

**MAXIMS OF THE HEART:
H.P. Grice and Carlos Bulosan
in Philippine Context**

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Teaching English in the University of the Philippines is a complex task. In a typical classroom, there are students who use English as Second Language (ESL) learners and there are those who use English like native speakers. While these students who are comfortable with English do not speak with American accents (I use this comparison given that the University of the Philippines was founded by Americans and therefore follow, more or less, the American standard of English), I have found that in certain instances a number of them can write better than their

American counterparts. There are some peculiar ones who can hardly speak straight English but turn out to be superior writers. There are several issues involved here but I will focus on a specific problem they encounter whether in speaking or writing English. Despite the ability to write or speak in English well, I have encountered a seemingly recurring problem. Students have a problem with brevity. They do not go directly to the point and they tend to repeat themselves.

Of course, the same things occur in American classes but usually only in writing (to meet the page count perhaps?). When American students speak in class, I notice that they usually stay on their main topic, more so than Filipino students do. I must admit that I expected this. Filipinos view Americans as direct both in speech and writing. Why can't Filipino students be as direct? Why do they ramble on and on? These questions apply to those who are supposed to be bilingual and comfortable with English.

Upon discussing these issues with a colleague, who was also a Filipino instructor at Virginia Tech, the "maxims" of H.P. Grice came up. We had been teaching Filipino students with the Gricean "rules" in the back of our minds. The rules stress clarity, order, and brevity, among others. Indeed, since Grice's maxims are thought to be universal, we had been applying them to our English classes in the Philippines. Even if we did not believe that the maxims apply to all languages (I am not sure if teachers of Filipino or Tagalog would apply them), we obviously thought that we should be teaching "proper" English, proper in the Gricean sense. But with the existence and development of Philippine English, I wonder if the maxims really apply. Are these maxims, even within the area of English usage, truly universal? Can the divergence from these maxims be considered incorrect or substandard English? In answering these questions I will examine Grice's maxims more closely in connection with other cultures and languages. The assumption is that Grice's maxims are culturally bound to the West (although even this is debatable) and do not apply to all cultures even if English is the language used.

In terms of examining the cultural influences on the use of English, I will bring in portions of Carlos Bulosan's novel, *America is in the Heart*, one of the earliest Filipino novels written in English to be published in the United States. Having taught this autobiographical novel to my composition classes at Virginia Tech, I believe that the text may prove to be an interesting example of cross-cultural encounters, not only in terms of Bulosan's own experiences but also in terms of the reception of the book by American college students. The essay will also be an example of how language can be culturally reflective and how any set of rules can prove to be limited or even inapplicable.

EXAMINING AND CONTEXTUALIZING GRICE'S MAXIMS

H.P. Grice formulated a most influential set of rules in terms of communication. These rules can be assumed by the participants in communication to be true in any given context. The basic maxim for any conversation is to be cooperative (Palmer 1996: 191). This cooperative principle can be broken down into four maxims. I am using the maxims as they are written in Nancy Bonvillain's book, *Language, Culture, and Communication* (1993: 108).

Grice's Maxims for Communication

1. *Quantity*. Be Informative.
 - a. Make your contribution as informative as required (for the current purposes of the exchange).
 - b. Do not make your contribution more informative than required.

2. *Quality*. Be Truthful.
 - a. Do not say that which you believe to be false.
 - b. Do not say that for which you lack adequate evidence.

3. *Relation*. Be Relevant.

4. *Manner*: Be Perspicuous.
 - a. Avoid obscurity of expression.
 - b. Avoid ambiguity.
 - c. Be brief.
 - d. Be orderly.

In the first maxim, parameters are given in terms of giving information. Apparently, there should be a minimum and a maximum amount of information given or shared in a conversation. Information as being quantifiable reflects the postmodern (which is a Western concept) view of knowledge as commodity. What the "proper" amount should be seems to be dependent on the situation and even on the culture. What may be "too little" information to one culture may be "too much" to another. This creates ambiguity within the so-called rules of communication. And, according to the rule of manner, ambiguity must be avoided.

Bonvillain demonstrates how the rule of quantity can be culturally relative by citing Elinor Ochs Keenan's study of conversations among the Malagasy of Madagascar. According to the study published in 1976, the communal nature of small villages allows information to be easily spread, thus being quickly known by all villagers. In this case, knowledge then becomes a precious possession and is not readily shared (Bonvillain 1993: 109). The fact that others know that one villager has more information makes the information more valuable and the keeper will most probably remain reluctant to share it. "As long as it is known that one has that information and others do not, one has prestige over them" (Keenan, cited in Bonvillain 1993: 109).

The Malagasy are also reluctant to give information because they do not want to be responsible for the consequences that the information might bring about. Thus, they do not make explicit claims about the future in particular "because they would feel shamed if events do not occur as predicted" (Bonvillain 1993: 109).

The opposite may be true to small Filipino communities. While there are always exceptions, the idea of *tsismis* (rumors) seems to be a common past time. Just like in Madagascar, information travels quickly in small communities. But unlike the Malagasy, many Filipinos seem eager to divulge information about themselves and more so about other people. This spreading of information is not restricted to the rural areas. In small urban "communities" (offices, neighborhood blocks, and even in academic circles), people get involved in *tsismis* as participants in the conversation. Talking behind one's back is a common practice and at times, is even expected even by the subject of the conversation. When a person is away from the others, she/he expects to be talked about. Still, the "expected" *tsismis* are usually harmless stories with no malicious intent. If the *tsismis* is meant to harm a person, then definitely it is not expected or condoned. Of course harmful and harmless rumors can be relative and they do cause much controversy and conflict among the members of the community. On the issue of gender, the women are stereotypically labeled as the rumormongers even if men also engage in the same thing. In and of itself, the very concept of *tsismis* violates the Gricean rules of quantity, quality, and relation. In American settings, rumors are also present.

Should there be no place for rumors in a conversation then? I would say that rumors are not "expected" but they do exist. In this sense, Grice's maxims serve to avoid rumormongering. But as I have noted, the concept or "use" of rumors as a social activity exists in other cultures.

To the Malagasy, the participants in the conversation are crucial. The participants are classified into three categories: *havana* (close kin and neighbors); *havan-davitra* (distant kin); and *vahiny* (strangers) (Bonvillain 1993: 109). According to Keenan, the Malagasy regularly share information with their close kin and neighbors but not with distant kin and strangers because of lack of trust towards those who are not close to them (Bonvillain 1993:

110). This applies, to a certain extent, to both Filipino and American cultures. People do not share personal crises with strangers on a bus or even with their colleagues at work. On the other hand, if a person does not share personal feelings with a close friend, the friend might be offended.

While the personal aspects of conversational context (speaking to friends as opposed to superiors or strangers) may be accommodated by Grice's maxims, avoiding the possibility of offending someone brings in another issue. If Grice's cooperative principle is the "first rule," then the politeness principle is the second. According to Robin Lakoff who formulated this so-called second rule, the use of politeness (which can be divided just like Grice's principle) often involves violating the maxim of quantity (Bates 1976: 316). People either explain too much or hide information so as not to hurt other people. Again, how much is too much? How little is too little? The answers to these questions are culturally bound. But to bring in another Western oriented conversational construct, the second rule undermines much of the cooperative principle. So even in a particular culture or frame of thought, the rules go against each other.

The rule of politeness affects the second maxim which concerns the quality of the information given. The idea of truthfulness can be even more uncertain than the actual transmission of information. To clarify the idea of truthfulness, studies have been made to determine the characteristics of a lie.

Gary Palmer defines lying as an act of speech "intended to create a false impression" (1996: 194). However, he concedes that given the different kinds of lies (white lies, social lies, etc.), the concept of lying is more complex. To determine the "prototype of lying," Palmer cites the experiment conducted by Coleman and Kay. Questionnaires with eight situations which depict the possibility of lying were given to seventy-one respondents, ages fifteen to seventy-two and native speakers of English. Fifty of the respondents were "students, faculty, or staff at Berkeley" and the sexes were

"equally represented." These are two examples from the questionnaire (Coleman and Kay, cited in Palmer 1996: 194):

Two patients are waiting to be wheeled into the operating room. The doctor points to one and says, 'Is Jones here the appendectomy or the tonsillectomy?' Nurse Braine has just read the charts. Although she is anxious to keep her job, she has nevertheless confused the charts in her mind and replies, 'The appendectomy,' when in fact poor Jones is scheduled for tonsillectomy.

Did Nurse Braine lie

It was {a lie / not a lie / can't say}

Superfan has got tickets for the championship game and is very proud of them. He shows them to his boss, who says, 'Listen, Superfan, any day you don't come to work, you better have a better excuse than that.' Superfan says, 'I will.' On the day of the game, Superfan calls in and says, 'I can't come to work today, Boss, because I'm sick.' Ironically, Superfan doesn't get to go to the game because the slight stomachache he felt on arising turns out to be ptomaine poisoning. So Superfan was really sick when he said he was.

Did Superfan lie?

It was { a lie / not a lie / can't say }

In each of the situations, the subjects were asked to encircle their answer. With this experiment, most of the subjects did not believe that Nurse Braine lied. Most believed that it was an "honest mistake" and there was no intent to deceive. In Superfan's case, even if his statement turned out to be true, he believed it to be false at first. But even in this situation, the intent to deceive may seem to be absent as the way things eventually turned out (Palmer 1996: 195).

Despite the complications that were involved in interpreting the results of the experiment, Coleman and Kay came up with the "three elements involved in the prototype of lying," ranked in their order of influence on the answers of the respondents:

1. Speaker believes statement to be false.
2. Speaker says it with intent to deceive.
3. The statement is false in fact (Palmer 1996: 195-96).

The speaker's belief in the statement was the most influential factor. This demonstrates the importance of Grice's maxim of quality. In conversations then, speakers must speak of things that they believe to be true. However, as already mentioned, Lakoff's politeness principle tends to violate this. Social lying is a prime example. Palmer (1996: 195) states that "the speaker may tell a deliberate falsehood, but with no intent to deceive the listener":

- a. What a lovely party!
- b. The dinner was very good.
- c. Oh, you wrote that paper on lying? I found it extremely interesting (Palmer 1996: 195).

All these statements are meant to be polite. These examples can also be considered scripts, or socially expected lines. The truthfulness or falsity of the utterances does not matter. The maxim of quality is not merely violated; it is completely ignored. When it comes to socially constructed politeness, the notion of truthfulness is rendered moot.

Despite the intricacies of truthfulness vis-a-vis politeness, Palmer points out that lying is still considered a serious offense in American context. He cites Sweetser's view of the "linguistic power relationship" between the speaker and the listener (Palmer 1996: 199). In a conversation, the speaker assumes the position of authority and can thus harm the listener by lying. Of course, there are varying degrees of severity in terms of lying as noted by Palmer,

Coleman, and Kay; but the act still goes against the American values of self-determination and individualism (Palmer 1996: 199). According to Palmer, Americans are more likely to be offended by lying as compared to more "paternalistic cultures" such as the Chinese or Japanese where elders or superiors may lie "to avoid harm or embarrassment" (Palmer, 199).

Lying for the good of others may also apply to Philippine culture; but in this case the lie may take the form of hidden truth (violating Grice's maxim of quantity). A person may help another behind the scenes without the beneficiary's knowledge. In this process the truth is hidden and the person may lie to cover up his/her "acts of kindness" or favors. The reason for helping in a secretive manner may be due to a sense of humility. A person who helps financially may do it in secret in order not to be perceived as being a show-off. When the helper is "exposed," the beneficiary can understand why the person did not openly reveal his/her wealth and is grateful for the help. This is not a regular practice but it is not a surprising occurrence. This situation may undermine the American ideas of autonomy and independence. However, if deception is used in order to harm a person, the offense taken may be much greater in Philippine context.

Michael Agar has made some cross-cultural comparisons in terms of speech acts. His discussion on lies mentions how Anglo-Americans stereotype Mexicans as people who "lie more than Anglos expect" (Agar 1994: 154). One type of "lie" (Agar places this in quotation marks because Mexicans do not consider it a lie) is embodied in the phrase *pasar un buen momento* ("have a pleasant moment"). In this case, conversations should "keep the moment pleasant" and that maintaining this feeling is more important than telling the truth (Agar 1994: 156). This may be viewed as an extension of the politeness principle. This goes beyond mere politeness since the harmony or enjoyment among the participants of the conversation is deemed to be more valuable. The truth may even be irrelevant since it can be destructive.

Filipinos, to a certain degree, practice this "pleasantry principle" as well, especially in group settings. The harmony of the group is more important than the "frank exchange of ideas" common in American settings (Agar 1994: 156). Indeed, a number of Filipinos stereotype Americans (Anglo- or otherwise) as being too frank. Many Filipinos believe that Americans are people who believe that ideas and rules are more important than the feelings of other people. Some people believe this to the extent of explaining or even excusing extreme abrasiveness coming from an American (usually a visitor to the country) with a phrase like *Amerikano kasi, e* ("She/He's American, that's why") — not knowing that Americans themselves have cultural differences in terms of frankness.

In the Philippines, people avoid arguments as much as possible. When arguments do occur, they are often explosive. Indeed, outbursts of emotion may be the result of tensions that have been built up over time. People usually hide negative feelings and withhold possibly offensive statements so that the light and pleasant mood may be maintained.

Disagreements violate the concept of *pakikisama* ("getting together in harmony"). For the sake of this concept or value, people may do things they do not necessarily feel like doing. This can be considered "peer pressure" without the negative connotation. In informal gatherings, people often refrain from saying something that may offend another or lead to a disagreement. Even in more formal settings such as an academic discussion where disagreements and arguments are common, the frank tongue is guarded so as not to offend a colleague.

For the maxim concerning relation, Palmer describes being relevant as referring "to an antecedent image or mutual understanding and [adding] some new bit of information" (1996: 192). He states that situations dictate relevancy and gives the example of speaking in tongues in Fundamentalist (or rather Pentecostal — correction mine) churches. Obviously, non-believers

find this activity totally irrelevant but those who are members of the congregation understand its spiritual importance and meaning. They also know that there are members of the church who have the gift of interpretation (Palmer 1996: 192).

Relevance is also culturally relative. Agar gives an account of a conversation between two businessmen, a Mexican and an American. They were discussing business matters and as the Mexican was speaking, he drifted to describing the eclipse that would occur and then moved on to talk about the Aztec belief in a fifth sun. The American, growing impatient, gave a quick scientific explanation and then proceeded to discuss "prices and quantities" with great enthusiasm (Agar 1994: 142). In this example, the American believed that the Mexican was moving away from the topic, going off-tangent. The eclipse and the proceeding superstitions were irrelevant to their conversation. For the Mexican, "sticking to the first topic is less important than having an interesting conversation" and there would always be time to discuss business (Agar 1994: 142). This situation can be linked to the Filipino concept of *pakikisama*. In this instance, the American had "no *pakikisama*" or "*walang pakisama*"; he was a killjoy.

Certain parts of the maxim regarding manner are also questionable. In Palmer's discussion on lying, he gives examples of social lies that are not necessarily falsehoods but are meant to deceive the listener by being deliberately ambiguous:

Mary is leaving the house to buy John's Christmas present, and John asks her where she is going. She might reply —

Oh, Shod's having a sale on shoes and mine are worn out.
We're out of paprika (Palmer 1996: 195).

The statements are literally true but are vague and misleading, thus violating both the maxims of quantity and manner.

Palmer states that the maxim of manner as well as the rest of Grice's rules are truly needed when giving directions. However, Filipinos are known to give inadequate and vague directions. Directions are usually too general. The person giving the directions would simply say, "Over there" or "It's nearby." Perhaps the concept of space is still communal or perhaps this is a cultural trait held over from pre-urban times. People still assume that areas are familiar to people and are not subdivided into sections. Thus, the directions tend to be general and vague. The idea of private property and ownership was brought in by the Western colonizers and perhaps there are residual pre-colonial notions of space existing in the way land area is viewed.

Ambiguity plays a role in traditional Filipino courtship. The woman who is being courted is not expected to answer directly to a proposal early in the courtship period. In fact, even the question itself is not asked directly. The usual courtship question would be "Do I have a chance?" The expected answer would be "I don't know." With this the courtship goes on. A more direct question would be asked later and this would be answered directly as well.

In one case of a Filipino man courting an American woman, this ambiguity led to a great misunderstanding. The man asked if he had a chance (*May pag-asa ba ako?*), and the woman gave an affirmative answer since she thought that the man did have a chance, but only a chance. She could still accept or reject him. However, to the Filipino, her answer meant that she was already accepting him. Indeed, there are cultural differences that came into conflict. The American gave a clear and direct answer to an ambiguous question that in certain ways required an ambiguous answer.

Grice's maxims do help prevent confusion and conflict, but they are culturally grounded. Different cultures have different rules and expectations, and as demonstrated by the examples I have shown, various situations also require more flexibility even within the same culture or frame of thought. In cross-cultural situations,

the participants must be aware that there are different rules that are at work. Palmer believes that Grice's culture-bound maxims should not be applied universally, but other forms of discourse should be examined. He echoes Sweetser's ideas when he states that it may be "best to regard Grice's maxims as defining a simplified world of information that speakers of English invoke only in special circumstances, such as an intellectual conversation" (Palmer 1996: 193).

Still, in a world of new Englishes, this conclusion may not be sufficient or even applicable.

EXAMINING CARLOS BULOSAN'S *AMERICA IS IN THE HEART*

Carlos Bulosan's autobiographical account of his boyhood in the Philippines and then his experiences as a migrant worker in the United States was first published in 1946. It was one of the first Filipino novels written in English to be published in America. Its autobiographical nature demonstrates characteristics of Philippine oral tradition but I will first examine the actual events and situations in the novel and how they diverge from Grice's maxims. These instances also reflect various Filipino cultural traits as well as political issues.

The notion of power plays a major role in the so-called violations of the Gricean rules. In one incident, Carlos who is from a poor peasant family in the Philippines, is helping his mother sell beans in the market. A rich young woman arrives and the mother is awed by her elegance and beauty. This is their first encounter with the middle class of Philippine society that is still under American colonial rule. As the woman approaches their booth, she notices the dumbfounded stare of Carlos' mother. Suddenly, she sticks the basket of beans with her silk umbrella. The mother crawls on her knees and tries to scoop up the beans while muttering meekly, "It is all right." She says this over and over again.

Obviously, it is not all right, but the mother says it is as a sign of inferiority. She knows her place and it is possible that she is acting accordingly. She is expected not to make a fuss over it because she is powerless. She deliberately lowers herself by acting politely even in the face of horrible treatment. Indeed, her words emphasize her social status. The words/the lie is important to Carlos when he says that "I was one peasant who did not crawl on my knees and say: "It is all right. It is all right" (Bulosan, 38). Clearly, the violation of the maxim of quality is due to social inequality.

Carlos himself violates the rules of quantity and manner when he is questioned by an Anglo-American businessman in California where he works as a dishwasher in a cafe:

"Mr. Opal tells me that you are reading books. Is it true?"
"Yes, sir." But realizing that my tone had a challenging note in it, I said immediately: "Well, sir, there is nothing else to do after working hours. I hate to go to the Mexican quarters because, as you know, gambling and prostitution are going on there all the time. And I'm a little tired of the phonograph in my room, playing the same records over and over. I find escape in books, and also discovery of a world I had not known before ... " (162).

Here, Carlos lowers himself by giving a long answer when his terse answer could have sufficed in terms of giving the information that was asked. Although his tone is also a factor, Carlos gives a long answer in order to appease the white businessman. Again, the long answer demonstrates his status in an American community during the 1930's. He does not have any rights as a foreigner since the Philippines is not a "nation" and he certainly is not an American citizen. Again, the violation of the Gricean maxims is done in order to show deference and inferiority. Even if he does not believe that he is inferior to Americans, he does what is expected of him.

I have taken up *America is in the Heart* in my English classes at Virginia Tech and while a number of my students liked the book, many found it too repetitive. An American teacher suggests that excerpts might work better in teaching Bulosan since the book "kind of goes on and on" (Garret <http>). Taken as a whole, the book may be violating the maxims of relation (remaining focused on a topic), manner (brevity) and quantity (too much information is repeated). Indeed, Bulosan gives numerous accounts of his suffering in America and perhaps readers would have preferred that incidents which demonstrate the same point be lessened. Still, in terms of oral tradition, Bulosan may be mentioning several similar incidents of hardship because he wants his readers to "be" with him and share in his suffering.

Cross-culturally, substantial repetition is common in oral narratives. The fact that an oral text becomes written may make it seem "defective." It must be noted that the readers of Bulosan's book may not be making allowances for the orality of the written text.

In Filipino oral stories, stories are generally lengthy because the storyteller wants the listeners to feel the story. The feelings are more important than the actual events in the story. The traditional *pasyon* or passion plays depicting the sufferings of Christ usually drag on for hours. The people are familiar with all of the events but the play emphasizes the pain Christ went through. Even in drama serials on television, highly emotional scenes drag quite a bit to make the viewers truly feel the pain, sadness, or anger of the character on screen. It can be noted that in Michael Halliday's multifunctional view of language, the interpersonal function, or rapport among participants is more important than the ideational function or the transmission of information. The criticisms toward the repetitive nature of Bulosan's narrative style come from a Western framework. In an American context, these points are valid. Filipino readers may view it differently.

GRICE'S PLACE IN THE PHILIPPINE ENGLISH CLASSROOM

English, whether spoken or written, is used differently in different countries. Given that the standard English that the Philippine educational system follows is standard American, should Grice's maxims then be imposed on Filipino students of English? As was demonstrated before, even the cooperative principle is not totally applicable in all American situations. Filipinos have their own way of using English and these ways may not necessarily fit into Grice's maxims. How will I go about teaching English in the Philippines, then?

In terms of writing, Margie Berns (1990) mentions that cross-cultural studies have been made to examine "patterns of text structure" (37). She cites the findings of Robert B. Kaplan, who, in 1966, studied the paragraph organization of different languages. The American model would be a line going from top to bottom while the Oriental model would be circular (38). Berns (37) states that the American model is imposed in most countries where English composition is taught. This may be the dilemma of the Filipino English teacher. The paragraph pattern of Filipino may be similar to the Oriental model; that is why students do not go directly to the point; rather, they ramble and "write in circles" even when they write in English. The students may be writing in English, but (in Bradd Shore's culture being in the mind) they are living in Filipino. However, there are indeed universals in paragraph patterns: beginning, middle, and ending. It is the specific situations and contexts which need to be examined more.

I believe, as a teacher of English to Filipinos, that I must consider the cultural differences that are at work when students use the language. Given the position of the Philippines in the midst of its own postcoloniality and the advent of globalization, the "possession" of English is a possession of power. English is and has always been the language of authority in terms of business,

the sciences, government, and education. Despite the initial imposition, the language has been infused with Philippine culture, and thus needs to be "retaken," not as a language imposed by a former colonial "master" but as a language that can be utilized to empower Filipinos with rules that reflect and are influenced by Philippine culture. Thus, the American standard, with its own paradoxes and contradictions (as demonstrated by Grice and Lakoff), is not the be all and end all.

This does not mean that I will abandon directness, brevity, clarity, and the other characteristics that Grice's maxims require. The context of writing must be emphasized. There are situations where directness is important, such as in writing business letters. Still, given the cultural context, specific letters such as letters of termination need not follow the brief and direct pattern. The letter may be written in such a way that the reader will fully understand the situation. This may involve hedging and an extended introduction to act as a buffer. Students should learn that there are standards but that these standards are dictated by their proper contexts of situation and culture. In an academic setting, English is used in a certain way. Within the classroom there are various patterns that can be utilized: some are linear; some, circular. Some may require the workings of the mind; others need the workings of the heart.

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