The Cooperative Principle and Computer-Mediated Communication

by

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A Thesis Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree of Master of Arts in Linguistics, Department of English Language and Literature, Yarmouk University, Irbid, Jordan.

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Some studies of multiparty text-based chat indicate that some of its properties, such as disrupted turn adjacency, can lead to interactional incoherence and relevance breakdown. Notwithstanding these limitations, this mode of computer-mediated communication (CMC) continues to grow in popularity. This study is, therefore, an attempt to evaluate relevance maintenance in group text chat on an Internet Relay Chat (IRC) channel. This study had two major goals: the first one was to find out if disrupted turn adjacency interfered with the observance of the relevance maxim in IRC interactions; at the same time, it endeavored to pinpoint the various strategies that CMC users rely on for maintaining coherence in their conversations.

The results show that there is a high degree of disrupted turn adjacency and overlapping conversational threads in IRC interactions. Nevertheless, few instances of miscommunication were the result of disrupted adjacency. Ability of users to adapt to the constraints imposed by the medium might be a plausible explanation for this finding. IRC users, in general, observed the relevance maxim in the construction of their messages; cooperative interaction appeared to be the
norm. In addition to cohesive devices, other strategies were used to maintain coherence. It was, for instance, possible to establish the relatedness of non-adjacent relevant utterances based on sequencing. Uninformed assumptions about common ground between participants were found to contribute to the occurrence of miscommunication. The study concludes with suggestions for design improvements to the IRC system of group text chat and its client software.

**Keywords:** computer-mediated communication, cooperative principle, relevance, Internet Relay Chat, coherence.
Chapter 1

Introduction and Theoretical Background

1.1 Introduction

The introduction of the cooperative principle (CP) by Grice was one of the most influential developments in the field of pragmatics. According to Grice, in a talk exchange both the speaker and listener cooperate in order to make the conversation successful. The CP is expressed as follows: “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).

Grice subdivided the CP into four different maxims, which are commonly known as the maxims of conversation: Quantity, Quality, Relation and Manner. These maxims can be seen as criteria for determining whether a conversational contribution is cooperative or not. In order to determine the cooperativeness of a conversational contribution, one only needs to check it against these maxims. If it complies with them, it is assumed to be in compliance with the CP as well.

Grice identified several different ways in which people can violate the maxims. For example, a speaker can violate the maxim of quantity by using redundant expressions for no specific purpose (Weizman, 2007). Functional redundancy, however, is not considered a violation of the maxim.
A lot of research has been conducted with respect to the application of the Gricean maxims to spoken conversation in the various social contexts. In contrast, there is not as much research covering the application of these maxims to computer-mediated communication (CMC). One is inclined to believe that the CP could be implemented differently in CMC due to the many vital differences that hold between CMC and face-to-face conversation in the real world. The people interacting in text-based CMC contexts are unable to make full use of their communicative inventory. There are several factors which render CMC more problematic than typical real-world conversation. For example, in CMC, most people choose to remain anonymous; they use nicknames instead of their real names and they give little background information about themselves, if any at all. Also, the participants in a CMC interaction do not share the same context in terms of place and time.

CMC users, however, have developed new techniques for establishing context and avoiding misunderstandings. The use of emoticons (also known as smileys) is a technique that CMC discussants use to make up for the absence of facial gestures and emotional cues. In text-based CMC, interactants cannot make use of paralinguistic cues such as intonation and voice tones. One strategy that is commonly used to compensate for this shortcoming is the use of capitalization to signify shouting or emphasis.
Furthermore, various strategies are used by CMC users to keep their interactions contextualized, relevant and coherent. For instance, it is common use for participants in Internet forums to quote either fully or partially the message to which they are replying. A user is more likely to do this when there are other messages intervening between his/her reply and the message to which s/he is responding. This practice gives context to those replies and maintains the consistency and coherence of the forum discussions (Serfaty, 2002).

1.2 Definition of Terms

Maxim: the term Grice uses for the four sub-principles of his cooperative principle. The four maxims enjoin the speaker to strive to provide appropriately informative, well-founded, relevant contributions to conversation in a perspicuous manner. These may be ‘hedged’ by meta-lingual glosses which indicate the extent to which the speaker is abiding by one or more of them. Examples include I mean and by the way (Grundy, 2000).

Cooperative Principle (CP): the central presumption underlying Grice’s theory of conversational implicature (1975) which enjoins speakers to make relevant, expectable contributions to conversation (Grundy, 2000).

Computer-mediated Communication (CMC): any communicative transaction which occurs through the use of two or more networked computers (Herring, 1996).
**Emoticons (Smileys):** graphical shapes used in CMC to indicate the emotional state of the chatter. They are termed as the paralanguage of the Internet (Crystal, 2006).

**Internet Relay Chat (IRC):** a popular way of online chatting, which is done via a special browser or IRC client such as Mirc and Pirc. IRC contains a large number of chatting rooms, known as channels, negotiating various topics. The IRC system requires all channel names to be preceded by a hash sign (#). IRC users can save their conversations as a ‘log file’. In addition, ‘overlaps and interruptions are impossible’ in IRC (Werry, 1996).

**Synchronous and Asynchronous CMC:** synchronous CMC refers to communication that takes place between two or more users simultaneously, i.e., in real time. Asynchronous CMC, on the other hand, describes those CMC environments where the exchanges between users are not simultaneous, i.e., delayed.

**Listserv:** The term Listserv has been used to refer to a few early electronic mailing list software applications that allowed a sender to dispatch one email to the list, and then transparently sending it on to the addresses of the subscribers to the list. (Wikipedia, 2012)
1.3 The Cooperative Principle

In ‘Logic and Conversation’, Grice introduced four conversational maxims and the cooperative principle. The CP runs as follows:

Make your 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 fact that Grice expressed the CP in the imperative mood has led some critics of his work to describe it as being prescriptive. Thomas (1995) pointed out that the CP is not telling speakers how they ought to behave but it is merely suggesting that people engaged in a conversation expect each other to abide by these rules. In Leech’s terms (1983), the maxims proposed by Grice are ‘descriptive rather than prescriptive’ in nature. The CP is ‘about how people use language’ and not about how they ought to use it (Levinson, 1983). The wording of the CP has led some commentators to assume that Grice was suggesting that people are always cooperative in conversational interaction. This assumption is, however, inaccurate because Grice himself stated in his paper that there are numerous occasions when people fail to observe the CP.

1.3.1 The Four Conversational Maxims

In addition to the CP, Grice (1975) put forward four maxims of conversation which he considered as subdivisions of the CP. These maxims are formulated as follows: