

What is it?

We usually try to be helpful when we talk. Grice said we follow a 'Cooperative Principle'—we give the right amount of true, relevant, and clear information so the listener can understand. These simple rules are called 'maxims.'

Why does it matter for language learners?

When people ‘break’ (flout) a maxim, they often mean something extra (humor, sarcasm, politeness). Learners who know the maxims can guess the hidden meaning and avoid misunderstandings.

Teaching Ideas (TESOL) - quick wins

- Matching game: Line → Which maxim? → What’s the implied meaning?
- Rewrite task: Make the indirect line direct (and compare politeness).
- Dialogue practice: Students create a short skit with one flout per line.

The Four Maxims

1) Quantity – Say enough, but not too much.

Example: Q: 'How was the exam?' A: 'It was... fine.' (Too little → maybe it was bad.)

2) Quality – Be truthful; don’t say what you lack evidence for.

Example: 'This miracle tea cures everything!' (Likely false → listener doubts the claim.)

3) Relation – Be relevant.

Example: Q: 'Where are the keys?' A: 'The car is already locked.' (Possibly irrelevant → or hinting 'we don’t need them.')

4) Manner – Be clear, brief, and orderly.

Example: 'The individual of juvenile status proceeded to ambulate.' (Too wordy → just say 'The child walked.')

References

Grice, H. P. (1975). 'Logic and Conversation.' In Cole & Morgan (Eds.), Syntax and Semantics 3.

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Mini-Inquiry: Spotting Maxim Flouts
Easy Class Task

Data: collect 3 everyday examples (memes, TV lines, friends’ chats) where someone is indirect or sarcastic.

Method: Decide which maxim is flouted and what extra meaning the speaker implies.

Example: 'Lovely weather!' said in heavy rain → Flouts Quality (not literally true) → Means 'The weather is terrible.'

60-Second Demo Activity

Show 3 sentences and ask peers to vote the maxim with fingers 1–4. Reveal answers and implied meanings.

Findings

- Most examples use flouting for humour or politeness.
- Learners can identify the implied meaning once the maxim is named.
- The same line can flout more than one maxim (e.g., Quantity + Manner).

References

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