



Absence of the Maxim of Ethics: Socio-cultural Contexts in Focus

Muhammad Reza Namy Soghady¹, Hossein Vahid Dastjerdi^{2*}

¹Ph.D. Candidate, English Department, Shahreza Branch, Islamic Azad University, Shahreza, Iran

namymr@yahoo.com

²Associate Professor, English Department, Najafabad Branch, Islamic Azad University, Najafabad, Iran

h.vahid@yahoo.com

Citation

Namy Soghady, M., & Vahid Dastjerdi, H. (2023). Grecian Maxims Revisited: Proposing the Maxim of Ethics for Specific Socio-cultural Contexts. *International Journal of Language and Translation Research*, 3(4), pp. 25-37. <http://doi.org/10.22034/IJLTR.2023.177151>

Abstract

Available online

Keywords:

Grecian Maxims, Cooperative Principles, guard-avoidance, Maxim of Ethics, offensive discourse

The present position study provides arguments about different aspects of Grecian Maxims (Grice 1975) within the Persian socio-cultural, Islamic setting. According to one of the most reliable Islamic Shiite sources, *Man La Yahdhoroh Al-Faghih* (Vol. 4), people are allowed to tell lie in some circumstances, for specific purposes, e.g. in battlefields, out of discretion, for building up reconciliation among people, and when promising to secure family relations and foundations. Also, based on the Holy Quran, telling lie to save life, properties and family from real enemies, which is regarded as Taqiyyeh; namely, guard-avoidance (Holy Quran, Surah Al-Imran, 28; An-Nahl, 106; Al-Mo'min, 28) is permissible. This qualitative study is, therefore, aimed at investigating ethics in the Holy Quran, as a highly culture-specific element, to explain and exemplify the above-mentioned cases and demonstrate that ethics is a missing maxim in the framework of Grecian Cooperative Principles, at least in two respects, 1) ethics should govern Grice's Maxim of Quality and 2) Maxim of Ethics does not allow us to draw on unpleasant, offensive discourse.

فقدان اصل اخلاق: زمینه های اجتماعی-فرهنگی در کانون توجه

پژوهش حاضر استدلال هایی را در مورد جنبه های مختلف اصول گرایس (گرایس 1975) در فضای اجتماعی-فرهنگی و اسلامی-ایرانی ارائه می دهد. بر اساس یکی از معتبرترین منابع اسلامی شیعه، *من لا یحضره الفقیه* (جلد 4)، افراد مجاز به دروغ گفتن در برخی شرایط هستند، برای اهداف خاص، مثلاً در میدان جنگ، از روی صلاحدید برای ایجاد آشتی بین مردم، و نیز زمانی که قول می دهید که روابط و پایه های خانوادگی را تضمین کنید. همچنین بر اساس قرآن کریم، دروغ گفتن برای نجات جان و مال و خانواده از دست دشمنان واقعی که تقیه شمرده شده است جایز است (قرآن کریم، سوره آل عمران، 28؛ نحل، 106؛ المؤمن، 28). از این رو، این پژوهش کیفی با هدف بررسی اخلاق در قرآن کریم به عنوان یک عنصر کاملاً فرهنگی خاص، برای تبیین و مصداق موارد یاد شده و نشان دادن این موضوع که اخلاق در چارچوب اصول همکاری گرایس یک اصل مفقود است، (حداقل از دو جنبه، 1- اخلاق باید بر اصل کیفیت گرایس حاکم باشد و 2- اصل اخلاق به ما اجازه نمی دهد که از گفتن ناخوشایند و توهین آمیز استفاده کنیم.) انجام شده است.

کلید واژه ها: اصول گرایس، اصول همکاری، تقیه، اصل اخلاق، گفتن توهین آمیز

¹ Corresponding Author's Email:
A_alirezaebrahimi@yahoo.com

Introduction

Grice in his article “Logic and conversation” (1975), introduced a theory of conversation which consists of Cooperative Principles (CP). The theory makes conversational contribution as required by the accepted purpose or direction of the talk exchange in which one is engaged; that is to make certain explicit rational principles observed by people when they converse (Hadi, 2013). Listeners and speakers generally cooperate in speaking to understand and make themselves understood mutually unless they want to miscommunicate for gaining some specific personal reasons. The components of CP are four conversational maxims that arise from the pragmatics of natural language. Pragmatics is a branch of linguistics that is concerned with the communicative functions of language (Levinson 1983, Thomas 1995, Yule 1996).

According to Grice (1975), the Cooperative Principles venture to clarify rational principles observed by people in communication. He claims that people communicate rationally with each other, and that man’s talks are unconditionally cooperative. He claims further that this phenomenon is everlasting since it has been gained from childhood. As a final point, he maintains that ‘audience listener understands the implication of a speaker’s remarks by drawing on an assumption of cooperativeness, contextual information and background knowledge’.

In his article, Ladegaard (2008) argues that Grice’s focal point is just the semantic aspect of utterances, clarified on the basis of pragmatics or the context in which the speaker’s intentions and purposes can be interpreted. Instead, he suggests that both the semantic and pragmatic aspects as well as all the indispensable linguistic knowledge should be made use of to understand and interpret human communicative interaction in any theory of conversational cooperation. He states that Grice is extremely biased towards cooperation, claiming that ‘Grice’s assumption is that people communicate logically, and all of them attempt to be good communicators’, and asserts that, ‘In real life setting not all people tend to be logical and ideal. They sometimes struggle to gain their benefits and sometimes cultures, beliefs, and customs require them to do something to gain a purposeful goal’.

Understanding the real intention of a speaker in an interactional context necessitates turn-taking strategies, speech accommodation, voice alternations (Ledegaard, 2008). There are some circumstances people attempt to save their face, reputation, properties, and relationship by using some ethical behaviors. The present position qualitative study tries to review these circumstances

in Persian socio-cultural settings and to revisit Grecian maxims in order to show that although these maxims are the thread of human interactions, they fail to see ethical issues in certain contexts.

Review of Grice's Maxims

Grice developed Conversational Maxim theory in 1975. This theory which belongs to the field of pragmatics explicates how people should behave in conversations. The theory has, however, faced some criticisms since its conception (Thomas, 1995). The focus of criticisms is on different factors such as age, social and cultural background, and people's mental capacity which influences the use of language.

To refresh our knowledge of conversational maxims, a quick glance at them is in order here:

1-Maxim of Quantity governs the appropriate amount of information that someone makes in a conversation. The speaker should be as informative as possible to the purposes of the exchange and also the speaker is required not to give unnecessary information (Grice, 1975).

2-Maxim of Quality, which governs truthfulness, requires the speakers to say something they know it is true and to avoid telling something they lack adequate evidence for. Maxim of quality is the most important (Grice, 1975). The hearer tries to decode other maxims on the condition that the maxim of quality is observed; in other words, when the hearer assumes that the utterance is right and truthful.

3-Maxim of Relevance, which governs relevance of the topic being discussed, requires the speakers to utter only something which is relevant to the main theme and can contribute to the discussion (Grice, 1975). Some other researchers (Sperber & Wilson, 1986) argue that this maxim is the most important maxim that actually subsumes the other maxims within it.

4-Maxim of Manner, which governs ambiguity avoidance, requires the speakers to avoid unnecessary prolixity, ambiguity and disorderliness. It focuses on clarity of expressions, brevity and requires the speakers to describe the events in order in which they occur.

Flouting of a Maxim

Flouting a maxim occurs when speakers fail to observe a maxim because they want the addressee to infer a meaning which is different from what the speaker is expressing explicitly. There are several subcategories, specific to each one of the maxims. There can be flouts when exploiting the maxim of quality, this means when people provide statements they do not have enough information or also when they are intentionally lying (Thomas, 1995, p.65). Exploiting the maxim of quantity occurs when the speakers provide less information than it is required from them or another extreme case when they provide more information than it is required (Thomas, 1995, p. 68). There is a flout exploiting the maxim of relation when the utterance is irrelevant to the topic (Thomas, 1995, p. 70). Generally speaking, according to Darighoftar & Ghaffari (2012), **Grecian** Maxims are not always observed and their violation or floating bears more information than if they were obeyed.

Jia (2008) believes that the flouting of a maxim can be clearly seen in occasions when one or some maxims are opted out during communication processes. For instance, he adds, telling a joke, writing a book and making a movie are different situations in which maxims can be flouted to surprise people so they burst into laughter, to better develop the plot of the story (Mey, 2001), or to create a special effect. This occurs when something is suggested in an utterance in a way that is neither expressed nor strictly implied.

Criticism of Grecian Maxims

In spite of the wide use and application of the Grice's maxims, Grice has been criticized many times because of the Anglo-centeredness of his maxims (Kecskes, 2019) and their validity by some scholars around the world (Thomas, 1995, Stokke, 2016). Thomas (1995) mentions various problems with the maxims. He believes that the imperative voice of maxims is often interpreted as a dictate of how to behave normally. However, the formulation is not the only problem. One of the main points, he adds, is that an utterance is open to a range of different interpretations and it is difficult to determine when the implicature (what is suggested but not formally expressed and the speaker tends to communicate to the audience beyond or instead of what has been literally said, Robinson, 1989) is intended. The maxims themselves and their violation often overlap. Also, it seems that the maxims work differently depending on cultures, beliefs and natural communication

and artificially created world of communication, such as the courtroom hearings, where there is no spontaneous speech and there is a strong restriction on communication.

Leech (1983) introduced the politeness principle in order to account for violations of maxims. Albeit, there may sometimes be a clash between politeness principle and maxims (Jia, 2008), in most cases of maxim flouting interlocutors violate maxims in favor of politeness principle, not because they do not wish to cooperate, but because certain societal norms demand it. For instance, in a military setting, the phrase “Yes Sir!” is a kind of routine and standardized reply uttered by a sub-ordinate person to be polite to their super-ordinates regardless of their true willingness (Jia, 2008). Jia (2008) argues that “...cooperation is essential for a conversation to take place. In order to make a conversation go on successfully and smoothly, the speakers on both sides of the conversations should hold a cooperative attitude”. Hadi (2013) states that, “Grice’s maxims have played a significantly functional role in the field of pragmatics because this theory separates pragmatics from linguistics”. She argues that although Grice’s work faces major limitations, it is still at the centre of the disciplines of pragmatics and the important role it plays in this field cannot be denied”. She suggests “we should be careful interpreting what is meant by [cooperation] in Grice’s maxims. His notion is different from the everyday notion of cooperation. Some authors make this difference clear to readers. To have a fair understanding of the Grice’ maxims, it would be better to study it in isolation”.

Ladegaard (2009, p. 66) believes that ‘Maxim theory is fundamentally asocial’, and that we can say he follows Chomsky’s idea (1965), of positing an “ideal speaker-listener in a completely homogeneous speech community”. Therefore, Ladegaard asserts that Grice fails to explain how people actually communicate concerning sophisticated social contexts, for instance if speakers aim to be accepted in every social settings in which they find themselves. Since Grice’s theory does not take the social contexts into account, and only considers the speaker-listener interaction in an ideal context, and applies universally (regardless of social elements such as sex, power relationships, social class, and age) it has little explanatory power. Last but not the least, it is too biased towards cooperation. Grice believes communicating effectively is the goal of the people involved in interactional settings to solve their problems. Actually, miscommunication is sometimes the purpose of some discursal interactions.

This study: Exemplifications and Argumentation

Both sides of every bilateral discourse will often have to choose between maintaining conventions and achieving their ideal goals. In some occasions, norms may be violated if the personal goal achieved by such a discourse is more significant than the ideal goal of satisfying the societal norm. For example, suppose a person was being cut in front while driving by another driver. He or she may resort to shouting or profanity and this is violation of social norms. Thus, social norms must always be weighed against the goals of a specific piece of discourse in order to determine which is more important. Persian socio-cultural setting has also, like other cultural settings, some exceptions and so called violations. Islamic laws too require people to tell lie in some tough circumstances. Also, people are required or at least supposed, not to insult or hurt others by words and other spoken or non-spoken acts. This claim is investigated at two phases in the present qualitative position study, 1) telling lie to achieve intentional but morally-beneficial goals and 2) using soft discourse as well as Taqiyyeh (guard-avoidance) to save people's lives and properties. It is to be noted here that since this study is qualitative, examples of such a claim would suffice to prove it through a descriptive-argumentative method.

Phase One: Examples of Telling Lie out of Discretion

Example 1: In battlefield

In battlefield where the enemy wants to attack people especially women and children, it is commendable to tell lie and mislead the enemy in order to save innocent lives of the people. In Islam, Muslims are not permitted to attack others unless they are attacked. They can defend themselves by lying and giving misleading information to the enemies (Sheikh Saduq, A.H. 381).

Example 2: Reconciliation among people

When two or more people/groups are involved in hostile arguments and they do not seem to come to terms at all, they naturally try to talk negatively behind each other's back. In this condition, people are not supposed to pass on negative talks but reversely, they should propound positive words to settle down the arguments. In fact, although they break the norms of the society but it is permitted to do so just to pacify a tough condition among a group of people. In other words, people are not permitted to rub salt into the wounds and make such conditions tougher and worse (Sheikh Saduq, A.H. 381).

Example 3: Maintaining family relations and foundation

In Islam, family is a holy social structure and all of the prophets and imams have advised to promote and secure it. Sometimes wives and children request something the man cannot afford that on the spot. In these condition man is not supposed to disagree immediately and if the man tells the truth, then there will be some tensions and grudge among them so the man is allowed to tell something indirectly like “God willing I will do that, hopefully I will try to do so, etc.” to satisfy them for the moment of request. As the time passes, they may forget or take their request back, also they may be satisfied through talking and reasoning, etc. (Allameh Majlesi, 1984).

Example 4: Taqiyyeh (guard-avoidance)

Taqiyyeh is a way of keeping your beliefs secret when your life or family is endangered by enemies. In these conditions Muslims are supposed to agree with the enemy by tongue but they keep their beliefs deep in their heart. In Muslim Holy book, The Quran, there are at least 10 cases of mentioning Taqiyyeh. Here are some of them:

- a. **Surah Al-Imran** (The Family of Imran), Verse 28: *Let not the believers take the disbelievers as their friends in preference to the believers, and whoever does that will never be helped by Allah in any way, unless it be a guard against them. And Allah warns you against Himself (His punishment), and to Allah is the final return.*

Argument: Muslims are supposed to guard themselves by keeping their belief secret in case of dangers only as well as avoiding hypocrisy simultaneously.

- b. **Surah Al-Nahl** (The Bee), Verse 106: *Whoever disbelieves in Allah after his belief except for one who is forced [to renounce his belief] while his heart is content with faith. But those who [willingly] open their hearts to disbelief, upon them is wrath from Allah, and theirs will be an awful doom.*

Argument: Those who are forced to renounce their religion and reluctantly pretend to be so are the exceptions for the wrath of God.

- c. **Surah Al-An'am** (the Cattle), Verses 76-78: *76- So when the night covered him [with darkness], he saw a star. He said, "This is my lord." But when it set, he said, "I like not those that disappear." 77- And when he saw the moon rising, he exclaimed, "This is my lord." But when it*

set, he said, "Unless my Lord guide me, I will surely be among the people gone astray." 78- And when he saw the sun rising, he said, "This is my lord; this is greater." But when it set, he said, "O my people, indeed I am free from what you associate with Allah.

Argument: It refers to the story of Abraham the Prophet (PBUH) who first agreed with star-worshippers, moon worshippers and sun worshippers in order to guide them toward the unique God.

d. Surah Al-Saffat (Those Who Set the Ranks) Verse 89: *And said, "Indeed, I feel sick."*

Argument: When Abraham, the Prophet, did not want to go out with his opponents (the disbelievers) and wanted to stay in the city to break the idols, he proposed this excuse out of discretion.

e. Surah Al-Anbiyaa (The Prophets) Verse 63: *He said, "Rather, this - the largest of them - did it, so ask them, if they should [be able to] speak."*

Argument: When the angry idolaters rushed into Abraham, the Prophet, to know who had broken the idols, he calmly answered "the largest idol did that". This is Taqiyyeh out of discretion.

f. Surah Al-Mu'min (The Believer) Verse 28: *"And a believing man from the family of Pharaoh who concealed his faith..."*

Argument: That believer concealed his belief and penetrated into the Pharaoh's castle to help Moses.

g. Surah Al-Kahf (The Cave) Verses 19-20: 19- *And similarly, We awakened them that they might question one another. Said a speaker from among them, "How long have you remained [here]?" They said, "We have remained a day or part of a day." They said, "Your Lord is most knowing of how long you remained. So send one of you with this silver coin of yours to the city and let him look to which is the best of food and bring you provision from it and let him be cautious. And let no one be aware of you. 20- Indeed, if they come to know of you, they will stone you or return you to their religion. And you will never prosper."*

Argument: Firstly, the believers in that castle concealed their belief. Secondly, visiting the city to provide food was full of hidings in order to save their lives and beliefs.

h. Surah Ya-Sin, Verse 14: *"When We sent to them two [Prophets] but they denied them, so We strengthened them with a third [Prophet], and they said, "Indeed, we are messengers to you."*

Argument: The third prophet could win the disbelievers' trust with the help of Taqiyyeh.

i. Surah Al-An'am (The Cattle) Verse 108: *“And do not insult those they invoke other than Allah, lest they insult Allah in enmity without knowledge. Thus, We have made pleasing to every community their deeds. Then to their Lord is their return and He will inform them about what they used to do”.*

Argument: The Holy Quran orders the believers not to insult what the disbelievers worship because they will insult the unique God in return ignorantly.

j. Surah Al-Baqarah (The Cow) Verse 195: *“And spend in the way of Allah and do not throw [yourselves] with your [own] hands into destruction. And do good; indeed, Allah loves the doers of good”.*

Argument: Joseph's presence and his high position in ancient Egypt emperor's court was the result of nothing but Taqiyyeh in some circumstances. Another example of Taqiyyeh is Abutalib, Prophet Muhammad's paternal uncle, who concealed his faith in order to save the Prophet from the disbelievers' malicious intentions and dangers.

There are many stories of Taqiyyeh in Islamic and Persian culture. This study just names two of them to make the stories brief and sweet:

Story 1

Bohloul was born in Kufa. His real name was Wahab bin Amr. Haroun al-Rashid feared the seventh Shiite Imam, Musa Kazim (A.S.), for the security of his Caliphate and kingdom. Therefore, he tried to annihilate the Imam. He put the blame of rebellion upon him and demanded a judicial decree against him from the pious people of his time, including Bohloul. Everyone gave the decree except Bohloul, who opposed the decision. He immediately went to the Imam and informed him of the circumstances, and asked for advice and guidance. The Imam told him to behave insanely. He did so and was saved from Haroun's punishment. Actually, without any fear of danger, Bohloul could protect himself from against tyranny. He insulted the Caliph and his courtiers in his talks. People, of course, acknowledged his great wisdom and excellence. Even today, many of his stories are narrated in religious meetings to teach the listeners valuable lessons. Before pretending to be insane, Bohloul lived a life of influence and power, but after obeying the Imam's order, he turned his face away from the magnificence and splendor of the world. In reality, he became a true lover

of Allah. He rejected Haroun's favors and dependence. In fact, Bohlool considered himself better than the Caliph and his courtiers because of his own way of life.

Argument: Bohlool in his heart was faithful to Islam and Imam, but that forced condition and Imam's order as well made him reluctantly act like an insane person; however people trusted his wisdom. So, in this respect, we notice that Grice's maxim of quality is governed by Maxim of Ethics that is ethics necessitates some hidden conversational acts and speech.

Story 2

Ammar who was one of the first believers in Islam, was tortured until he eventually maligned Prophet Muhammad and spoke well of the pagan gods under the pressure of torture. Afterwards, he went to the Prophet and confessed his recantation. The Prophet inquired him, "How did you find your heart?" When Ammar replied that he was still a Muslim in his heart, Muhammad said, "all was well", based on this verse of the Quran: "Whoever disbelieves in Allah after his belief except for one who is forced [to renounce his belief] while his heart is content with faith" (Al-Nahl, [The Bee] Verse: 106).

Argument: In this story too, we notice that ethics necessitates people to change their way of expression in order to save their lives, properties and families from enemies and wicked people.

Phase Two: Sources of Using Nice Language With Others

In Persian culture which is closely attached to Islamic traditions and laws, people are not supposed to use bad, negative or irritating language with others. This culture actually recommends kindness, affection, softness in language, brotherhood, etc. There are hundreds of hadith (Islamic traditions) which motivate people to stick to beautiful manners and behavior. Examples of them are mentioned below:

1. *Be kind and gentle; speak politely and neatly* (Imam Sadiq, A.S.).

Argument: This hadith promotes kindness and disallows harshness towards people.

2. *The most good-tempered people are those who are soft-hearted and inoffensive to others, who associate easily with people just as they associate with them easily* (The Holy Prophet, P.B.U.H.).

Argument: This hadith motivates people to have kind language and not to insult others. When people are soft-hearted and kind, they are approachable and friendly. So people are not supposed to use bad language to reject people.

3. *Be aware that a good-natured youth is the key to benevolence and the lock for malevolence. Also, a bad-tempered youth is the key to malevolence and the lock on benevolence (Imam Sadeq, A.S.).*

Argument: Imam Sadeq (PBUH) emphasizes on being open to human being. If people show cold shoulder or have the sulks toward others, then there will be no humanitarian attitudes around, and human societal life would be like that of the jungle law.

4. *I have been appointed to consummate magnanimous manners, Prophet Muhammad (P.B.U.H.).*

Argument: Magnanimous manners are supposed to be in the gene of human beings, not animals. Thus, Prophet Muhammad (P.B.U.H.) preached harmless language, behavior, attitude, etc. which are all referred to as magnanimous behaviors.

5. *You cannot win people's heart by wealth, so try to win their heart by good manners, Prophet Muhammad (P.B.U.H.).*

Argument: It seems that the power of words, behavior is far more than the power of wealth. So, ethics is necessary in all the seconds of our lives, especially when we are talking to a people. Since man is a social creature and cannot live on his/her own, s/he should try to communicate with others in society, and this necessitates good manners.

6. *The most loved ones to God are those who are the most good-natured,. Prophet Muhammad (P.B.U.H.).*

Argument: When God loves those who are much more open and welcoming to others, who thinks about doing something other than nice and pleasant behavior?

7. *The apogee of wisdom is treating people well, Imam Hasan (A.S.).*

Argument: Good behavior is so significant that it equals wisdom, and this evolution of mind and heart is only for human beings. Actually, if they would like to prove their wisdom and sagacity, they have to behave morally not immorally.

Concluding Remarks

This study investigated the development and significance of Maxim of Ethics which the authors believe should be attended to as a separate maxim (No. 5) within the Grecian framework, since it is missing in this framework in connection with many cultural issues. Specifically, based on the above arguments, it can rightly be claimed that Grice's maxim of quality is fairly not applicable to discourse of some languages, among them Persian, due to cultural and ideological discrepancies. In Persian socio-cultural context, for instance, telling lie is recommended in a) battlefield, b) reconciliation among people, and c) maintaining family relations and foundations (Sheikh Saduq, A.H. 381; Allameh Majlesi, 1984). In the same line, Taqiyyeh is another type of manipulating the truth to save someone's life and properties in case of danger. So, Maxim of Ethics here governs Grecian maxim of quality and, thus, necessitates some manipulations. Furthermore, Maxim of Ethics sometimes requires people not to stick to offensive, harmful, negative discourse. Suppose you are in a class and you do not like the color of your teacher's shirt. How would it be appropriate for you to behave? Telling your teacher about your negative impression of his shirt color or keeping silent in order not to offend him/her? Maxim of Ethics requires you not to say anything about your likes or dislikes in these occasions. Since we are human beings and we have mutual interactions with other human beings, Maxim of Ethics demands positive and safe language in many contexts. We are actually not supposed to let others know what we think deep inside. Hundreds of traditions (*hadith*) and wise sayings by prophets, religious authorities and philosophers have been cited to promote ethics among people. Thus, Grice's maxims will be evolved if we add Maxim of Ethics, as a separate maxim, to his list. This claim is by no means irrefutable and thus, subject to further argument by interested academics.

As a final word, this study suggests investigations about other cultures and belief-oriented settings around the world to check the maxims for any probable problems and inadequacies when utilizing them in certain cultural or ideological contexts.

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