

Cooperation in Linguistic Communication

In what sense of “cooperation” does one cooperate in linguistic communication? I want to address this question by looking at the Cooperative Principle (CP) introduced by Paul Grice (1967). The principle applies to linguistic communication, but it is not restricted to linguistic utterances. One can intentionally and openly communicate by using gestures or almost any other sign. But for the principle to apply, the communication must be of the complexity of linguistic communication.

Grice formulates the CP as follows (Grice 1967: 26):

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.

It has been objected that this principle is too strong. For example, Asa Kasher argues that communication can take place without a common purpose: “at no stage in a conversation is there an accepted direction which determines the degree of appropriateness of the contributions by the conversants [...] If the conversants have no mutual aims and the conversation has no accepted direction, there are still possibilities for cooperation” (1976: 202). Dan Sperber and Deirdre Wilson argue that communication may take place without a common purpose “over and above the aim of achieving successful communication” (1986: 161-162; see also 1995: 267-268). Richard Grandy argues that in order for two people to continue a conversation no common goal is necessary, but only that “each has an expectation of benefiting from the conversation”, and he compares some conversations with poker games (1989: 521). It is not entirely clear whether these arguments are in fact an objection to the CP, because it is not clear what the CP says precisely. A closer look at the CP is needed in order to assess the objection.

I will distinguish between two notions of common purpose: having the same purpose, and having the same purpose while having common knowledge about that purpose. On the basis of Grice’s analysis of “meaning” I will also distinguish between the “understanding of a communicative behaviour” and “successful communication”. The objection may thus be understood as saying that understanding is the only necessary common purpose. But all the cases that have been forward do not show that the objection holds. The objection may also be understood as saying that there is the same purpose that communicators have, but they do not have common knowledge about it. In this case, the objection holds, but only against the Cooperative Principle as a principle underlying rational cooperation, not as a principle used to generate conversational implicatures.

References

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