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Keep the conversations going! Gricean maxims in the Old age

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This paper continues our research on communication with the elderly and offers some suggestions for those who work in geriatric care. With the demographic challenges resulting from the changing population age patterns, we believe that this interface of pragmatics and gerontology is of special significance. It may seem common sense that in a normal, everyday conversation speakers expect their interlocutors to follow the co-operative principle. Some linguists dismiss the need for Gricean maxims as we generally assume that people will do “the right thing” at the right time unless we have a good reason to believe otherwise. But what would be a good reason? We know that culture may be at odds with some of the maxims. Can age also be a factor that influences the degree to which speakers adhere to Gricean maxims of conversation? And if so, can the maxims still be defended as relevant for the interpretation of what people have to say? Many people have had the experience of talking to an elderly parent, relative or friend and realizing with frustration that they did not seem to “co-operate”. Repeating the same stories, telling significantly more than asked for, digressing (i.e. violating the maxim of relevance), or simply telling things that we know cannot be true are just some of the things that may happen in conversations with the elderly interlocutors, giving rise to the multitude of stereotypical representations of the aged in popular films or in literature. Though partly fictional and often exaggerated, these representations reflect popular (mis)perception of seniors. Using dialogs from a number of main stream English language films depicting elderly people suffering from dementia of Alzheimer’s disease, we analyzed to what extent the subjects appear to meet the expectation of obeying the Gricean maxims and how the other (non-senior) participants react to the violations. The results show that most caregivers or relatives react with different levels of frustrations and often try to constantly correct or even ridicule the senior, often resulting in the senior person withdrawing from the conversation. Knowing that they are NOT doing “the right thing,” we tend to insist that they realize their mistakes and reason the way we do. This, of course, is in most cases impossible. However, seniors with mild dementia or suffering from Alzheimer disease often make sense according to the reality they are living in and their statements may be consistent with each other within that modified setting. It is not impossible to adapt to that reality and keep the conversation going without necessarily compromising the maxims ourselves. If someone says that their deceased spouse brought them flowers that morning, a reply that would not frustrate the senior could be “I see you miss him” or “he always did that, didn’t he?” or even “what flowers did he bring you?” As language not only serves the purpose of communication with others but is also the necessary instrument of thought, it may be more important to simply keep the conversation going than to ascertain who is right. With the aging of the baby boom generation we are facing a dramatic increase in the number of seniors and people suffering from dementia in the years to come. Anything that can help seniors to retain a grip on reality is of utmost importance and keeping the communication alive may serve this purpose. However, it is also necessarily to help caregivers by giving them tools for communicating with patients without frustration. This research is suggesting very simple and easy to follow guidelines for such tasks.

Biography

Magda Stroinska is Professor of German and Linguistics at McMaster University in Hamilton On, Canada. Her major areas of research include sociolinguistics and cross-cultural pragmatics, in particular cultural stereotyping, language and politics, propaganda, the issues of identity in exile, aging and bilingualism. More recent areas of interest and research focus on language and psychological trauma. She co-edited a number of books, most recently *Unspeakable: Narratives of trauma* (with Vikki Cecchetto and Kate Szymanski, Peter Lang 2014).

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