

# A Literature Review on Cooperative Principle

Yijun Wu

Department of Foreign Languages  
Xi'an Jiaotong University City College  
Xi'an, China

**Abstract**—This study is devoted to a brief literature review of Grice's Cooperative Principle. The introduction, development and application of it will be discussed in the present study. The previous studies of it on literary works will also be mentioned in order to get better understandings of this theory.

**Keywords**—pragmatics; cooperative principle; Maxim

## I. INTRODUCTION

In *Logic and Conversation*, Grice, H. P. proposes the Cooperative Principle (hereafter CP), which illustrates the rules people should abide by in communication in order to make the conversation go smoothly and meaningfully. Grice's concept of CP and its four associated maxims is considered a major contribution to the area of pragmatics. First, it plays an indispensable role in the generation of conversational implicatures. Second, the CP is a successful example showing how human communication is governed by general principles. Following Grice, as Spreber and Wilson (1981: 155) put it, "conversation is now governed by maxims of truthfulness, relevance, informativeness and manner", "thus it is no exaggeration to say that most recent theories of utterance interpretation are a direct result of Grice's William James Lectures." Last but not the least, Grice's idea of the CP and its associated maxims has triggered heated discussions, provoked a flood of research and thus becomes the source of many widely known pragmatic principles. For example, on the basis of Grice's theory, Kasher (1976) formulated the Principle of Rationality; Leech (1983) outlined his Principle of politeness; and Levinson (1983) advanced his Q-, I- and M- principles, to name just a few.

## II. PREVIOUS STUDIES OF CP

### A. Research Abroad

Since the proposal of the Cooperative Principle by Grice in 1967, it has been applied to many areas in the studies abroad. The application of this theory abroad is far more extensive than in China. First, in the education area, this theory is used to analyze the class conversations. Edwards, Mercer and Friel have made achievements in this field (Lindblom, 2001). In the book *Common Knowledge: the Development of Understanding in the Classroom*, Edwards and Mercer have explained Q & A in the class by use of Cooperative Principle (Lindblom, 2001). They point out that

Grice's maxim tend to specify the rule through which people can infer the shared knowledge to facilitate the acceptance and agreement of the utterance. Kleifgen (1990) finds the Cooperative Principle is helpful in explaining understanding of the game rules by 3-years-old children. When the children flout the quality maxim to achieve humor effect, s/he has understood the rules. She proposes the concept of "pre-determined point" which is very important in the education strategy because it can indicate the reasonable time for teachers to know students' understanding and impart new knowledge. In *Toward a Theory of Questions*, Goody (1978) has studied the intercultural communication by use of the Cooperative Principle. According to him, the questions not only convey the contents but also reflect the complicated relationship between questioner and answerer. People of different classes in the society would ask different questions and the social class would restrict the generation and understanding of the questions. Such restriction is called shared definition by him. From Goody's view, questions can be used to establish intersubjectivity and context (e.g. between mother and children), to train the children, to make jokes to lovers, and to control others or obey the orders (Lindblom, 2001). Some scholars who study grammar also have learned from the Cooperative Principle and proposed some constructive suggestions. Rundquist (1992) calls Grice's theory Social Theory of Indirectness. He has collected a great deal of cases in his article *Indirectness: A gender study of flouting Grice's maxims and through the analysis he gets a conclusion that in the conversation the male is more frequently to convey their meanings by violating the Cooperative maxims.*

There is no doubt that the co-operative principle can go some way towards explaining the generation of implicatures. However, it is deficient in explaining why people always convey what they mean in an indirect way by violating some maxims, why people prefer to let the hearer to infer their meanings than tell what they mean directly. To answer these questions, great efforts have been made, among which the Politeness Theories proposed by Leech, Brown and Levinson are of the most importance. Leech (1983) proposes PP in an attempt to rescue Grice's CP. Leech suggests that speakers often violate the principle of cooperation out of politeness. It is out of consideration of politeness that people choose different pragmatic strategies to obey or violate CP. According to Brown and Levinson (1978), some politeness principles must be followed and certain politeness strategies should be adopted to preserve face or not to threaten face. When people decide to do FTAs, they can choose to do them

on-record with or without redressive action, or they can choose to do them off-record which means they can damage the face secretly.

## B. Research in China

From 1980 to 2007, Chinese pragmatists published as many as 100 articles on the CP in academic journals, making the study of the CP a major concern of pragmatic research in China. According to its development, the CP research can be roughly divided into three stages, namely, theoretical introduction, theoretical research, and application.

1) *Theoretical introduction*: The CP was first introduced to China by Hu Zhuanglin in 1980. In an article entitled "Pragmatics" (Hu Zhuanglin, 1980), Hu first mentioned the CP and its related maxims. Three years later, Chen Yumin wrote another article entitled "Gricean Conversational Implicatures and Related Discussions" (Chen Yumin, 1983, which is considered the most comprehensive and faithful introduction of the CP at that time. Since then, discussion of the CP has become a big concern to the Chinese circle of pragmatics. Articles of this sort spring up like mushrooms.

Besides Hu Zhuanglin and Chen Yumin, a group of Chinese pragmatists also joined in and contributed to this field either by translating related articles or making comments on the CP. In addition to articles, the introduction of the CP also appears in books of pragmatics compiled by Chinese scholars (He Ziran, 1988; He Zhaoxiong, 1989, 2000; Jiang Wangqi, 2000; Suo Zhengyu, 2000).

The notion of the CP and the content of its related four maxims are introduced to Chinese readers mainly on the basis of Grice's *Logic and Conversation* (Grice, 1975). Articles explicitly entitled 'Cooperative Principle' and 'Conversational Maxims' or of sort are seldom seen. Most often, the introduction of the CP goes hand in hand with the introduction of the conversational implicature theory, and serves as a precondition for the inference of the conversational implicature.

The introduction of the CP, on the one hand, familiarizes the Chinese pragmatists with one of the most influential pragmatic concept in the late 1960s; on the other hand, lays down a solid foundation for future and further research of the CP.

## 2) Theoretical research

a) *Critiques*: Critiques on the CP and its associated maxims mainly concentrate on two aspects. One is to explore and clarify the relation between the general principle (CP) and its associated maxims; the other is to point out the limitations of the CP and its maxims.

Echoing Grice, Sun Yu (1994) points out that the CP differs from its maxims in nature, and each maxim does not enjoy the same importance. In an article entitled "*On the Limitations of the CP*", Zhang Chunlong (1995) argues that Grice's description of the relation maxim is too vague, and that Grice's emphasis on the speakers instead of on the hearers or both is itself incomprehensive. In the article

"'Cooperation' and 'Principle' in the CP", Gao Weidong (1997) analyzes two basic concepts — "cooperation" and "principle", and finds that the "cooperation" advocated in the general principle is in contradiction with that in the maxims. Moreover, he finds that whether the CP is understood as an absolute principle or a relevant one, there might be problems. Thus, Gao concludes that the CP is both vague and inconsistent.

These critiques, though partially borrowed from western pragmatists' ideas, are of great help to a better and deeper understanding of the CP.

b) *Modification*: Although a lot of pragmatists touch upon the research of the CP, few of them has ever attempted to construct a new theory as their western counterparts do on the basis of Grice's framework. So when Xu Shenghuan (1993, 1994) came out with his neo-Gricean inferential apparatus, it is no exaggeration to say that so far, he is the first and only Chinese pragmatist who sets out to enrich the CP.

Xu argues that the classic conversational implicature theory is insufficient to account for the mechanism which generates conversational implicatures, so it is necessary to construct a new model to replace the old one. Based on Levinson's principles (I-principle, Q-principle and M-principle: Levinson, 1983), Xu first clarifies some important concepts such as "conventional relation", "generalized implicature" and "particularized implicature", and then he sets about constructing a new inferential apparatus for the deduction of the conversational implicature. To cope with his model, Xu modifies the CP and proposes his own principles: principle of information intensity; principle of semantic credibility; and principle of manner validity.

Xu's model is both a breakthrough in the construction of linguistic theory and a contribution to the Neo-Gricean conversational implicature theory.

c) *Comparative studies*: The emergence of the inter-cultural communication highlights the cultural influence on the application of the CP and its maxims. Some Chinese scholars turn to investigate the CP and the maxims in Chinese culture. After the data-based investigation, Zhang Zexing (1991) concludes that the CP and the maxims are inter-culturally applicable, but not infra-culturally universal. Moreover, the operation of the CP and the maxims are activity-type-specific as well as goal-specific. Another scholar, Liu Yingkai (1991), probes into the East-West differences in adopting the CP and the maxims, and points out that the cause of these differences is the cultural differences.

The study of the CP and its maxims in the Chinese culture makes a big step forward in the research of the CP, because it is not only a successful attempt to examine the western pragmatic theory with Chinese linguistic facts, but also a valuable contribution to the worldwide activity in investigating CP's universality.

### III. APPLICATION IN CHINA

In China, the CP has been mainly applied to the following six areas:

#### A. Cooperation and Translation

Since 1993, many language researchers like Chen Xiaowei, Wang Ping and Liao Kaihong have applied the Cooperative Principle to their translation work. According to them, in order to help the reader be aware of cultural differences, understand the original meaning of the author more exactly and establish a cooperative relationship between them, it is necessary for the translator to add proper cultural information in the proper place. The idea of applying the Cooperative Principle to translation has been proved to be feasible.

#### B. Cooperation and EFL Teaching

Some scholars who have been working on language teaching combine the Cooperative Principle with practice of teaching. They mainly explore on how to make use of strengthen and influences of this theory to facilitate teaching, especially English teaching, in a more efficient way. As Jinli (2005) mentioned in his book *Cooperation and Conversation*, researchers in this aspect include Zhou Hong, Du Hong, Wang Liya, etc.

#### C. Cooperation and Humor and Comedy

In order to achieve a cheerful atmosphere or produce humor effect, the actors or speakers always violate or flout the Cooperative Principle. Exploratory and primary researches explaining the reasons for this with CP are made by people like Liu Fuchang, Li Zhirong, Chi Changhai (Jinli, 2005).

#### D. Cooperation and Advertisement

The conversational implicatures of advertisement language are explained with the help of Cooperative Principle. Scholars such as He Jianmei, Li Gang and Wei Han have explained the generation of implicatures of advertisement language (Jinli, 2005).

#### E. Cooperation VS. Politeness

The limitations of the Cooperative Principle and its maxims have also been analyzed extensively. Concerning the relation between Cooperative Principle and Politeness Theory, scholars such as He Ziran, Chen Rong, Qu Weiguo have conducted ardent and deep discussions. For example, based on China's culture, Gu Yueguo has proposed four aspects of politeness in China, i.e.: respectfulness; modesty; attitudinal warmth; and refinement (Jinli, 2005).

#### F. Cooperation and Literature

Here is an example such as the thesis *The Violation of the Cooperative Principles in Catch-22* written by Zhangyan (2002).

### IV. PREVIOUS STUDIES OF CP ON LITERARY WORKS

CP study of literature has experienced a very short history and it can be traced back to the 1970s. Discourse analyst, Professor Van Dijk (1976) terms a novel, a poem, and a drama as a literary discourse. In his opinion, the whole discourse or text is a macro-discourse, performing a macro-speech act and the specific discourses in a text are termed as micro-speech acts. A literature work has a speaker-system (the author/s) and a hearer-system (the reader/s) and a transmitted message (literary text) construed with rules of a semiotic system. The author and the reader communicate through the literary text, which is termed as literary communication. (Van Dijk, 1976)

Pratt (1977) maintains that literature is a particular speech context which involves a specific set of conventions and expectations concerning the relationship between the author and the audience, the preparation and selection of texts, the application of Grice's CP, which, she subsequently carries out to analyze some literary texts. She later states that it is only when the maxims are intentionally flouted the conversational implicature stands out.

Geoffrey Leech and Michael Short in 1981 published *style in Fiction: A Linguistic Introduction to English Fictional Prose* in which a whole chapter is devoted to conversation in the novel and practical analyses of prose texts and extracts are made. In that chapter, turning to a pragmatic analysis of fictional dialogue, Leech and Short introduce speech act theory and, in particular, Gricean principles, in examining "the gap between overt sense and pragmatic force" (Leech & Short, 1981:294). They examine a passage from Jane Austin's *Pride and Prejudice*, and later analyze the dialogue between Nelly Dean and Isabella in *Wuthering Heights* written by Emily Bronte as well as dialogues in the famous detective fiction *Destination Unknown* written by Agatha Christie, in order to make their points on the violation of the conversational maxims put forward by Grice. They also maintain that "the pragmatic model of understanding can apply not only to character-character discourse, but also to the way in which authors convey messages to their readers." (Leech & Short, 1981: 302)

Toolan (1990: 273) applies some concepts of discourse analysis to the analysis of the dialogues in Faulkner's *Go Down*, on which Grice's CP also helps to shed some light. Fowler (1996) argues that the theory of implicature helps understand how discourse works, and provides numerous insights for linguistic criticism. He believes that implicature is central to dialogic structure in a good deal of elliptical, allusive modern drama and to dialogues in witty and/or ironic or stylized novels and that in literary works, branches of the maxims are applauded as producing aesthetically or conceptually agreeable verbal effects. He then explores the application of the CP in a drama excerpt.

In one word, the pragmatic study of literature has made great progress abroad despite its short history of development, which, to a large degree, has led to the corresponding development in China. Chinese scholars have also contributed a lot in this field. Shao Zhihong (1990) is



perhaps the first Chinese scholar who treads on the virgin land of pragmatic study of literature by applying the CP to the analysis of Shakespeare's *Hamlet* and *King Lear*. (Tu Jing: 2005a) Suo Zhenyu (1999) applies the maxims of CP to analyze and obtain the implicature of *Divorce* by Lao She and *The Thunderstorm* by Cao Yu. Wang Shouyuan (2000: 188-203) applies Speech Act theory and the CP to some literary texts and justifies the effectiveness of pragmatic models for the analysis and interpretation of literature. Feng Zongxin (2002) applies CP on the analysis of the absurd dramas.

## V. CONCLUSION

The studies mentioned above both at home and abroad contribute greatly to the CP studies on literary works. But further research still deserves to be done in other fields, two of which are listed as follows:

### A. *Breaking Through the Disciplinary Barriers, Promoting the Combination of Cooperative Principles and Cognitive Principles, and Enhancing the Explanatory Power of Cooperative Principles*

It is believed that the past research fully shows that the cooperation principle has a strong vitality. Although it still has some shortcomings, CP will be gradually improved in the future practice. CP is the core issue of pragmatics research, it will also have more practicability and stronger explanatory power with the development of pragmatics. In a small sense, the principle of cooperation is closely related to pragmatic theories such as presupposition and speech act. There are overlapping parts between the conversational implicature and presupposition which are both the research focus in the study of CP. Although the research angles of speech act and cooperative principle are different, they are both dynamic analysis of conversational implicature, and the two are mutually complementary to each other. In a large sense, CP is an interdisciplinary theory, which belongs to linguistics. At the same time, it is also the research object of logic, social psychology and other disciplines. Therefore, the research results of CP in any of the above disciplines are bound to promote the development of other disciplines. At the same time, because the cooperative principle lacks an operational reasoning mechanism, it should be combined with the cognitive principle to enhance the explanatory power of itself.

### B. *Strengthening the Applied Research of CP*

While advancing the theoretical construction, we should strengthen the applied research of the CP. For example, if people who are engaged in the research of artificial intelligence want the machine to have the ability to understand the meaning between the words, the first they need to figure out is how can people convey and deduce conversational implicature. In order to achieve this goal, we must combine macro research with micro research, combine foreign language research with Chinese research, so that what we learn can be put in use. In the future research, we should combine the theoretical discussion with the empirical

analysis, especially in the field of man-machine conversation, translation, social intercourse and so on.

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