

# Ways of failing to live up to the maxims

Chris Potts, Ling 390a: Controlling the Discourse, Fall 2007

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**Background** In 'Logic and conversation', Grice identifies four ways in which speakers might fail to fulfill a maxim or maxims. This handout summarizes them. The terminology might be useful for your papers, though you are by no means required to use it.

## 1 Simple violation

Speakers who simply arbitrarily violate maxims are interesting creatures (and watch out for them), but it's not clear to me that they are useful for us to study (unless they are systematic in their violations).

## 2 Opting out

- (1) a. "My lips are sealed."
- b. "No comment."
- c. "I plead the fifth."

There are of course lots of reasons why a speaker might opt out (secrets, embarrassment, power, ...).

## 3 Clashes

In many cases, it is impossible to satisfy all the demands of the maxims because two of them are in conflict. For example:

- (2) You'd like to say something relevant, but you don't know enough.
- (3) You'd like to be succinct, but that would create ambiguities.
- (4) You'd like to be honest (quality), but doing so would be impolite.

## 4 Maxim flouting

He [the speaker] may FLOUT a maxim; that is, he may BLATANTLY fail to fulfill it. On the assumption that the speaker is able to fulfill the maxim and to do so without violating another maxim (because of a clash), is not opting out, and is not, in view of the blatancy of his performance, trying to mislead, the hearer is faced with a minor problem: How can his saying what he said be reconciled with the supposition that he is observing the overall CP [cooperative principle]? The situation characteristically gives rise to a conversational implicature; and when a conversational implicature is generated in this way, I shall say that a maxim is being EXPLOITED." (p. 49)