Gricean Maxims and Reading Instruction
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Proceedings of the Sixteenth Annual Meeting of the Berkeley Linguistics Society (1990), pp. 381-389

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Introduction. This paper is an application of linguistic pragmatics to the area of literacy education. My goal is to explore how the Gricean concept of conversational cooperation and the maxims which support it (Grice 1975) apply, or apply in unusual ways, or fail to apply to the reading tasks which beginning readers encounter in classrooms.

My thesis will be that while the cooperative principle and maxims do govern classroom reading activities, as they govern other communicative events, the maxims operate under constraints that apply only in the classroom. These unique constraints have less to do with differences between spoken and written language than with differences between classroom discourse, whether spoken or written, and discourse outside of classrooms.

Theoretical Background. Educational research in the past twenty years has described how classroom discourse differs from discourse outside of classrooms (Sinclair & Coultard 1975, Mehan 1979, Gumperz 1981, Heath 1982). This research shows for example that in classrooms topics and turn taking are often centralized and teacher-controlled, known answer questions are common, and answers to questions are often evaluated by teachers.

Other research has focused on the pragmatic demands of the written texts and of texts used in reading instruction (Griffin 1977, Morgan & Green 1980, Fillmore & Kay 1983, Lakoff no date).

It seems clear that Grice's cooperative principle and maxims apply in the literate transaction between readers and writers (Tierney & LaZansky 1972). That is, readers read with the assumption that writers intend to communicate, that they wish to be efficient in their communication, and that a relationship of relevance exists between the sentences in an extended written discourse. Consequently, readers interpret items in written texts with reference to the assumed intentions communicated in the text. This interaction between reader and writer through the text relates to what Fillmore (1974) has called the INTERNAL CONTEXTUALIZATION of discourse, 'the possible properties of the world depicted or implied by the text ... the worlds in the imagination of the creator and interpreters of the text' (V-5). Readers are justified in making inferences about this text-internal world based on the assumption that conversational maxims are in effect.

Literature does have unique demands, but it does not violate the cooperative principle. The obscurity of certain poetry reflects unique communicative intentions. We do not judge works of fiction by the same standard of truthfulness (QUALITY) as conversations, but readers do apply tests of plausibility and internal consistency to works of fiction.

But in addition to the creation of an imaginary world, readers and writers use literacy as part of their participation in society: publishing and reading newspapers to keep people informed, technical manuals to guide the actions of workers, or paperback novels to keep authors, publishers and printers employed and readers entertained during their leisure time. These social relations relate to the EXTERNAL CONTEXTUALIZATION of written discourse, 'the worlds in which the text can be appropriately used'.

It is the external contextualization of texts which will be the focus of my discussion. In classrooms the external context of literacy is very much in evidence, since there texts are not read by individuals in seclusion for their own pleasure, but by groups

of children and adults to fulfill a variety of classroom tasks. I would like to explore how Gricean maxims apply to reading tasks in classrooms. I will be showing what children need to learn in order to use texts appropriately in school.

Data and Method. The data presented here comes primarily from a year-long observational study of reading-related activities of first graders in two Bay Area public school classrooms. The classroom data includes transcripts of audiotape recordings of children working with teachers in reading groups and on their own doing workbook exercises. Additional data comes from widely-used basal readers and workbook pages completed by children in a midwestern first grade classroom.

Variety of Classroom Tasks. Two types of texts will be of primary interest: the stories found in basal readers, and the pages of exercises found in basal workbooks. My contention is that elementary school children learn to interpret written texts in terms of the goals associated with typical classroom tasks. A typical elementary classroom day consists of a succession of different social-instructional contexts, each with a different set of texts, different tasks and norms of talk and reading, and sometimes different participants. Some of these typical classroom contexts are Rug Time, when class business is transacted, Reading Time, when children work in teacher-led groups and independently on tasks associated with basal workbooks, and Sustained Silent Reading Time, when children read independently in books of their own choosing.

From a Gricean perspective, children and teachers adjust their goals for different tasks, and these adjustments affect the type of cooperation required and the interpretation of conversational maxims. That is, a response or interpretation that might be appropriate in one setting (relevant or quantitatively sufficient) might be viewed as inappropriate and uncooperative in another. Conversational cooperation is dependent on a shared understanding of the goals implicit in each context.

I will now present illustrations of how three Gricean maxims - QUANTITY, RELATION and MANNER - apply to the contextualization of written texts in elementary school classrooms.

Quantity. The maxim of QUANTITY states that one should be as informative as necessary in a given situation. I will examine primer texts and workbook texts as they relate to QUANTITY. From the standpoint of the internal contextualization of texts, primer texts taken on their own might be considered uncooperative due to their artificially controlled language and their dependence on accompanying pictures. To be quantitatively cooperative, primer texts need to be interpreted in connection with their accompanying pictures and the talk and tasks in reading lessons.

Example 1: The Fire Dog (Clymer & Venezky 1982)

> '"Have you come to see us?" the man asked.
> "We have", she said.
> "We have come to see what you do here."'

Taken on its own, these opening lines of the story "The Fire Dog" do not contain sufficient information to interpret the pronouns you, us, we, and she, the definite expression the man, and the deictic expressions come and here. It is only when the accompanying picture is added, showing a women a four children talking to a man in front of a fire station, that the text becomes somewhat clearer. The text is clarified further by the teacher-led discussion, which is scripted in the teacher's manual with directions

such as 'As pupils study the picture..., explain that the storybook children and their classmates and their teacher are on a field trip to a neighborhood fire station. ... Aid pupils in recognizing the people they know... Ask: What does the man mean by us when he asks, "Have you come to see us?"'.

Workbook exercises also demand a special interpretation of the maxim of QUANTITY. In Example 2 (Alvermann et al. 1989), a first grader completed a worksheet exercise by using all the possible responses from the top of the page to fill in the sentence blanks. That is, he used his knowledge that each word at the top of the page should be used in one sentence. However, after deciding that the word mix completed the second sentence, 'I will get paint mix', said Carlos., he apparently filled in the wrong answer to the last item by writing in the remaining word today without reading the resulting sentence: 'You can today blue paint and yellow paint,' said Max. (The original responses are visible in dotted lines underneath the solid line corrections.)

In Example 3 (Alvermann et al. 1989), the same child answered the questions correctly and with sufficient information for normal conversational exchanges - that is incorporating new information, or comments, and leaving out given information, or topics. But the child's responses were judged incorrect by the classroom standards of QUANTITY, which required the use of "complete sentences." Under the teacher's direction, the child corrected items 1 and 2. Interestingly, item 2 was made into an acceptable sentence by removing the conjunction because, the logical tie between response and question. These worksheet examples demonstrate the incompatibility of judgments of QUANTITY in the classroom and outside it.

Relation. The maxim of RELATION states that one should be relevant to the communicative task at hand. Within written texts, an assumption of coherence ties together sentences. For example, temporal and causal ties are assumed to account for the relevance of successive sentences.

In terms of their appropriate use, classroom texts must be interpreted in relation to the task at hand in any given context, and these external tasks will determine the relevance of texts and their parts. For example, in order to successfully interpret and use worksheets, children must not only read the worksheets literally, but interpret what they read and see in terms of the typical tasks associated with them. Example 4 occurred while two first graders were working side by side on a worksheet.

Example 4. Independent Work

Synopsis: Alex and Meera are doing a cut and paste work sheet, where pictures of objects must be pasted in sh or ch areas depending on their initial digraph sound. Well into the activity this exchange occurs:

Alex:	I can't find another one that goes with this.
Meera:	... Ship.
Alex:	... I thought it was boat.
Meera:	But. See. To make it go, it had to be ship. Because SH.

In Example 4, Meera interpreted the picture as a representation of the word ship because she realized its relevance to the workbook task of distinguishing two digraph sounds. Alex's interpretation of the picture as representing boat did not take into account the relevant contrast. This example shows how children learn to interpret workbook pictures in terms of typical tasks which test discrimination of letter sounds.

During reading lessons, pages of text are often read to achieve the goal of answering teachers' questions. Children perform this reading task most successfully when they have in mind the typical functions of reading within pre-formatted lessons. Example 5 shows how a teacher's request to label a picture actually serves, within the lesson format, to introduce the title of the selection to be read.

Example 5. Reading Group

Synopsis: This exchange takes place as children are preparing to read a one page poem entitled "Clay" (Aaron et al. 1983). The picture shows a girl making toys out of clay.

Teacher:	What's this girl look like she's working with. (points to picture)
Talya:	Toys.
Teacher:	No, she's making them. She's making her own toys.
Talya:	Clay.
Teacher:	She's using clay. And that's the title of the poem.

In this excerpt, Talya's first response to the teacher's question is based on her examination of the pictures. Although it is literally correct, the teacher evaluates this response as inappropriate, since it is not relevant to the unstated goal of deducing the poem's title and overall topic. Talya's second response represents a second attempt to be relevant to the topic at hand. The teacher evaluates this response as appropriate.

A final example of how the maxim of RELATION operates during reading lessons involves adult responses to reading errors (miscues) and hesitations during oral reading by children. If we assume that the shared task during reading lessons is to read through a given selection, we might expect a competent adult reader to assist a child by reading words the child is having difficulty with. However, if we view the task as one of assisting children in becoming independent readers, then the appropriate response is to assist the children in marshalling strategies for decoding the word themselves. Adult responses to oral reading errors during a cooking activity are presented in Example 6.

Example 6. Cooking Center

Synopsis: Lydia (a parent) is copying a baking recipe from a book onto a display card as she directs several children in mixing.

Lydia:	Here's a tricky word. (copying "KNEAD")
Sandra:	"Ke:n:d. Ke:n:d." (reading)
Lydia:	The K is silent.
Sandra:	"Nend. Nend. Ed. Nended. Nend. Nend."
Lydia:	Instead of trying to figure it out by what it looks like, think about what we're going to do to it now.
Cathy:	Knead it.
Sandra:	"Knead".
Lydia:	"Knead". Yea.

In this episode, the refusal of the adult (Lydia) to pronounce the word knead for the children can be interpreted as an uncooperative move in the task of decoding the recipe together. But this refusal and providing graphophonemic and semantic clues to decoding are cooperative moves in the task of training children in independent word decoding.

Manner. The maxim of MANNER states that one should be clear and orderly relevant to the task at hand, avoiding obscurity and ambiguity. There might be variations in what counts as clear and orderly depending on different tasks. For example, some modern poetry may be interpreted as too obscure and ambiguous, unless one assumes that ambiguity contributes to communicative intentions which differ from those of ordinary conversation.

In terms of classroom reading tasks, clarity and orderliness must be judged in terms of localized goals. As I showed in the discussion of QUANTITY, primer texts are unique in the way readers must construct an imaginary world. They are also unique in how they are used. While they are often in the form of stories, their function in the classroom is not to provide pleasure during leisure time, but to provide practice in reading for beginners and a basis of evaluation of children's reading for teachers. Thus, when children read primer texts during reading lessons, their conversational contribution, in the form of how they read and how much they read, must be appropriate to the instructional goals of reading groups and not to the pleasure-seeking goals of reading literature.

In reading groups, children learn appropriate manners of reading: to read orally or silently, in chorus or individually, and they also 'follow along' while the teacher or another child reads. For example, during the initial read-through of a basal story, a teacher instructs the children in the appropriate manner of reading:

Example 7. Reading Group

Teacher: Read the first two sentences to yourself.(points to text) Put your thumb up when you're finished, hand up if you need help.

The following example, also from a round-robin reading activity, shows the consequence of a child's inappropriate manner of reading:

Example 8. Reading Group

Synopsis: During round robin reading the teacher discourages Talya from paging ahead in her book.

Talya: (sings, flips ahead in book)
Teacher: Talya, QUIT flipping your book. When we're in a GROUP you have to read differently than when you're reading by yourself. You can't just turn pages right off cause sometimes there's other things that are important too. Okay? About reading?
Talya: (sighs)

In this example, Talya has difficulty conforming to the pacing of reading determined by the teacher-directed reading lesson. Her impulse to read ahead conflicted with the teachers instructional agenda. The teacher tries to explain to Talya why her behavior is inappropriate in this situation. In other classrooms contexts, such as student-directed Free Reading times, children are free to read silently and at their own pace.

Conclusions. During classroom reading activities, then, children learn to understand cooperation in terms of conversational norms unique to classrooms, and indeed unique to localized task contexts. In particular, children must interpret the maxims of RELATION

(be relevant), of QUANTITY (be as informative as necessary), and of MANNER (be clear and orderly) in terms of unusual and localized classroom tasks and goals. This reformulation of conversational maxims is a problem facing children as they seek to succeed in learning to read and write in American classrooms.

The examples presented here raise a questions: How do participants and observers of discourse, whether in or out of classrooms, recognize common purposes? What may occur in some classroom situations is a failure of teachers and children to establish and maintain shared purposes. That is, teachers may view children as uncooperative, or children may view teachers in a like manner, if they fail to construct shared cooperative frames of reference for literacy activities. Without this shared frame of reference, children's or teachers' contributions may be judged disorderly, insufficient or irrelevant to the task at hand.

Two pragmatic problems face children as they encounter classroom reading instruction. One is that reading lessons are formats which are often pre-planned by teachers to fulfill certain instructional goals, rather than the unplanned and jointly constructed conversations children are used to. A second problem facing children is that of recognizing the goal of reading activities to be instructional, rather than recreational or functional. Children may judge the texts and reading tasks they encounter in class as uncooperative if they evaluate them in aesthetic or functional terms, rather than in terms of providing instruction and practice in reading and writing.

A recent movement in literacy education, the whole language movement (Goodman 1986), builds on the assumption that literacy acquisition is quite similar to language acquisition, and that it should proceed through literacy experiences which have functional and aesthetic value rather than purely instructional ones.

From a pragmatic perspective, the whole language movement seems to offer children opportunities to engage in child-directed and open-ended interactions with natural language written texts in place of pre-planned and teacher-directed tasks associated with basal stories and workbooks. But whether whole language instruction is the answer to problems facing children in classroom reading instruction or not, it is important that teachers and researchers continue to ask themselves whether classroom reading tasks are helping children to transfer reading and other language use strategies from classroom texts and tasks to those that will engage them outside of school.

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Example 2. Workbook page

Name

Write

green mix paint stop today

Carlos wanted to pdint the house.

"I will get paint todxy," said Carlos.

"Can we stop for pizza?" said Max.

"I just want green paint," said Carlos.

"You can mnix blue paint and yellow paint," said Max.

"Good!" said Carlos. "Then we will get some pizza."

Example 3. Workbook page

Pete

Pete can fly up in the sky.
Pete has a big, orange beak.

1. Is Pete a little boy?

☺ No, he is not.

2. How do you know that?

☺ [illegible] he flies

3. Where does Pete fly?

no sentence in the sky

4. What color is his beck?

no sentence orange

5. Can you fly?

no sentence No