An Aspectual Analysis of Grice’s Maxim of Relation: Compared
With the Principle of Relevance

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The Cooperative Principle proposed by Herbert Paul Grice in 1967 requires speakers’ utterances to comply with the objective of discourses, while receivers construct assumptions by reasoning speakers’ implicatures. He set some maxims and sub-maxims to attempt to explain how the hearers get what is meant from what is said by speakers. What interests me is that the Maxim of Relation only includes one simple annotation—Be relevant without any other sub-maxims. Honestly, this is too obscure. So I would like to analyse Grice’s Maxim of Relation from its definition as well as classification, the discourse-topic and the relationship with context. And, more remarkable, the research method of this article is to explore the essence of the Maxim of Relation based on the opposite side as Dan Sperber and Deirdre Susan Moir Wilson’s the Principle of Relevance (Relevance Theory).

Keywords: the Cooperative Principle, the Maxim of Relation, definition, discourse-topic, relationship with context, the Principle of Relevance

Introduction

In 1967, Herbert Paul Grice proposed the famous principle of pragmatics—The Cooperative Principle. Although linguists had different views on its merits and demerits during half a century, there is no doubt that Grice’s Cooperative Principle has played a decisive role in the pragmatic field. One of the bone of contentions is about the Maxim of Relation which he barely discussed it. Grice once wrote:

Though the maxim itself is terse, its formulation conceals a number of problems that exercise me a good deal: questions about what different kinds and focuses of relevance there may be, how these shift in the course of a talk exchange, how to allow for the fact that subjects of conversations are legitimately changed, and so on. I find the treatment of such questions exceedingly difficult, and I hope to revert to them in later work. (1989, p. 27)

From the words above, we can infer that Grice noticed the problem about the ambiguity of the Maxim of Relation, but he was not able to explain it in a clear way. Dascal even thought that it will be more reasonable as well as appropriate if we regard the Cooperative Principle as the Relevant Principle (He, 2007, p. 20). What’s more, he also distinguished pragmatic relevance from semantic relevance. We will talk about this in the following pages. Sperber and Wilson epitomized Grice’s concept about the Maxim of Relation and established the Principle of Relevance.

Principle and Maxim: The Goals for Two Theories

Be relevant is the only super-maxim of Grice’s Maxim of Relation. It might be interesting and telling...
about the reason why Grice named the Maxim of Relation instead of the Principle of Relation. The word *Maxim* often implies a rule for good or sensible behaviour. According Grice’s opinion (He & Ran, 1998, p. 100), both sides of one communication, including at least the speaker and the hearer, must know the Cooperative Principle and the hearer should be able to recognize whether the speaker has violated one or several maxims or sub-maxims, leading to producing the conversational implicature. In fact, *Maxim* conveys such implicit meanings that a series of rules are created to provide some theoretical basis for reasonability of the conversational implicature as well as offer a new perspective for us to analyze and understand the conversational implicature (Wang, 2016, p. 182). To some extent, the Maxim of Relation can be regarded as one specific rule which can be violated. But there is no doubt that if we consider the Maxim as the rule, it must not be improper because rules are always associated with the imperative sentences, like *Do this right now!* The truth, however, is that this kind of comprehension might mislead us to understand the Maxim (Liang, 2006, p. 130). From Saeed’ viewpoint (2000, p. 182), receivers will translate the speakers’ utterance into their assumptions as declarative sentences. In his mind, *Maxim* should be regarded as the concept of assumptions, and worked as the starting-point of hearers’ reasoning process. Lyons (2000, p. 100) also expressed similar opinions. Anyhow, the meaning of *Maxim* as the rule is just a start and also fundamental to some extent.

But *Principle* is not totally the same compared with *Maxim*. If we seem *Maxim* as one rule, Principle can be considered as the concept of the law. In the Principle of Relevance, both sides of the communication do not have to comply with the principle, or even know it, because in Sperber and Wilson’s (1986, p. 158) own words:

> The set of assumptions I which the communicator intends to make manifest to the addressee is relevant enough to make it worth the addressee’s while to process the ostensive stimulus.

In Sperber and Wilson’s idea, each ostensive communicative act is supposed to have such characteristic as relevance, resulting in the consequence that even if someone would like to break the Principle of Relevance, they are unlikely to violate it. The purpose of the principle is not to handle some practical problems via pragmatic theories, but to give an overview of the all-sided cognitive principles of relevance.

**Relevance and Relation: Two Different Reasoning Process**

To be frank, this title might not so appropriate to the extent because the sub-maxim of the Maxim of Relation is *Be relevant*, pretty being like the Principle of Relevance. But we can also find something interesting and valuable from the naming of these two proper nouns, namely, two different reasoning processes.

The meaning of the word *Relation* is that *If you talk about the relation of one thing to another, you are talking about the ways in which they are connected*. That is to say, the aim of the Maxim of Relation is to find out the way about the procedure which includes how speakers produce utterance and hearers comprehend them. Moreover, Grice also wanted to discover the generation and inference of the conversational implicature.

While *Relevance* is the concept of one topic being *connected* to another topic in a way that makes it useful to consider the second topic when considering the first. So if we intend to find out the intention of the naming of the Principle of Relevance, we need to figure out what is the *first topic* and the *second*. I will illustrate these two variables in the following words.

The main part of this section is the comparison of two theories. In Grice’s opinion, if the speaker wants to convey implications to the hearer, the hearer must a sequence of procedures for the discourse. As shown in the following figure.
Speaker’s Thought or Intention ⇒ Literal Meanings ⇒ Implicature Based on Literal Meanings ⇒ Thought or Intention Understood by Hearer.

This kind of reasoning process can get the procedure of an effective utterance. And the role of the Maxim of Relation is to illustrate how the hearer understands the implicature from the literal meaning which is implied by the speaker. There is one saying that Relation can be deemed as the relationship between a series of propositions and discourse-topics, which decides the discourse coherence and the success of communication (Brown & Yule, 1983, p. 38).

Meantime, Sperber and Wilson’s the Principle of Relevance also has such similar reasoning process. As shown below.

Speaker’s Thought or Intention ± Context-mediated Information ⇒ Encoded ⇒ Transmitted ⇒ Decoded ± Context-mediated Information ⇒ Thought or Intention Understood by Hearer

From the figure, it is obvious that Sperber and Wilson especially noticed the variable of context-mediate information, which will lead to the variable of the hearer’s understanding from a narrow sense.

From the broad sense, by the way, although Sperber and Wilson insisted that the Cooperative Principle and the Principle of Relevance have no direct successive relationships (Jiang, 2014, p. 2). But it is clear that the Maxim of Relation has something to do with the Principle of Relevance where Sperber and Wilson put forward their own ideas and try to perfect Grice’s the Maxim of Relation which he left off.

The Classification of the Maxim of Relation in Wang’s Opinion

Wang Chuanjing (1994, p. 40) has once listed the six sub-maxims of the Maxim of Relation as follows.
The Maxim of Relation:
(1) Be relevant to the meanings and implications;
(2) Be relevant to the reference;
(3) Be relevant to the speech acts (illocutionary forces);
(4) Be relevant to the conversational goals (conversational demands);
(5) Be relevant to the communicative situations (context);
(6) Be relevant to the discourse-topics.

From Wang’s perspective, the concept of Relation is a relative term which fits with Sperber and Wilson’s idea. He thinks that the Maxim of Relation only including the sub-maxim Be relevant is quite not enough. The reason is that only when the speaker assumes the relation in the discourse is the hearer able to understand what is meant. So Wang deems that it is possible and reasonable to separate from the Cooperative Principle. Whether the classification appropriate or not is not the key-point of this part, while his idea enlightens us that we might consider the Maxim of Relation as a separate one in the discourse analysis.

In addition, compared with Sperber and Wilson’s theory, the notion of the discourse-topic and context-mediated information are the two common ideas. In the following two chapters, these two concepts will be illustrated by comparing the Maxim of Relation with the Principle of Relevance to figure out Grice’s idea in a clearer way.

The Discourse-topic of Grice’s the Cooperative Principle

Before we discuss the concept of discourse topic of Grice’s the Cooperative Principle, we need to be absolutely clear on the notion of the conversational goal.
Grice (1975, p. 45) once said:

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.

This purpose or direction might be determined at the beginning, like an issue which is decided before the discourse starts, or it changes gradually with the conversational process. In other words, it can be determined or not which means each participant in a discourse has some kind of major degree of freedom, like a casual conservation in our daily life (Grice, 1989, p. 26). These words give us a hint as to tell us the fact that Grice’s conversational goal is the discourse-topic.

Grice (1989, p. 28) also admitted that the purpose of the conversation, according to his statement to the notion of the maxim, is to exchange information in a most effective way. But what is clear is that the former is too narrow. This part should be expanded. The more general purpose might include the goal to influence or guide others’ behaviors. That is to say, in the narrow sense, the conversational goal is to exchange information in a most effective way; in the broad sense, the conversational goal is to influence or guide others’ behaviors.

Now, we list these three conversational goals in a clear way:

1. the discourse-topic;
2. to exchange information in a most effective way;
3. to influence or guide others’ behaviors.

Goal (1) is specific while Goal (2) and (3) are abstract. According to the Speech Act Theory, speech is also a kind of act, and its ultimate aim is to influence or guide others’ behaviors, which is the conversational goal (3). In order to realize (3), information exchange is necessary because the speaker needs to ask the hearer to understand his meaning or implicature from his own words at first, which is the conversational goal (2). But the discourse is unlikely to be made up of irrelevant words. Information for the speaker and hearer’s exchange, therefore, must involve one or several relevant topics. And the discourse for the most effective information exchange should start with and be about with one or several relevant topics (Jiang, 2014, p. 3).

Upon all these points, the Cooperative Principle, the conversational goal as the standard, has at least two implicature or relation:

① What is said and what is meant should be relevant to the discourse-topic;
② What is said and what is meant should be beneficial to exchange information, and even influence or guide others’ behaviors.

Obviously, relation ① is sort of Grice’s the Maxim of Relation. At the meantime, the Maxim of Relation is one part of the Cooperative Principle. All these show that the concept of Relation is of special status in Grice’s whole theoretical system. Grice also thought that before the hearer realizes whether information is given enough or not by the speaker, the hearer should receive the discourse-topic at first. Only when the receiver recognizes the body of the Relation can he make the judgment on whether the information is adequate or not.

All these statement indicates that Relation in Grice’s theory is the relationship between discourses and topics. Unlike Sperber and Wilson’s the Principle of Relevance, they use the concept of assumptions instead of discourses. This causes the notion of Relevance being abstract and fuzzy because we have no idea how to define Relevance, not the relationship between topics and speakers or the relationship between topics and hearers.
In Grice’s mind, relation ① is connected to the Maxim of Relation and relation ② is associated with the Cooperative Principle. However, Sperber and Wilson’s theory does not discriminate between relation ① and relation ②.

The Relationship With Context-mediated Information of the Principle of Relevance and the Maxim of Relation

From the two figures of reasoning process as shown in section 3, the cognition of context-mediated information is one of the main differences between two theories. In fact, two kinds of cognition about the context are totally disparate.

As mentioned in the previous section, in the Principle of Relevance, the context-mediated information, as an independent variable, results in the change of the understanding of the hearer, as a dependent variable. Here are Wilson’s own words about “context”.

By “context” here, I mean not simply the preceding linguistic text, or the environment I which the utterance takes place, but the set of assumptions brought to bear in arriving at the intended interpretation. These may be drawn from the preceding text, or from observation of the speaker and what is going on in the immediate environment, but they may also be drawn from cultural or scientific knowledge, common-sense assumptions, and, more generally, any item of shared or idiosyncratic information that the hearer has access to at the time. (1994, p. 35)

The “context” here in the Principle of Relevance is a kind of psychological construct, and a series of assumptions which constitute the hearer’s cognitive context, just like the Sperber and Wilson’s (1986, p. 122) definition of Relevance.

*An assumption is relevant in a context if and only if it has some contextual effect in the certain context.*

Moreover, it is a fluid notion and communicators will expand and enlarge their cognitive contexts, such as the hearer’s required encyclopedic knowledge, the relevant context information and the relevant context around the hearer.

What is more, Sperber and Wilson noticed the function of the hearer’s cognitive effort which is based on the reasoning process named as Ostensive-inferential Communication. At the beginning of the discourse, the speaker expresses his informative intention or communicative intention via the ostensive act to the hearer and then the hearer reasons the speaker’s intention based on the ostensive act. But because of the different context-levels under normal conditions, the hearer needs to make the adequate cognitive effort to obtain the speaker’s assumptions, and to attain the relevance of the discourse. The hearer will seek more cognitive contexts with the continuity of the discourse to guarantee the conversations going smoothly.

All in all, Sperber and Wilson emphasized the dynamic feature of context-mediated information during the utterance. They regard the “context” as a variable, including a series of constantly changing propositions which can be also considered as the result of the hearer’s continuous choices during the process of the utterance interpretation. So in their mind, *Relevance* is a constant and relative term, depending on the contextual effect and the hearer’s cognitive effort.

In terms of Grice’s the Maxim of Relation, he focused on the research of the conversational implicature. In order to keep the discourse smoothly, the speaker and the listener will communicate with each other based on the Cooperative Principle. If the speaker intends to violate one or several maxims, it means that the speaker will give the certain conversational implicature to the hearer. In Grice’s reasoning mode, the context is known by both sides of the utterance and predetermined before the discourse. Such cognition carries
significant limitations for the interpretation of Grice’s Relation. Under the predetermined context, some
originally relevant discourses will seem less relevant (Miao, 1997, p. 10). To illustrate the idea, I will give the
example (a) and (b).
(a) Peter: I’m tired.
Marry: If you’re tired. I’ll make the meal.
(b) Peter: I’m tired.
Marry: I’ll make the meal.
In example (a), Peter and Marry’s dialogue is obviously relevant. In example (b), however, the context of
Peter’s words cannot help us explain Marry’s. This means (b) is irrelevant. In order to make the less relevant
discourse become relevant one, adding such assumptions which are beneficial for the utterance relevance into
the current context. One obvious negative effect is that the listener has to expend more cognitive effort, thus
influencing the original relevance of the utterance. From this perspective, in Grice’s theory, context-mediated
information is a constant term. However, with the cognition that assumptions which are beneficial for the
utterance relevance are added into the current context, Relation changes continuously, which means it is a
variable.

Conclusion
Sperber and Wilson’s the Principle of Relevance is intended to establish the cognitive theoretical
framework for discourse interpretation in the macroscopic view. Whereas, Grice’s the Cooperative Principle,
including the Maxim of Relation, is aimed at exploring the speech communication on the micro level. It is the
different research objectives that lead to the different cognitive outcomes.
As far as the Maxim of Relation, because of its special status in Grice’s conversational implicature theory,
Sperber and Wilson presented the relation-focused Principle of Relevance. Although the problems of the
Maxim of Relevance posed a headache for Grice, the research on the Principle of Relevance just makes up the
gap existing in the notion of Relation and is supposed to be more specific. But for some aspects, like the
discourse-topic of the Principle of Relevance, due to the abstraction of the concept of Relevance, Sperber and
Wilson’s theory is not clearer and explicit, but vague and implicit.
Finally, on account of the highlight of my paper, the Principle of Relevance just serves as the contrast
theory compared with the Maxim of Relation. Therefore, some content of the Principle of Relevance is not
mentioned, such as the cognitive principle of Sperber and Wilson’s theory.

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