assumptions is so critical in intercultural inferencing that the final section of this paper will consider Sperber and Wilson's refinement of the theory of inferencing in relation to shared assumptions in some detail. For Sperber and Wilson (op. cit.: 38) , while "all humans live in the same physical environment", this is only a common environment in a very broad sense, within which variability must always be accounted for, for the following reasons:

There are "differences in our narrower physical environments".

1. "Perceptual abilities vary in effectiveness from one individual to another".
2. "Inferential abilities" also vary.

3. "People speak different languages, they have mastered different concepts", so they (a) "construct different representations" and (b) "make different inferences".

Sperber and Wilson point out that even members of the same linguistic communities using the same language do not share the same assumptions as no two people share identical "life histories". They conclude that the notion of common knowledge is untenable and the idea of shared knowledge too vague. In our extract, the Japanese student's contributions indicate an assumption that drinking is incompatible with driving, however little has been drunk, based on his knowledge that it is illegal in Japan to have consumed any alcohol when driving. The American student brings the assumption that "having a drink" or a "couple of drinks" before driving is not a serious issue in this negotiation based on his assumption that a driver is allowed to have a few drinks up to a legal limit.

A notion central to Sperber and Wilson's theory of inferencing is that of "ostension". One speaker "shows something" (49) to the other or deliberately draws something to the attention of the partner(s) in conversation. What is described as the "main thesis" of relevance theory (49) is that "an act of ostension carries a guarantee of relevance and that this fact - which we will call the principle of relevance - makes manifest the intention behind the ostension". This "guarantee" is not a guarantee that an assumption will be "mutually manifest" or that the communicative intention will succeed. It is more a guarantee that something relevant is being made available. In our sample, the Japanese student's assertion "You were drunk" is an act of ostension that carries a guarantee of relevance.

The concept of "manifestness" (39) is central to Sperber and Wilson's theory - "What visible phenomena are for visual cognition, manifest facts are for conceptual cognition." "Manifest" refers to what is "perceptible or inferable" but not necessarily perceived or inferred. The application of manifestness can be extended from facts to "all assumptions", assumptions (02) being defined as "thoughts treated by the individual as representations of the actual world (as opposed to fictions, desires, or representations of representations)". Assumptions are available to be made, but may never be made, unless activated in the process of a conversation. An assumption that Osama bin Laden has never played golf with President Bush is available to be made, is manifest, but may never actually be made unless activated. Based on the idea of "manifestness", Sperber and Wilson (41) then suggest that "a notion of mutual manifestness can be developed which does not suffer from the same psychological implausibility as "mutual knowledge" or "mutual assumptions". "Mutual manifestness" is further linked to the notion of a "mutual cognitive environment" which is "any shared cognitive environment in which it is manifest which people share it".

A mutual cognitive environment (41) (i.e. what actually intersects in the cognitive environments of two people) does not mean that two people make the same assumptions, but "merely that they are capable of doing so". Hence a "mutually manifest assumption" is not a "mutual assumption". One desired result of intercultural communication, if not of all communication, is to modify and to expand mutual knowledge of each other's assumptions. What is actually required, activated and made mutual in a particular conversation is subject to the appreciation and skill of participants and is also subject to constant negotiation.

In this sense the negotiation in the first data extract fails. The challenge by the American student (Where does it say I was drunk then?) indicates that he has missed the relevance of the Japanese student's assumption. JP1 however immediately confirms its relevance in relation to "Japanese Law", but does not convince the American student, as some six minutes later in the second extract a similar exchange is initiated with unchanged assumptions. However, the Japanese student's insistence on "in Japan" allows us to conclude that he has an inferential advantage in that he is aware of an assumption that the American student does not share.

Sperber and Wilson (42) suggest that "the fact that it [an assumption] is manifest to the people who share the environment is itself manifest". However, in intercultural conversation, the possibility that an assumption is not even manifest to a participant who does not share this part of a cognitive environment should also be manifest, available to be assumed, based on our experience of intercultural conversation. We might then also wonder if this is only true of intercultural conversations. Sperber and Wilson (42) conclude that "it is left to the communicator to make correct assumptions about the codes and contextual information the audience will have accessible and be likely to use in the comprehension process." We must therefore make assumptions about which assumptions will be, and especially will not be, mutually manifest. Sperber and Wilson (45) "prefer to look at what kind of assumptions people are actually in a position to make about each other's assumptions, and then see what this implies for an account of communication", pointing out that "failures are to be expected" as a normal part of face to face communication. The assumption that communication is governed by a "failsafe procedure" is likely to exacerbate misunderstandings. Indeed they state that "what is mysterious and requires explanation is not failure but success" (45). This is because of the very nature of inferencing. "The addressee can neither decode nor deduce the communicator's communicative intention. The best he can do is construct an assumption on the basis of the evidence provided by the communicator's ostensive behaviour. For such an assumption, there may be confirmation but no proof." (65)

We have already noted that the American student did not consider the Japanese student's assumption of the "drunkenness" of the Escort driver as true or possibly true in any relevant sense. (I didn't say he was drunk, I said he had a drink.) The repeated act of ostension by the Japanese student in the second extract obliges the American student to re-consider his assumption. The strong ostensive behaviour of the Japanese student has successfully made the American student recognize the relevance of the contribution "you were drunk" in spite of the fact that this contradicts the background assumption his own argument was grounded in and his assumption that language was the major problem of understanding. Skilled intercultural negotiation involves bringing out into the open, ostensibly making manifest or available for inference what is not shared. The discovery of radically opposing assumptions may represent the cultural equivalent of an electric shock. In this context, the American student, a hitherto able and articulate negotiator with considerable intercultural experience, admitted (in later analysis) that he was "paralysed", leading him to accept a very high percentage of blame for his driver with little further negotiation.

Brown and Levinson (1987: 05) characterize Grice's model as an " 'unmarked' or socially neutral (indeed asocial) presumptive framework for communication, the essential assumption is 'no deviation

from rational efficiency without a reason". It is, however, difficult to imagine any framework as being truly "neutral" in a socio-cultural sense. No theorist can be immune to ethnocentric bias. To use any such framework as an aid to intercultural analysis, we need to distance ourselves from any assumptions that the maxims operate alone or represent context-independent, universal normative values. A potentially serious problem of the maxims is that it is difficult to extricate notions such as the notion of "truth" embodied in the maxim of quality from a culturally influenced moral value. Nevertheless, Grice does make a distinction, classifying maxims of morality beyond the range of his maxims of rationality. "There are, of course, all sorts of other maxims (aesthetic, social, or moral in character) such as "Be polite" that are all normally observed by participants in talk exchanges, and these may also generate nonconventional implicatures." (1989: 28, my italics.)

By refining the "untenable" notion of "common background knowledge", Sperber and Wilson invite us to look beyond the Cooperative Principle or the maxims, to consider the impossibility of mutual assumptions about "the accepted purpose or direction of the talk exchange in which you are engaged". They emphasize inferencing as highly complex skilled behaviour which is often unsuccessful. Our extract indicates that even extensive experience accompanied by training in awareness and flexibility are no guarantees of success. The less confident we are of success in perceiving what is mutually manifest, the more likely we are to reach mutually acceptable compromises at critical moments in intercultural negotiations.

Appendix 1

Group Negotiation - Preparation Sheet

You are the insurance agent for the driver. You have to negotiate with the insurance companies of the other drivers. The aim of your negotiation is to decide the % of blame for each driver. Your company would like to pay as little as possible, but would like to settle out of court.

1. Try to defend your driver.
2. Try to accuse the other drivers.
3. Negotiate the percentage each driver's insurance should pay.

This is a very important negotiation for your company. Before the discussion prepare your information carefully in the table below. Write the percentage you can accept in the 3rd column before you negotiate.

Mistakes	% of blame	% of blame negotiated
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Truck Driver

Mini Driver

VW Driver

Escort Driver

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