

GRICE'S CONVERSATIONAL MAXIMS AND ISLAMIC CONVERSATIONAL RULES

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Abstract

In their daily activities, people will need to interact with other people. In this interaction, people use language as a means of communication. A conversation, as a way of people doing communication, can only take place by the presence of both speakers and hearers under a particular circumstance. As one of the pragmatic aspects, cooperative principle becomes something that should be noticed in a conversation. Grice (1975) said that the conversation will run well if both of the speaker and hearer obey the rules of conversation which he arranged into four conversational maxims, namely Maxim of Quantity, Maxim of Quality, Maxim of Relevance, and Maxim of Manner. For Islamic followers, these conversational rules, however, have long time been known well since Islam has ruled its people to treat other people well in all aspects, not to mention in speaking. This present article will see how Grice's conversational maxims, which were proposed in 1975, are in line with the Islamic conversational rules which were mentioned in Quran and hadith long time ago, since 600s. It means that this broadly-known pragmatic theory is not something new in Islam. It is also to prove that Islam, to some extent, is the source of knowledge and value which are often developed further by western scholars.

Keywords: *pragmatics, Grice's conversational maxims, Islamic conversational rules*

Introduction

“Communication is a form of social interaction that involves the production and the interpretation of the evidence of the communicator's intentions”¹. This quotation simply means that people, as the communicators, have their own message that needs to be understood by other people in order to make a good social interaction. This kind of interaction is one of the most important aspects in life since people need to socialize with their surrounding. They do such a good social interaction in the form of conversation which is believed as the most common uses of human language. By doing a conversation, people can socialize and develop their relationships with each other².

A conversation will involve at least a speaker, a hearer, and a context that will give different meanings. The context of the conversation really depends on when the conversation takes place, who are the participants, what is the situation, and what is the

¹ Spencer-Oatey, Helen, ed. 2000. *Culturally Speaking: Culture, Communication and Politeness Theory*. New York: Continuum.

² Liddicoat, Anthony J. 2007. *An Introduction to Conversation Analysis*. London: Continuum.

conversation about³. It means that this context will give a description of what kind of conversation happens and how the speaker and the hearer understand the message conveyed in that conversation.

Such approaches to conversation use the form of a prescriptive rules that can describe what a conversation should be. They present sets of social rules which indicate which topics are appropriate or how language is to be used for maximum effect ⁴. One of the approaches to conversation is by the study of pragmatics. This linguistic branch will focus on how language is used in a society, in this case, how language, as the media of communication, is used to explore what meaning can be interpreted from a conversation. For that reason, as it is mentioned before, some rules of conversation are required.

One very common rule of conversation in pragmatic study is the conversational rules proposed by Grice (1975) under the principle of cooperation, known by Cooperative Principle. According to this principle, Grice argued that “human communication should be explained as form of social interaction whose success depends on the interactants’ presumption that communicative behaviour is driven by certain norms and rules”⁵. For him, the most important thing in doing a conversation is that “communicators are co-operative in that they aim to make their communicative acts appropriate to the situation of communication in content and form” (p.56). As the result of his argument, he explored this principle into four maxims, namely Maxim of Quantity, Maxim of Quality, Maxim of Manner, and Maxim of Relevance.

Nevertheless, the phenomenon of Grice’s maxims as the rules for conversation is actually not something new for the followers of Islam. About 600 years ago Islam has already ruled its followers to have such a good cooperation in conversation, as what mentioned in Grice ‘s Cooperative Principle. This article will try to describe some evidence in Quran and Hadith which are in line with what Grice tried to explain in his maxims. This is also to prove that Islam is a perfect religion that it really cares about what should be done by its people, not to mention in speaking activity.

³ McManis, Carolyn, Deborah Stollenwerk, Zhang Zheng-Sheng (ed.). 1987. *Language Files*. USA: The Ohio State University.

⁴ Liddicoat, Anthony J. 2007. *An Introduction to Conversation Analysis*. London: Continuum.

⁵ Spencer-Oatey, Helen, ed. 2000. *Culturally Speaking: Culture, Communication and Politeness Theory*. New York: Continuum

Rules of conversation

Since pragmatics studies language, meaning, and context, then conversation is one of the most common realisation of language in use⁶. As it is mentioned before, that in a conversation, some social rules are needed. The rules of conversation function as the norms or the limitation of someone's speaking towards others. Such norms are needed because this activity requires the cooperation between the speaker and the hearer. In other words, both speaker and hearer should make their communicative act appropriate to the situation in content and form. Although there is no punishment when violating the norms, these rules become the social norms that can be seen as explicit or implicit statements for when something should or could be said and the manner in which it would be expected to be said.⁷ Therefore, the rules really depend on the society and the culture where the conversation takes place.

In the study of pragmatics, Paul Grice is the famous linguist who noted that all conversations should follow a basic set of rules, which people use to express themselves when speaking. On his view, without these rules, conversations would be impossible to have.

In line with this study, Islam has actually given special attention to speech, its style, its etiquette and rules, because the talk that comes out from a man's mouth shows his intellectual level and moral nature, because the etiquette of speech in a group reveals its general standard, and shows the standard of propriety in their environment. These rules are taught to the people because, as His creatures, Allah has given them the language as the precious gift.

"The Most Gracious Allah has taught the Quran; He has created man; He has taught him speech." (Ar-Rahman:1-4)

This verse explains that people are taught to use language in order to get blessing from Allah. However, this is not something easy for us since we should use the language for goodness and truth.

Grice's Conversational Maxims

Conversational maxims are the elements of Grice's *cooperative principle* which assume that in a conversation, both parties will obey a cooperative principle as a way to achieve

⁶ Clark, Herbert H. 1997. *Using Language*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press

⁷ Ishikara, Noriko and Cohen, Andrew D. 2010. *Teaching and Learning Pragmatics: Where Language and Culture Meet*. Great Britain: Longman-Pearson.

successful interaction in communication. Grice's-frequently-quoted phrases states, "Make your contribution such as it is required, at the stage at which it occurs, by the accepted purpose or direction of the talk exchange in which you are engaged"⁸. It suggests the speakers and hearers to speak in a cooperative way one another in a sense that the information they share are, concise, current, and direct.

Grice's statement above is further drawn into the so-called *Gricean (conversational) maxims* which consist of four maxim. They are:

Maxim of Quality

Be Truthful

- Do not say what you believe to be false.
- Do not say that for which you lack adequate evidence.

Maxim of Quantity

Quantity of Information

- Make your contribution as informative as is required (for the current purposes of the exchange).
- Do not make your contribution more informative than is required.

Maxim of Relation

Relevance

- Be relevant.

Maxim of Manner

Be Clear

- Avoid obscurity of expression.
- Avoid ambiguity.
- Be brief (avoid unnecessary prolixity).
- Be orderly.⁹¹⁰

In conversation, the maxims are not always obeyed even more frequently broken. In Grice's theory, the defiance of those rules or maxims may take two forms, whether they are violated or floated. However this part is left unelaborated in this paper to maintain the focus of the discussion only on the linkage between these rules and Islamic rules in conversation.

⁸ Thomas, Jenny. 1995. *Meaning in Interaction: An Introduction to Pragmatics*. London: Longman

⁹ Thomas, Jenny. 1995. *Meaning in Interaction: An Introduction to Pragmatics*. London: Longman

¹⁰ Huang, Yan. 2007. *Pragmatics*. New York: Oxford University Press

Islamic Conversational Rules

Islam pays attention to all aspects of life including the relation among human as to keep harmony among them. Manners on how people interact with each other in a conversation have become one concern in the Islamic teaching under one general topic known as *adab at-tahadduts wa al-isime'* (manner of speaking and listening). It indicates the role of both parties to respect each other whether when they act as the speaker or the hearer. Some of the rules are:

- 1- The goal of your talk should be good and beneficial. It means that remain silent is better rather than talking something useless, as indicated by the the Prophet (S.A.W.) saying reported by Imam Bukhari and Muslim, "Whosoever believes in Allah and the Last Day, let him say good or remain silent."
- 2- Be truthful in your talk and refrain from lying because the believer is always truthful, and does not lie even if he is joking. The Prophet (S.A.W.) says, "You must speak the truth for the truth leads to virtue and virtue leads to Paradise. One who always speaks the truth and means the truth, is recorded as truthful with Allah. Keep away from the lie for the lie leads to evil and evil leads to the Hell Fire and one who continually tells a lie and intends to lie is recorded with Allah as a liar (Bukhari Mslim)."
- 3- Refrain from disobedience (against Allah) in your talk whether you are serious or kidding because Allah hates the disobedient, the curser. An authentic hadith says, "The believer does not accuse, curse others, disobey Allah, nor bad-mouth others." and in another authentic hadith, "The curse of a Muslim is disobedience."
- 4- Refrain from Gheebah or backbiting in your talk, as well as refrain from Nameemah. Nameemah is spreading talk among people to make them hate one another. The Prophet said in an authentic hadith, "He who makes Namimah does not enter Paradise." Also, refrain from listening without making your objection known to people who are making Nameemah. Because if you do, you will be sharing the sins.
- 5- Refrain from swearing unless it is necessary. Allah (S.W.T.) says in Surat Al-Baqarah, (Verse 224), what can be translated as, "And do not make Allah's (Name) an excuse in you oaths."
- 6- Talk only within your knowledge and expertise, and do not talk about what you do not know. Allah (S.W.T.) says in Surat Al-Isra'a, (Verse 36), what can be translated as, "And do not follow (say) that of which you have no knowledge."

7- Do not talk to people about everything you hear without investigation and confirmation, because you may hear from others the truthfulness and falsehood and what is true and what is doubtful. If you talk about everything you hear, you will be sharing the sins. The prophet (S.A.W.) warns us in an authentic hadith, "It is enough sin a person commits when he talks about everything he hears."

8- Make sure that the goal from your talk and conversation with others is to reach the truth, and reveal the falsehood. And do not be concerned whether the truth is reached and falsehood is revealed by you or by others.

9- Refrain from being involved in useless arguments which sole purpose is to put down and prevail over others. For this reason, the prophet (S.A.W.) warned us in an authentic hadith reported by Imam At-trimithi, "A people did not get misguided after Allah had guided them, but they were aimlessly argumentative." Abandon useless arguments even if the truth is on your side to prevent useless argument-full conversation. In another authentic hadith, the prophet (S.A.W.) says "I guarantee a house in the surroundings of Paradise for the one who stopped being aimlessly argumentative even if he is right (Imam Abu Dawud)."

10- Make your talk clear, simple, devoid of words that are difficult to understand, devoid of eloquency when it is not necessary, and devoid of anything that puts down others because the prophet (S.A.W.) hates this kind of talk. The prophet (S.A.W.) says in a hadith, "The people whom I hate the most and who are the farthest from me on the Day of Judgment are those who talk uselessly, and those who put down others, and those who shows off when they talk (At-tirmithi)."

11- Talk and debate in a nice way which is devoid of harming, hurting, putting down, and making fun of others. This good way of talk was commanded to all messengers. Allah (S.W.T.) said to Mousa and his brother Haroun, when he sent them to Pharaoh in Surat Taha, (Verse 44), "And speak to him (Pharaoh) mildly, perhaps he may accept admonition or fear Allah." So, you are not better than Mousa and Haroun nor that person you are talking to is worse than Pharaoh.

The correlation between Grice's Conversational Maxims and Islamic Conversational Rules

From the article "*Logic and Conversation*", Grice assumed that when we speak to one another, we are trying to cooperate with one another to construct meaningful conversation. This assumption is known as the Cooperative Principle:

Make your conversational contribution such is required, at the stage at which it occurs, by the accepted purpose or direction of the talk exchange in which you are engaged. (Grice, 1975:45)

In other words, the speakers should try to contribute meaningful, productive utterances in a conversation. Therefore, the hearers also need to do the same way.

This is what Islam also teaches its followers. Islam has given a number of rules that a Muslim should abide by when he talks to others. He should also remember that everything he says is accounted and he will be rewarded if what he says is good and will be punished if what he says is evil, just like mentioned in Surat Qaf:18, "Not a word does he (or she) utter, but there is a watcher by him ready (to record it)." It is a kind of warning that our talk is very dangerous. Therefore, we should control it with the rules of Islam, guided by Allah SWT and his Messenger Muhammad SAW.

When compared to what Grice stated, it seems that we, the Islamic followers, also have what we know as conversational rules. We can therefore see that there is a correlation between Grice's maxims and Islamic conversational rules. The discussion below will explore how Grice's maxims correlate with Islamic conversational rules in many ways.

a. Maxim of Quantity

This maxim says:

1. Make your contribution as informative as is required.
2. Do not make your contribution more informative than is required.

According to this rule, when talking, people are expected to provide 'enough information'. People should not provide too much or too little information.

In Islam, we are taught to decide in what occasion we need to speak. If it is necessary or demanded for us to speak, then speak, otherwise silence is much better. In one of the hadiths by Tirmizi, it is said that

"It is the excellence of a man's faith that he gives up meaningless work."

The goal of our talk should be good and beneficial. If someone cannot have a good talk, then it would be better for him to remain silent. This is because our Prophet Muhammas SAW says, reported by Imam Bukhari and Muslim, "Whosoever believes in Allah and the last day, let him say good or remain silent."

So, this rule is an encouragement for the Islamic followers to speak what is good and beneficial. At the same time, it is also a warning that cautions us to be careful in what we say, for fear that we say something that is harmful or false.

b. Maxim of Quality

This maxim says:

1. Do not say what you believe to be false.

2. Do not say that for which you lack adequate evidence.

According to this maxim, people are expected to say what they know to be true and we expect people to tell us the truth. In this case, all information should be true, or having the right and clear references that can prove if the information is true or false.

In Islam, it is a part of a Muslim's faith to speak the truth. As mentioned in Surah Al-Ahzab:70-71, Allah says:

"O, you who believe! fear Allah and speak a word that is right. He will make right for you your deeds and forgive you your sins. And whoever obeys Allah and His Messenger has surely succeeded in the great success."

Here, we have to speak the right words. We have to be truthful in our talk and avoid lying because believer is always truthful, and does not lie even if he is joking. In a hadith by Imam Bukhori and Muslim, The Prophet SAW says,

"You must speak the truth for the truth leads to virtue and virtue leads to paradise. One who always speaks the truth and means the truth, is recorded as truthful with Allah. Keep away from the lie for the lie leads to evil and evil leads to the hell fire and one who continually tells a lie and intends to lie is recorded with Allah as a liar."

This is why, in Islam, we have to speak the truth. Because good things will result good things, and so with the talk. When the talk is truthful, Allah will record it and reward our truthfulness. But when it is a lie, Allah will record the talk as well. So, we must be careful not to speak falsehood. We must think about what we are saying and the possible consequences of our words before we speak.

c. Maxim of Relation

This maxim says "be relevant". What is expected from this maxim is that people should say something that has correlation with other people's saying, not deviate from the topic they are talking about. In the simple way, if we are asked about the location of a key, for instance, then we answer by saying its position (Thomas, 1995). This maxim to some extent in line with verse 36 in Al-Isra'a which says, "And do not follow (say) that of which you have no knowledge." It means that we cannot say something unless we know about the thing. The relevant answer to a question is that of we know the answer, not by making up or guessing.

d. Maxim of Manners

This maxim says:

1. Avoid obscurity of expression.
2. Avoid ambiguity.

3. Be brief.
4. Be orderly.

The last maxim suggests us to speak clearly, concisely, and neatly. This is what also expected from moslems that when they talk they should speak clearly, in a simple way, and avoid unnecessary talk, as the prophet says in a hadith , “The people whom I hate the most and who are the farthest from me on the Day of Judgment are those who talk uselessly, and those who put down others, and those who shows off when they talk (At-tirmithi).”

Moslems are also encouraged to avoid long talk that might bore the hearers and leads to uselessness as indicated by the hadith, .”Abandon useless arguments even if the truth is on your side to prevent useless argument-full conversation. In another authentic hadith, the prophet (S.A.W.) says “I guarantee a house in the surroundings of Paradise for the one who stopped being aimlessly argumentative even if he is right (Imam Abu Dawud).”

Conclusion

Allah has given us the ability to speak, to communicate with others. However, there are some rules that regulate our conversation activity. Islam has taught these rules to the people long time ago and those are proven in Quran and hadith. Moreover, one of branches in linguistics, pragmatics, also put some rules to this conversation problems under the principle purposed by Grice, namely Cooperative Principle.

This article is only the reflection of thoughts that both Islam and science are two things that cannot be separated. Good things come from good things, and so with human behaviour. The evidence in Quran and Hadith related to conversation will encourage us to guard our tongues. A person who wants to speak should think about what he is about to say before he utters it. If it is good and has some benefits to others, he may speak it; otherwise he should avoid it.

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