

## Panel on: Maintaining Identity in the Virtual World

### Virtual Fraud and Misinformation in the New Age: Revisiting Grice's Cooperative Principle

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#### Abstract

Naturally, humans seek physical and psychological joy. Romance, for instance, is one of the means. People are making quick use of the Internet technology to facilitate their seeking of romantic and quasi-romantic experience via "virtual reality." In this paper we concern ourselves mainly with meaning generation and interpretation in the virtual world. With analysis of a reported case of online deception as empirical evidence, we question in the conditions and assumptions Grice based on for his theoretical proposition of the Cooperative Principle. Our research suggests that deception in online romance is hard to find out because the virtual reality does not provide sufficient conditions for generation of conversational implicatures as suggested by Grice's Cooperative Principle.

**Keywords** : virtual deception, cooperation, implicature

#### Discussion

Virtual deception and misinformation, particularly in online romantic affairs, are widespread. Popular press articles dramatize the dangers and treacherous nature of online romance with catchy headlines such as "When spouses go astray online" ("When Spouses", 1999), "Internet romance ends with man jailed in Wales" (Internet Romance, 1999), "French woman dies after an Internet romance sours" ("French Woman", 1999) (from McDo well, 2001), and "Man with over 200 online wives" (<http://www.wenxuecity.com/BBSview> ). According to a recent survey, 55 percent of the subjects reported that they started a relationship, only to find out later that their partner was already involved in the real world (<http://www.phillyburbs.com/loveonline/raw.shtml> , sponsored by Calkins Media, Inc.). Such cyber behavior has captured much of research attention. Psychologists approach it by looking into the concepts of impersonality, non-conformity, flaming, self-presentation, and fantasy, to name just a few (refer to Parks and Floyd 1996, for a comprehensive review). Sociologists, on the other hand, are interested in demographic data, power distribution, and symbolic interactions.

In this paper we concern ourselves with meaning generation and interpretation in the virtual worlds. According to H. P. Grice (1975), deceptions such as those admitted and reported in online affairs, are clear examples of violating Cooperative Principle in general, and the maxim of quality in particular. And such

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violation would create conversational implicatures that may have alarmed the to-be-deceived in various ways. We direct our attention to the following two questions: 1. Does Cooperative Principle, a fundamental concept in pragmatics and discourse analysis, work the same in online verbal exchanges as in offline face-to-face conversation? 2. What are the unique features of virtual channels, especially Messenger and chat room, that

prevent the generation of conversational implicatures necessary for detection of virtual fraud and misinformation? We include the analysis of a reported case of online deception as an empirical evidence for the theoretical discussion. Our research suggests that Cooperative Principle still seems to be the operational principle in online exchanges, but mainly from the addressee's perspective and intention (rather than the speaker's intention as Grice had insisted). In other words, the addressee assumes the speaker is cooperative so far as the linguistic signs used are not sufficient to suggest otherwise. The very fact of large-scale online deception practice attests to the operation of Cooperative Principle. Interpretation of implicatures needs the presence of at least two systems, verbal and nonverbal systems, for instance. Messenger and chat room users are limited to only one sign system, which makes it harder for deciphering conversational implicatures, and consequently harder to detect deceptions.

We start with a brief review of the Cooperative Principle and its theoretical implications. In his William James lecture series at Harvard entitled "logic and conversation" in 1967, Grice introduced a distinction between what is said (sentence meaning) and what is communicated (speaker's meaning). What is said is a proposition, whereas what is communicated is both what is said (e.g., the proposition expressed) and other things which can be discovered from what is said but which are not part of the explicit content of the utterance. Grice suggests that what is said is different from, and less rich than, the communicated meaning. To achieve successful circulation of sentence meaning/textual meaning, people involved have to observe the Cooperative Principle (CP): "Make your contribution such as required, at the state at which it occurs, by the accepted purpose or direction of the talk exchange in which you are engaged" ([1967] 1989: 26). This CP is further articulated into the following four major maxims:

- 1) The maxim of quality:  
Try to make your contribution one that either you believe or have evidence to show that it is true.
  - a) do not say what you believe to be false
  - b) do not say that for which you lack adequate evidence
- 2) The maxim of quantity  
Make your contribution as informative as is required; no more or no less for the current purpose of the exchange.
- 3) The maxim of relation  
Be relevant to the topic of the current exchange
- 4) The maxim of manner  
Be clear in your intention and concise in expression

Speech that seems to violate the maxims, Grice suggests, will evoke implicatures, or the additional meaning that reflects the Speaker's intentions. To borrow Grice's own example: X, with whom A has been on close terms until now, has sold a secret of A's to a business rival. A and his audience both know this. A says "X is a fine friend". Here, it is perfectly obvious to A and his audience that what A has said or has made as if to say is something he does not believe, and the audience knows that A knows that this is obvious to the audience. So, unless A's utterance is entirely pointless, A must be trying to get across some other proposition (conversational implicature) than the one he purports to be putting forward. The audience thus understands the additional meaning and knows the hidden purpose of this remark—to satirize X and possibly to laugh at himself for taking X as friend for so long (Grice, [1967], 1989: 34). The example tells us another important characteristic of CP--sentential meaning will not become conversational implicature as long as CP is observed, and the maxims kept.

Grice proposed the principle in order to find the conditions governing conversation: "We might formulate a rough general principle which participants will be expected to observe". The goal of his grand project is to "inquire into the general conditions that apply to conversation as such, irrespective of its sub-

ject matter” (Grice, 1989: 24). In general terms, Grice can be grouped with Austin, Searle, and the later Wittgenstein as “theorists of communication-intention” (Miller 1998:223, Davies, 2000: 11). The belief of this group is that intention/speaker-meaning is the central concept in communication, and that sentence meaning can be explained (at least in part) in terms of it. Grice’s philosophy of language appears to belong to the long tradition in philosophy that treats linguistic communication as primary matter of a speaker’s using words to enable hearers to recognize the content of their thoughts (Dictionary of philosophy of mind). In Grice’s own words, “U meant (nonnaturally [as opposed to naturally]) something by uttering x, [which can be formulated as] for some audience A, U intended his utterance of x to produce in A some effect (response) E, by means of A’s recognition of that intention” (Grice, 1968: 58).

What is the role of the Hearer concerning the cooperative nature of the talk exchange? Grice seems to have taken the Hearer as an identical Speaker, going through the same, though reverse, procedure: “Hearers assume that an utterance addressed to them is intended to be meaningful. Therefore, if the utterance doesn’t have an appropriate conventional meaning, they will look for a more useful (and non-conventional) interpretation. As far as the Hearer is concerned, the Speaker providing an uninterpretable (meaningless) utterance would be pointless, and therefore irrational” (Grice, adapted from Davies, 2000: 18).

Grice’s concept of cooperation has made great appeal to scholars in disciplines other than philosophy and linguistics, and initiated much interdisciplinary research. Much of the attention has been focused on its implications and on his position of the Speaker’s intention. On the positive side, his work shaped the development of pragmatics and speech act theory. And the Cooperative Principle came to be considered as a fundamental concept in pragmatics and discourse analysis (Leech, 1983; Levinson, 1983; Yule and Brown, 1983). As he had intended to use “talking as a special case of or variety of purposive, indeed rational, behavior” (Grice, 1989: 28), its rhetorical application has gone beyond the limit of “talk exchanges”, even beyond language activities to include all kinds of cultural cooperative exchanges.

On the other hand, his Speaker’s intention has drawn much re-evaluation and criticism, especially from intercultural communication scholars. Questions have been raised as to the extent of universality that CP entails. Scholars of intercultural and cross-cultural studies point out that the Principle was based on ethnocentric position of Euro-American cultures. With a shift of cultural context, the Hearer could hardly bring themselves to the belief that the Speaker is observing the Cooperative Principle, based on the culturally different sign system. Therefore, CP fails to point out a fundamental assumption that the maxims are culture-specific interpretations of expected discursive acts. Cultural factors play a big role in how people perceive what is cooperative and what is not (Xu, 1996; Wang, 2001; Ma, 1993; Samovar and Porter, 1995; Jum, 1994).

Here in this paper, we adopt a line similar to that of intercultural communication scholars. We look into the issue of Speaker’s intention, but in a different context: cyberspace. We argue that Speaker’s intention fails to examine the fundamental assumptions upon which CP is based. Conversational implicature requires that the Hearer, or Addressee (in Roman Jakobson’s term), have access to at least two different and yet cross-referential sign systems. Discrepancies as revealed by the systems may lead the Addressee to interpret the additional meaning as implicatures. To facilitate the discussion, allow us to first present a case of online romantic fraud from [www.wenxuecity.com](http://www.wenxuecity.com), a major Chinese website for news, entertainment, and other items. The story is told in a 1<sup>st</sup> person narrative by a young lady, who accused a man of online cheating by having “more than 200 girlfriends as his online wives”. Here goes a summary of her narration:

I came across D-Cat, the man, in a private chat room. After initial greeting and self-introduction, D-Cat offered to tell me that he’d just come back from Germany after 4 long years. I had learned from a female cyber friend that D-Cat had offered to give her a cellular phone for “further contacts”. I was not involved with D-Cat in any romantic sense, and did not plan that way. I was

only curious as to why he had made that cellular phone offer to that female friend. He explained that he once owned “emotional debts” to the female gender [the original wording is *nu xing*—female gender. In that particular context, it might be easily interpreted as that particular cyber friend of the narrator, or the “sweetheart”, as D-Cat referred to her], and wanted to make up materially. In addition, he was suffering from cancer, so money had lost much of its meaning for him.

The turning point was at our first face-to-face meeting. D-Cat did not make a very positive impression on me with his disproportioned body shape and big pouch. I also noticed that he has thick hair and healthy complexion that could not possibly associate with chemo patients. At this meeting, he revealed more of himself: his blood father died young and his stepfather was in steel business, who had paid hundreds of thousands of dollars for his lung cancer. Seeing that I looked sympathetic, he asked me to lend him some money so that he could make calls to his sweetheart. This rhetoric of money borrowing did not seem to strike me as plausible, plus the fact that he neither looked nor sounded like suffering from a fatal disease. All the clues this far turned my suspicion on. Soon after our face-to-face meeting, I managed to get his password and got into his QQ mailbox. To my surprise, he had over 200 female cyber friends, whom he referred to respectively as his “dear wives”. He abused their trust in him, and cheated them out of their money [once they placed trust in him].

In this presentation, D-Cat was obviously guilty of deception. He made a promise to buy the girl friend a cellular phone that he never planned to carry out; he lied about his background, and especially his health status; he cheated hundreds of other people as well. As a reader, you may question the validity of this particular piece of narrative. It may be perfectly possible that the story was made up. We have no way to verify. So, let us forget for the time being whether the story is true, or the issue of his motivation behind the deceptive information, and focus instead on the process of her lie detection.

Lies refer to the discrepancy between what a sign (or a series of signs) indicates and the reality it refers to. Technically speaking, most people engage in communication that is deceptive every time they speak to someone else, because most people omit relevant information from their message to others. For instance, when asked “How are you?” people usually skip the aspects that are bothering to them at the moment, and say “Doing fine” instead. But this is not considered deceptive or lying unless it is intentional. Here we adopt Reboul’s classification (2001)—falsity masquerading as truth, and truth masquerading as false. Reboul defines a lie through a general characteristic of the speaker’s intention. “The speaker of a lie has the intention to produce a specific effect: that his hearer should believe something which the speaker takes, rightly or wrongly, to be false. What is more, he intends to obtain the effect through his utterance(s)” (Reboul 2001: 20). There are two major ways to achieve the intended effect to lie: you can say something which you believe to be false and get your hearer to think that you have said something which you believe to be true on good grounds. You can also say something you believe to be true and get your hearer to think that you have said something that you believe to be false on good grounds, leading him to adopt a contradictory belief (which you think false). The lies revealed in the above mediated narrative seems to belong to the first type—upfront telling of what he believes to be false.

On the other hand, however, a lie will not be a lie, or at least not be labeled as a lie unless it is *discovered* and *recognized* as such by the addressee. Notice that even Grice, who insisted on the Speaker’s intention as the dominant mode of interpretation, admits that that the presence of conversational implicature must be capable of being worked out. And the working out requires that the Hearer rely on the following data: (1) the conventional meaning of the words used, together with the identity of any references that may be involved; (2) CP and its maxims; (3) the context of the utterance; (4) other items of background knowledge; (5) the fact (or supposed fact) that all relevant items mentioned above are available to both participants and both participants know or assume this to be the case (Grice, 1989: 30).

It should be pointed out that the obtaining of the data mentioned by Grice is very difficult, if not impossible only via one sign system, the verbal exchange in its written form, for instance. If the addressee is limited to only one sign system, as is usually the case in the virtual world, truth discovering would be no easy task, as the previous narrative story suggests. Before their face-to-face meeting, the narrator found herself passively interpreting the messages in the way D-Cat had intended her to. Every verbal message exchanged fit in the Cooperative Principle; she did not detect any flouts of the maxims. The only signal of possible additional meaning (i.e., meaning in addition to that generated by the textual message) arose with the topic of cellular phone. Her previous interactions with other people led her to believe that material offering in a cyber relationship might indicate some hidden motive—“young men nowadays are very realistic; they won’t spend time and money for you if they could not get in flesh sexual satisfaction and/or more money in return”, as she related. Such a discrepancy between what he said and what her experience told her created the only possible breaching of the maxim of quality. And yet, she could not be sure of its implicature, if any, without other breaching instances to boost her suspicion.

The difficulty she experienced was not hers alone. It is a widely acknowledged phenomenon in the cyber world. To facilitate the reader’s understanding of online textual message people resort to other techniques. For instance, they may use the keyboard characters (smileys) to initiate facial expressions and paralinguistic features of conversation (e.g., typing “:-)”) to indicate a smile. The person who wishes a message to be taken as friendly teasing, for example, may embed a word or phrase like “grin” or “just kidding” in text (Parks and Floyd, 1996). In addition, as Walter’s research suggests, computer mediated communication (CMC) partners may pay extra attention to insignificant information such as spelling errors, use of punctuation, or word choice, and thus develop stereotypical impressions of the other (adopted from McDowell, 2001).

The problem of one sign system would be clearer if we step aside and take a look at our daily face-to-face talk exchange. You look for visual signs to tell the gender, age, personality traits, physical traits, and other features of the speaker, in addition to what he/she says. You may tend to suspect or even to conclude someone is telling a lie if you see the other avoid eye contact, or blink more or less. Other visual signals may include closing hands or interlock their fingers, crossing arms, fewer or more hand gestures, leaning and shifting body posture, licking lips, sighing and taking deep breaths, smiling or laughing more and inappropriately, touching nose, making more errors and gaffes, stuttering and becoming tongue-tied, clearing throat, and making other noises. The list may go on and on. More importantly, we may rely on consistency of behavioral patterns for detection of lies. Behavioral consistency is interpreted as honest and inconsistency is interpreted as deceptive regardless of the specific behaviors that are enacted (Henningsen, Cruz, and Morr, 2000: 1).

Let us come back to the analysis of the narrative story. Conversational implicatures began to make sense to the narrator when they met face to face. It happens that the description became more sensual as well. She literally saw, with her eyes, that a difference between what he used to tell her about his cancer and what his physical appearance (hair and skin color) revealed to her. Such a discrepancy gave her reason for practicing caution. Then D-Cat violated the maxim of quantity, the maxim that requires that the Speaker tell no more or no less than that is necessary. He disclosed to her about his father and stepfather, a self-disclosure that went beyond her comfort level. Generally, people do not offer that information unless they are very close, or for a specific purpose. In this case, she was inclined to take the latter interpretation. There followed his expressed interest of money borrowing. To her, this did not seem relevant—people do not borrow from strangers (considering the fact that they were almost strangers, except for some verbal exchanges in cyberspace), though it would be rather normal to borrow from friends, in the Chinese cultural context. With the help of the nonverbal sign system and of her experience interacting with other people (another system), she began to pull the threads together. The implicatures then led her to further action of truth finding.

It is not a mere coincidence that verbal messages began to generate implicatures at their face to face meeting. In a comparative study between online and offline romantic relationships, McDowell listed sixteen types of turning point in relational development. The three types that online relational development is statistically significant from offline relation are 1. first face-to-face meeting, 2. significant shifts in media, and 3. exclusivity. She finds that first FtF meeting with one's significant other was considered to be the most important turning point (both positively and negatively) to partners and led to the largest changes in reported commitment levels. The first face to face meeting was mentioned almost exclusively by the online group. It ranked the third high with online sample, while it ranked the last (16) with offline sample. Online participants mentioned significant shifts in media/exchange of personal information 12 times as often as the offline group. "This may be because in online relationships, shift in media represent significant increases in the number of channels (e.g., vocal, visual) through which a person is able to gain information about his [her] partner." In another research by Parks and Roberts (1998), 80% of the respondents who reported that they had relationships that began on a MOO (Multi-User Dimensions, Object Oriented, a real-time, text-based virtual environment) had also contacted their relational partner via email, 66.8% had spoken on the telephone, 54.5% had communicated by writing, (cards or letters), 40.5% had exchanged photos by mail, and 37.7 % reported that they had gone on to meet their partner in person. Partners in romantic relationships were the most likely to eventually meet face to face (57.9%) (statistics adopted from McDowell, 2001). This is confirmed by reports of mail, telephone, photo exchange as additional means for CMC (Parks and Floyd, 1996; Ogan, 1993; Reid, 1991).

To sum up, there are three characteristics associated with romantic involvement in virtual reality: 1. nonverbal effect is reduced to minimal, while verbal means becomes utterly important. In addition, written expression has an upper hand over the commonly assumed oral skills. Therefore, cyber space proves to be an ideal site to testify the validity of conversational implicatures. 2. the addressee feels less obliged to truth telling, though CP still holds in online conversation. 3. being honest and truth-telling is left to the discretion of the addressee, and it is relatively difficult to find out the truth of statements. Grice himself refers to the maxims as "moral commandments" in his discussion of implicatures in the epilogue to *Studies on the Way of Words*: "Somewhat like moral commandments, these maxims are prevented from being just a disconnected heap of conversational obligations by their dependence on a single supreme Conversational Principle, that of cooperativeness." (Grice, 1989: 370). The question is how deeply people are willing to commit to such moral commandments, especially in virtual environments where deception is hard to be discovered.

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