

## Conversational Maxims as Social Norms

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### **Abstract:**

I argue that although Paul Grice's picture of conversational maxims and conversational implicature is an immensely useful theoretical tool, his view about the *nature* of the maxims is misguided. Grice portrays conversational maxims as tenets of rationality, but I will contend that they are best seen as *social norms*. I develop this proposal in connection to Philip Pettit's account of social norms, with the result that conversational maxims are seen as grounded in practices of social approval and disapproval within a given group. This shift to seeing conversational maxims as social norms has several advantages. First, it allows us to neatly accommodate possible variation with respect to the maxims across well-functioning linguistic groups. Second, it facilitates a more psychologically plausible account of flouting. And third, it generates insights about the nature of social norms themselves.

## 1. Introduction

Paul Grice's (1989) notion of conversational principles has proven to be an immensely useful theoretical tool, offering unified explanations for a wide range of communicative phenomena. But despite the many valuable applications of Grice's conversational principles, his view about the *nature* of those principles is ultimately misguided. Grice portrays conversational maxims as tenets of rationality, but I will contend that they are best seen as *social norms*. Seeing our conversational principles as social norms has several advantages. First, it allows us to neatly accommodate possible variation with respect to those principles across well-functioning linguistic groups. Second, it facilitates a more psychologically plausible account of a key Gricean communicative mechanism, flouting. And third, it provides important insights about the nature of social norms themselves.

## 2. Grice's construal of his principles

As will be familiar to many readers, Grice (1989, 26) argues that communication is governed by the Cooperative Principle (CP): 'Make your conversational contribution such as is required, at the stage at which it occurs, by the accepted purpose or direction of the talk exchange in which you are engaged.' He then provides a list of further principles (or maxims) following from this general principle, organised into four categories:

### Quantity:

1. 'Make your contribution as informative as is required (for the current purposes of the exchange).'
2. 'Do not make your contribution more informative than is required.'

### Quality:

1. 'Try to make your contribution one that is true.'
  - a. 'Do not say what you believe to be false.'
  - b. 'Do not say that for which you lack adequate evidence.'

Relation:

1. 'Be relevant.'

Manner:

1. 'Be perspicuous.'
  - a. 'Avoid obscurity of expression.'
  - b. 'Avoid ambiguity.'
  - c. 'Be brief (avoid unnecessary prolixity).'
  - d. 'Be orderly' (26–27).

These principles allow speakers to generate *conversational implicatures*, often by saying something that apparently (or actually, in the case of flouting) fails to comply with one of the maxims, but which does in fact comply with that maxim (or with just the CP, for flouting) on the assumption that the speaker holds some particular belief. The content of that belief is then the content of the conversational implicature (30–31).

Grice makes it quite clear that he sees his conversational principles as tenets of rationality. He writes: 'I would like to be able to think of [the CP and maxims] not merely as something that all or most do *in fact* follow but as something that it is *reasonable* for us to follow, that we *should not* abandon' (Grice 1989, 29). Then he offers slightly more detail about how he views the principles:

I would like to be able to show that observance of the Cooperative Principle and maxims is reasonable (rational) along the following lines: that anyone who cares about the goals that are central to conversation/communication (such as giving and receiving information, influencing and being influenced by others) must be expected to have an interest, given suitable circumstances, in participating in talk exchanges that will be profitable only on the assumption that they are conducted in general accordance with the Cooperative Principle and the maxims (29–30).

This passage makes clear that Gricean maxims ought to be universal in two different, but not independent, senses. First, they are supposed to be normatively universal: they should apply to any rational agent who cares about achieving 'the goals that are central to conversation/communication,' which includes (presumably) all human beings with

functioning linguistic faculties. On pain of irrationality, we ought to comply with the maxims: they are tenets of rationality, with the force of rational normativity.

And second, because (as the passage implies) following the maxims is necessary to achieve the goals central to conversation, they also ought to be factually universal across all possible well-functioning linguistic groups—that is, across all groups in which those goals are reliably achieved (which, presumably, encompasses all human linguistic groups). Widespread departure from the maxims, while possible, would undermine achievement of the goals central to conversation. This factual universality follows from the normative universality just discussed: if it is the case that everyone who cares about the goals central to communication rationally ought to follow Grice’s maxims, it will not be possible for any group to systematically and regularly fail to comply with the maxims and still achieve those goals. So, although we’ll see that there’s more to say here, Grice’s view that his maxims are tenets of rationality seems to imply that there could not be systematic and regular variation with respect to conversational maxims across well-functioning linguistic groups.

### **3. Intergroup variation**

In this section, we’ll introduce a wide range of kinds of possible variation across well-functioning linguistic groups with respect to the maxims. These possibilities suggest, on their face, that Grice is wrong about the nature of his conversational principles: there cannot be any single set of maxims that are tenets of rationality if systematic and regular variation with respect to conversational maxims could occur across well-functioning linguistic groups. Our focus will be primarily on *possible* variation because that is all that is needed to challenge the claim that a single set of conversational maxims are tenets of rationality, but actual variation

will be mentioned in the footnotes where I am aware of it. I will say more, in the next section, about Grice's resources for accommodating variation.

Manner is perhaps the easiest category in which to imagine variation across well-functioning linguistic groups. First, consider the 'Avoid ambiguity' maxim. Some groups might prefer a certain amount of ambiguity in their speech, whereas others might stringently expect univocal utterances, and it's easy to imagine a significant amount of variation here that would be compatible with successful communication. Similarly, some groups might value prolixity as a demonstration of linguistic prowess, or they might highly prize brevity, leading to variation with respect to the 'Be brief' maxim. Obscurity of expression might also be highly prized in a linguistic group, again as a way of showcasing linguistic prowess. And although the 'Be orderly' maxim might seem more universal across well-functioning groups, there could conceivably be quite a bit of variation with respect to how orderly one must be, or what being orderly amounts to. For instance, is it orderly to tell a story in the events' order of occurrence, or of importance? Thus, with respect to Manner, possibilities for variation seem to abound, with plenty of room for well-functioning linguistic practice amidst that variation.<sup>1</sup>

Variation with respect to Relation is also easily imaginable: well-functioning linguistic groups might differ with respect to when and to what degree it's permissible to change the topic of conversation (*cf.* Szabó 2016, 171). For instance, we might imagine a group of people among whom conversation is expected to be narrowly focused on a single topic, with explicit permission needed to transition to another topic. And we might imagine another group in which people prize getting information from others about a wide variety of topics whenever

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<sup>1</sup> For an actual case of intergroup variation, consider Min-Sun Kim and Steven Wilson's (1994, 223, 225–226) finding that native speakers of Korean judge direct forms of requests to be clearer but less effective than indirect forms, whereas native speakers of American English judge direct forms of requests to be both clearer and more effective. American English speakers thus seem to judge perspicuity to be a more effective conversational strategy than Korean speakers do, with respect to requests. This suggests some subtle intergroup variation with respect to the 'Be perspicuous' maxim (*cf.* 227–228).

possible, and so the introduction of a new topic is typically welcome. There will be limits to how much groups could conceivably vary on this metric before starting to diminish their linguistic functionality, but nonetheless a considerable range of variation seems compatible with a high level of functionality.

Let's turn, next, to Quality. This may seem the least likely category for variation, but a little reflection shows otherwise. Well-functioning linguistic groups could conceivably vary significantly with respect to how much effort is required of a speaker to count as having tried to say something true. And in fact, a group could even require true contributions, full stop, rather than just an effort toward truth.<sup>2</sup> It also seems to me that standards for adequate evidence could potentially vary across well-functioning linguistic groups, both qualitatively and quantitatively. Groups might disagree about what kinds of evidence-gathering procedures are adequate, and also about how much evidence is required to reach the adequacy threshold.

With respect to Quantity, variation may again seem difficult to imagine. But still, we can conceive of two well-functioning linguistic groups requiring different levels of informativeness. One group might conceivably have a high expectation of informativeness, such that a significant amount of detail is expected in answer to even trivial questions. Perhaps they just generally enjoy getting a little more information than is strictly required for the matter at hand, or perhaps they have a group-wide belief that the value of information can be difficult to foresee. Another group might prefer to get only the bare minimum of necessary information, perhaps because they don't particularly enjoy conversation. Both kinds of linguistic groups could, it seems, function well.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> This case is not hypothetical. Eve Danziger (2010, 211) contends that among the Mopan Maya people of Central America, the maxim is 'Make your contribution one that is true' rather than '*Try to* make your contribution one that is true.' Her justification for this claim is that in a study she conducted, Mopan respondents did not seem to consider speakers' intentions and beliefs to be relevant to the blameworthiness of false utterances (210).

<sup>3</sup> Elinor Ochs Keenan (1976) describes an actual case that she interprets as variation with respect to Quantity. She observed that among the Malagasy people of Madagascar, if a man is asked where his mother is, he might

Now of course, I've really only provided sketches of possible variation across linguistic groups, and where the exercise is purely hypothetical, the task of imagining whether such a group could function well is perhaps a bit fuzzy. And even in the cases where I indicated (in the footnotes) that there is evidence of actual variation across well-functioning linguistic groups, perhaps the behaviour that has been observed and interpreted as variation with respect to the maxims actually admits of some other explanation.

But I do want to note that even if variation across well-functioning linguistic groups is possible with respect to only one maxim, that would present a significant challenge to Grice's construal of his conversational principles. It would threaten to make the principles into a sort of grab-bag: a few tenets of rationality, with some other kind of principle sprinkled in. And it would then be less clear how the principles could all follow in some way from a single principle, the CP, while being such different kinds of principles themselves (Grice 1989, 26).

#### **4. Gricean resources for accommodating variation**

Ultimately, my contention is that the possibility of variation with respect to the maxims across well-functioning linguistic groups means that Grice is wrong when he says they are tenets of rationality. But it would be hasty to just point out various possibilities for intergroup variation<sup>4</sup> and call it a day. This is because Grice does, in fact, have resources for accommodating

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reply, 'She is either in the house or at the market,' even if he knows for certain that she is in the house. This kind of response 'is not usually taken to imply that [the speaker] is unable to provide more specific information needed by the hearer,' suggesting genuine variation with respect to the 'Be informative' maxim (70). Keenan offers several other examples of contexts in which Malagasy practices with respect to providing information are more conservative than within the groups with which Grice was familiar. Also with respect to Quantity, Anna Wierzbicka (1991) describes differences in what gets communicated by utterances of tautologies within different linguistic groups. For instance, translations of 'War is war' do not seem to have the same significance among Russian speakers or French speakers as 'War is war' has among English speakers (394). This might be taken to suggest variation with respect to the Quantity maxims, although Wierzbicka herself takes it to imply that the significance of particular tautologies is a semantic matter (392).

<sup>4</sup> Going forward, I will use the term 'intergroup variation' as shorthand for 'variation across well-functioning linguistic groups.'

variation built into his maxims, and into his statements about their limits and the sense in which they are rationally required. Our question is whether the allowances for variation that Grice builds into his discussion of the maxims and their rationality can accommodate the intergroup variation discussed in the previous section, perhaps with the aid of some natural extensions of the allowances he explicitly makes.

A first possibility for accommodating variation lies in Grice's appeals to the notion of conversational purpose. Getting clear on Grice's notion of 'purpose' is a bit tricky because he seems to use that term in two different (though related) ways, which are worth discussing separately because they each present their own possibilities for accommodating intergroup variation.

Grice (1989, 28) introduces one use of 'purpose' when he acknowledges that his maxims presuppose that the purpose of communication is effective information exchange, and that ultimately 'the scheme needs to be generalized' to apply to other conversational purposes, examples of which are 'influencing or directing the actions of others.' Here the notion of a purpose is highly general, corresponding to different kinds of speech acts. The idea would be, then, that the maxims as formulated in 'Logic and Conversation' aren't designed to apply to non-assertive speech. This kind of general illocutionary purpose seems to be what Grice has in mind in the block quotation from Section 2, when he refers to the 'goals central to communication' and relativises the application of the maxims to agents who care about those goals, since the examples he offers there are the same, and the block quotation comes not long after this notion of purpose was introduced.

Grice's relativization of the maxims to conversations with information exchange as their purpose is important and well taken, but it won't help him with the intergroup variation we've been discussing. This is because all of the variation we've discussed has been within the



domain of assertive speech (or, in other words, in conversations with information exchange as their purpose).

Grice's other use of 'purpose' occurs when he claims that every conversation has a 'purpose or set of purposes, or at least a mutually accepted direction' that may shift as the conversation proceeds. He tells us that a question that has been explicitly suggested as the topic of discussion would be an example of a conversational purpose or direction (Grice 1989, 26). This notion of purpose is much more specific than the first. For instance, a particular conversation might have information exchange as its general purpose, and exchanging information about the specific question of what happened at the Battle of the Bulge as its more specific purpose.

Importantly, it is this more specific notion of purpose that Grice introduces right before he explicitly indexes the CP and maxims to purpose. Recall that the CP enjoins speakers to make contributions appropriate to 'the accepted purpose or direction of the talk exchange.' And because Grice (1989, 26) frames the maxims as principles such that, if we follow them, we are complying with the CP, we can presumably read that qualification into all of the maxims as well, and in fact he adds it explicitly to the first maxim he lists. Thus, Grice is positing two different levels of relativization to purpose: the application of the maxims as formulated in 'Logic and Conversation' is relativised to the general conversational purpose of information exchange, and then the CP and maxims each have some built-in sensitivity to the more specific purpose (or we might say, topic, or matter at issue) of the conversation.

This latter kind of sensitivity to purpose, like the former, is important to include. For instance, within the linguistic groups with which I am familiar, there is quite a bit of variation in how much information is expected in conversations, depending on what matter is at issue. If we are exchanging information about our favourite ice cream flavours, only a little

information is required. But if we are exchanging information about how to defuse a bomb, much more information is required. Similarly contrasting cases can be generated for our standards for adequacy of evidence, orderliness, relevance, *etc.*

But our question, of course, is whether the built-in sensitivity of the maxims to this more specific kind of conversational purpose can accommodate the possible intergroup variation we've discussed. It cannot. The intergroup variation we've discussed could still occur if we held fixed the question at issue in various conversations. For instance, a group that prizes lack of ambiguity very highly will tolerate less ambiguity in conversations about the question of the speakers' favourite ice cream flavours than will a group that welcomes more ambiguity.

It's worth emphasizing, though, that within each group, speakers will likely tolerate more ambiguity with respect to the ice cream question than with respect to the bomb-defusing question. So, there will be intragroup variation with respect to how the maxims apply in the context of different conversational purposes, but in addition to that, we might find systematic intergroup variation with respect to how much ambiguity (or relevance, or informativeness, *etc.*) is allowed across all the various conversational purposes, or systematic differences in what ambiguity (or relevance, or informativeness, *etc.*) amounts to in different groups.

Another qualification that Grice introduces that may seem promising for accommodating intergroup variation is his mention of circumstances in the block quotation from Section 2. There he says that 'anyone who cares about the goals that are central to conversation/communication...must be expected to have an interest, *given suitable circumstances,*' in complying with the maxims (Grice 1989, 30, my italics). Because Grice doesn't offer a specialised meaning for 'circumstances,' it seems most plausible to interpret him as just indexing the claim that people ought to comply with the maxims to situations in which the

goals central to communication can be achieved and need to be achieved. So, if you're in circumstances with no one to talk to, or you just don't need any information or have any desire to influence others, there's no pressure on you to follow conversational maxims. I don't see any reason to read anything more into what Grice says there. And importantly, all of the intergroup variation we've discussed presupposes (or is at least compatible with presupposing) circumstances in which the goals of communication are worth achieving. So, Grice's notion of circumstances doesn't seem to help, either.

We've seen that neither of Grice's uses of 'purpose,' nor his talk of circumstances, will straightforwardly accommodate intergroup variation. But there is a related strategy available. Grice could try to accommodate intergroup variation by building linguistic group membership into the notion of a purpose (or, perhaps, into the notion of circumstances). For instance, mightn't we define Purpose A as 'discussing favourite flavours of ice cream in Group B' and Purpose C as 'discussing favourite flavours of ice cream in Group D,' and then construe the difference in the application of the Quantity maxims in those two cases as due to a difference in purpose? Then Grice's claim about the rationality of the maxims would amount to a claim that it is rational to, *e.g.*, offer as much information as is required for the topic of conversation at hand, in one's linguistic group.

This strategy, while tempting, has an air of sophistry to it. Certainly a theorist could say that Purpose A is 'discussing favourite flavours of ice cream in Group B' and Purpose C is 'discussing favourite flavours of ice cream in Group D,' and then say that the variation between groups B and D is variation in purpose. But the reality is that B-members and D-members will have entirely different sets of dispositions. B-members might all be disposed to a certain level of informativeness were they to discuss ice cream flavours, whereas D-members are disposed to a different level of informativeness for that kind of discussion. And the two

groups will have divergent informativeness dispositions across other scenarios as well, with perhaps Group D tending generally toward more informativeness while Group B tends toward less. This systematic dispositional divergence suggests that these two groups have internalised different principles, and to find a way to formulate a single principle such that it glosses over these deep dispositional differences would be a merely nominal victory.

A similar strategy would be to say that since we already know that the maxims apply to different degrees in different contexts due to differences in purpose (in the sense of the specific topic or matter at issue), we could say that what's universal across well-functioning groups are the very general maxims (*e.g.*, 'Be relevant'), but then linguistic groups may vary quantitatively in *how* relevant one has to be, or perhaps qualitatively with respect to what, exactly, being relevant comes to. What's universal across well-functioning groups is that people ought, to some extent or other and in some respect or other, to be relevant; exactly how relevant they're expected to be, or precisely what relevance comes to, can vary.

But this strategy, too, runs afoul of well-grounded ways of individuating practices and the principles that guide them. Let's consider a non-linguistic example. Compare politeness norms in Canada, the United States, and England. What being polite amounts to, and how polite one must be, varies from situation to situation within each group, but there are also significant differences when we compare the groups' overall politeness practices. Following a strategy analogous to the one we've just suggested on Grice's behalf would lead us to say that all three countries follow the same principle: Be polite. But this seems like an obvious case of differing practices governed by differing principles, and it is widely acknowledged that these countries have *different* politeness norms. Moreover, the kind of widespread and systematic dispositional differences to which we appealed in responding to the previous strategy are

clearly present here as well. To say that all three groups follow a single principle is again a hollow victory.

I contend that this move works no better in the case of conversational maxims than in the case of politeness. Although a theorist could arguably describe all possible well-functioning groups as having 'Be relevant' as one of their conversational principles, it would just be a way of papering over the systematic intergroup diversity in dispositions. When members of one group have systematically and widely different relevance-related dispositions in comparison to a second group, to find a way to say that both groups follow the same principle is just misleading.

A final strategy we'll discuss is for Grice to say that all intergroup variation is a matter of a single, universal set of maxims being overridden by other principles, rather than genuine variation with respect to the maxims. An extreme example of a conversational principle being overridden would be if I knew that a word I must utter in order to provide you with enough information for the purposes of our conversation was also the trigger word for a bomb that would kill us both.<sup>5</sup> Obviously I should not provide that information, and my failure to do so would not be evidence that I am following a variant Quantity maxim. Grice (1989, 30) already makes room for a similar phenomenon when maxims clash with one another, so this extension would be natural.

This strategy seems promising for a certain range of cases. For instance, imagine a group of people with a particularly marked social hierarchy, with a strong practice according to which members of sub-group E should be highly deferential toward members of sub-group F. Perhaps then Fs would have a high degree of leeway to change the topic of conversation rather abruptly when talking to Es, and Es would be unlikely to object. But if linguistic practice

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<sup>5</sup> This example is closely modeled on one I heard from Peter Graham.

among just Fs and among just Es all looks more similar to the kind of relevance practices with which Grice was familiar, it seems plausible to say that there is no variation with respect to Relation, but rather that Relation gets overridden by a principle according to which Es ought to defer to Fs.

However, it's easy enough to imagine cases of intergroup variation where interference from a stronger principle doesn't seem like a plausible explanation. For instance, it's easy to imagine a group of people simply being more lenient about changes in conversational topic than the groups with which Grice was familiar, without any particular reason aside from the fact that that's just how they've always done things. Similar cases can easily be imagined for the other maxims. So, there is a great deal of intergroup variation that Grice would still be unable to accommodate, even if he took the strategy of appealing to interference from more strongly held principles.

It seems, then, that Grice's construal of his maxims as tenets of rationality has run aground on possible intergroup variation. Because it's possible for different linguistic groups to function well with different maxims, no one set of maxims has the force of rational normativity. However, I do want to temper this point a bit, to avoid giving the impression that my view is that 'anything goes' with respect to conversational principles.

The intergroup variation we've discussed is subtle. Communication would likely be stymied if there were no requirements, within a certain range of viable variation, related to Quantity, Quality, Relation, and Manner. In order to have a flourishing linguistic group, we need to be able to assume that people are being at least somewhat informative, that they are making some effort to be accurate, *etc.* And we also can't have requirements so taxing that people hardly ever meet the qualifications needed for speech.

What this implies, in my view, is that rationality plays the role of a *constraint* on the principles, rather than a *determiner* of exact principles. For an analogy, consider dietary practices. Different groups of people have distinct cuisines, even where many of the same ingredients are available (consider, for instance, Thai versus Vietnamese food). Yet we might say, to paraphrase Grice, that assuming that one cares about the goals central to eating, it is rational to eat foods that are non-toxic to humans and that overall provide adequate nutrition. And that is certainly true. But rationality just tells us that we should have a practice that allows for adequate nutrition, not whether we should eat pad thai or pho.

In fact, many practices are this way: there is some constraint coming from rationality, but within those bounds, much variation is possible. Consider practices in the realms of fashion, architecture, and exercise, for instance. These practices are arbitrary, not in the sense that we could just as well do anything whatsoever, but in the sense that we have at least two options that would be equally good means to our ends.<sup>6</sup> By the same token, I am not suggesting that any of the maxims are arbitrary in the sense that we could just as well do anything whatsoever (such as make entirely disconnected remarks in conversation, or speak with no concern for whether our utterances are true). Rationality acts as a constraint, although it does not act as a determiner.

So, Grice does not seem able to accommodate possible intergroup variation, which undermines his claim that his maxims are tenets of rationality. Rationality tells us that we need principles related to Quantity, Quality, Relation, and Manner, within a certain range of variation, but rationality doesn't tell us exactly which principles we ought to have. This then presents a question: if not tenets of rationality, what kind of principles *are* they?

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<sup>6</sup> For more on this notion of arbitrariness, see Stotts 2017.

## 5. Conversational maxims as social norms

My view is that conversational principles are *social norms*.<sup>7</sup> Social norms, generally speaking, are principles that govern some particular group because of group members' attitudes of approval and disapproval toward each other's actions. For instance, in many places it is a social norm that one ought to offer one's bus seat to a person with a cane. It is also a social norm in some places that women wear white dresses for their weddings.

Several accounts of social norms have been offered, but here I want to use Philip Pettit's (1990, 731) account as our starting point:

A regularity, R, in the behaviour of members of a population, P, when they are agents in a recurrent situation, S, is a *norm* if and only if, in any instance of S among members of P,

1. nearly everyone conforms to R;
2. nearly everyone approves of nearly anyone else's conforming and disapproves of nearly anyone else's deviating; and
3. the fact that nearly everyone approves and disapproves on this pattern helps to ensure that nearly everyone conforms.<sup>8</sup>

So, just straightforwardly applying Pettit's account for now, the idea would be that in my linguistic group, nearly everyone conforms to each of the group's maxims, nearly all of us

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<sup>7</sup> I should note that I am not the first to portray conversational principles as something other than tenets of rationality. Dan Sperber and Deirdre Wilson (1986, 32; cf. Lepore and Stone 2015, 60) portray the single relevance principle with which they would replace Grice's maxims as a psychological law, not a tenet of rationality. And Laurence Horn (1984, 1989) and Stephen Levinson (2000) each portray their Grice-inspired sets of conversational principles as linguistic rules (at least as Lepore and Stone (2015, Ch. 3) interpret them). These views are not direct competitors to mine because they include deep alterations to the content and structure of Grice's conversational principles, which my view does not. Arguing for my approach of treating conversational principles as social norms with content based closely on Grice's original set of maxims over these other approaches would be another paper in its own right, so I leave these other views aside in the main text. But I must also acknowledge a broader debt to Lepore and Stone (2015), whose perspicuous discussion of how central Grice's view about the rationality of the maxims is to his overall program, and of the ways in which he has been challenged on that point, was part of the impetus for this paper.

<sup>8</sup> Pettit (1990, 751) eventually adds a common belief requirement to this account. I haven't used that version because I find his reasons for adding common belief unconvincing and thus, in my judgement, the resulting account requires too much mental activity on the part of population members. I also want to acknowledge that the idea of conversational maxims as social norms in Pettit's sense has cropped up elsewhere, in relation to the Quality maxims. In the context of using the Quality maxims within an account of lying, Don Fallis (2009, 2012) makes it clear that he thinks of Grice's conversational maxims as social norms in accordance with Pettit's account (see especially 2012, 565). Additionally, Peter Graham (2015, 260) has discussed Pettit's definition of social norms in connection to the Quality maxims, although he treats the relevant social norms as additional norms that have 'the same content as Grice's maxims,' where the maxims themselves are still tenets of rationality.



approve of doing so and disapprove of failing to do so, and the widespread approval and disapproval is part of why we conform.

When we see conversational principles as social norms in Pettit's sense, it of course becomes very easy to accommodate intergroup variation. Different groups may just have different regularities in their behaviour, and different patterns of approval and disapproval of group members' behaviour. There is no need to contort ourselves trying to explain away the possibility of intergroup variation; we can just accept it as an interesting feature.

On the other hand, it's worth noting that social norms can also be tenets of rationality. For instance, the rational principle 'take the means to your ends' could easily also be a social norm in a group, supposing that nearly everyone in that group conforms to it, that they approve of conformity and disapprove of deviation, and that this approval and disapproval influences them to conform. So, if it turns out that I am partially wrong and a few of Grice's maxims really *are* tenets of rationality, seeing conversational principles as social norms is still possible. And in fact, in that scenario, seeing them as social norms would still bring a major benefit: it would show that our conversational principles are not just a grab-bag of different kinds of principles, but rather that they are unified by all being social norms.

Along with its ability to accommodate intergroup variation, shifting to viewing conversational principles as social norms also allows for a more psychologically plausible picture of flouting. For an example of flouting, we'll use a modified version of one Grice himself offers. Imagine a party where two friends, Ferdinand and Loretta, are gossiping about an acquaintance's poor choice of romantic partners. After Loretta describes her most recent encounter with the acquaintance's current partner, Ferdinand abruptly says, 'The weather's been lovely lately.' Grice (1989, 35) would say that Ferdinand has *flouted* the 'Be relevant' maxim. Ferdinand expects Loretta to notice that he has blatantly failed to comply with that

maxim, and then realise that she can preserve her assumption that he is nonetheless adhering to the CP if she infers that he thinks the topic of the conversation ought to change, perhaps because the person under discussion is approaching behind Loretta (30).

Notice that flouting, as Grice describes it, requires speakers and hearers to have some degree of awareness of the CP and of the fact that the maxims are subordinate to it. This might seem a bit less psychologically plausible than the rest of Grice's story. It's one thing to claim that we are loosely aware of others' expectations that we be relevant, that we have adequate evidence, *etc.*, but it's another thing entirely to claim that we are aware of the fact that all of those other principles fall under a broader one enjoining cooperation.

The shift to seeing our conversational maxims as social norms allows for a more psychologically plausible picture of flouting, by obviating the need for the CP altogether. On this picture, in a case of flouting, one does something that obviously seems to court disapproval, but with an apparent expectation that approval will continue, thereby implicating something else. When Ferdinand says, 'The weather's been lovely lately,' he fails to comply with his group's relevance norm (we'll assume). And sometimes people *do* straightforwardly violate this norm, without concern for the hearer's approval. This may happen in cases with a significant power difference between the speaker and hearer, where the speaker does not need the hearer's approval, such as when a parent speaks impatiently to their child. But Ferdinand does not have significant power over Loretta (we'll stipulate), and he has changed the topic to something even he seems unlikely to care about. Moreover, his behaviour reveals an expectation that Loretta will approve—he waits for her to continue the conversation, and his demeanour is open and friendly rather than hostile or dismissive. Thus, because Ferdinand has failed to comply with his group's relevance norm and yet still appears to expect Loretta's approval, she can infer that there is likely some reason why he thinks she'll ultimately approve

of his behaviour. The best available explanation seems to be that he is conveying something useful to Loretta precisely *by* failing to comply with the social norm—that is, he is openly and obviously failing to be relevant, but only in order to reveal his belief that it is inadvisable to *be* relevant right now. We no longer need the CP because we can tell the flouting story using just the notions of approval and disapproval, which are already built into each maxim *qua* social norm.

Of course, not all conversational implicatures involve flouting. It would be a major disadvantage if construing conversational principles as social norms prevented us from accounting for conversational implicatures that do not involve flouting, since we would lose a lot of the explanatory power of Grice's work. Fortunately, non-flouting implicatures can easily be accommodated. Let's consider Grice's (1989, 32) classic example:

A: *I am out of petrol.*

B: *There is a garage round the corner.*

A knows that there is a social norm in play that enjoins a certain amount of relevance, and that the semantic content of B's utterance is not very relevant at all. She also knows that social norm violations are widely known to elicit disapproval, and she sees that B seems to expect approval from her after his utterance. Then, A realises that if she infers that B believes there is gasoline available at the garage, she actually can construe B's utterance as relevant, thereby making sense of his behaviour. So, she concludes that B believes that there is gasoline available at the garage, recovering the implicature. In this way, conversational principles construed as social norms can still account for non-flouting implicatures.

As should be clear at this stage, on my view the process of producing and recovering conversational implicatures still includes a crucial role for rationality. The hearer must assume that the speaker is rationally enacting a complex plan in which she openly courts (or appears

to court) disapproval while intending her apparent expectation of continued approval to lead the hearer to conclude that she (the speaker) holds some particular belief. So, although conversational principles are not themselves tenets of rationality on this picture, the speaker's rationality still plays a key role in the hearer's recovery of implicatures.<sup>9</sup>

It's also worth noting that there is nothing about the shift to seeing conversational principles as social norms that precludes leaving something like the CP in the picture. If there is some compelling reason of which I am unaware that favours retaining that structure, we could easily accommodate a stronger, more general social norm enjoining some amount of cooperation, with some particular understanding of what cooperation comes to in a given group. To say that a social norm is stronger is just to say that its associated attitudes of approval and disapproval are more intense. On that picture, as before, Ferdinand's utterance of 'The weather's been lovely lately' clearly fails to comply with his linguistic group's relevance norm. But now we'd say that even as Loretta recognises this, she will not automatically conclude that Ferdinand is also failing to comply with the stronger social norm enjoining cooperation. Instead, she will realise that he *can* be seen as conforming with that stronger norm if he believes that the topic of conversation ought to be changed.

I'll end this section by addressing a concern that might arise at this stage. One might think that an advantage of seeing conversational maxims as tenets of rationality is that doing so helps us clearly distinguish semantics from pragmatics. Pragmatics would be a matter of general, unvarying, rational principles, whereas semantic principles vary from group to group (*c.f.* Lepore and Stone 2015, 1). One might even think that those semantic principles are social norms. The worry is that if conversational maxims and semantic principles are all social norms

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<sup>9</sup> Thus, seeing conversational principles as social norms still allows conversational implicatures to be calculable (Grice 1989, 31).

that can vary from group to group, we might lose the ability to distinguish semantics from pragmatics.

My own view is that semantic phenomena obtain in virtue of social conventions, not social norms (Stotts 2021, 30–31). So, semantic and pragmatic principles would still be different in kind. But even if semantic and pragmatic principles are all social norms, it would still be possible to distinguish semantics from pragmatics, relying on differences in the content of the social norms on each side of the divide. Depending on one’s view of the nature of semantics, one might hold that semantic norms have to do with word-world or word-sense connections, and also with how the meanings of words combine to produce the meanings of sentences. Pragmatic conversational norms, on the other hand, have to do with the kinds of overall sentential contents one ought to convey in particular contexts, and with the manner in which one ought to convey those contents. So, seeing conversational principles as social norms does not preclude a clear distinction between semantics and pragmatics.

## **6. Reflections on the nature of social norms**

We’ve seen that construing conversational principles as social norms rather than tenets of rationality allows us to easily accommodate possible intergroup variation, and also provides the resources for a more psychologically plausible picture of flouting. A further upshot of this shift in our view of the nature of conversational maxims is that it provides some new insights about social norms themselves. As I’ll argue below, construing conversational principles as social norms helps us see that Pettit’s requirement that nearly everyone in a population conform to a social norm is too strong. It also reveals that the pervasive approval and disapproval that characterise social norms can be merely *prima facie*. And finally, it suggests

that when there is a social norm, people's attitudes of approval and disapproval must influence each other.

The task in this section is a bit delicate, because to say that treating conversational principles as social norms allows for new insights about social norms is another way of saying that conversational principles do not, in fact, completely fit Pettit's account of social norms. In other hands, that might be construed as an argument *against* seeing conversational principles as social norms at all. To forestall this worry, I will discuss additional reasons independent of conversational maxims in favour of each suggested departure from Pettit's account of social norms. This will help to ensure that we're working our way toward an improved account of social norms in general, rather than an *ad hoc* account of social norms.

For reference, here again is Pettit's (1990, 731) account of social norms:

A regularity, R, in the behaviour of members of a population, P, when they are agents in a recurrent situation, S, is a *norm* if and only if, in any instance of S among members of P,

1. nearly everyone conforms to R;
2. nearly everyone approves of nearly anyone else's conforming and disapproves of nearly anyone else's deviating; and
3. the fact that nearly everyone approves and disapproves on this pattern helps to ensure that nearly everyone conforms.

Independently of any discussion of conversational maxims, Cristina Bicchieri (2006) has persuasively argued that there are some social norms to which people do not regularly conform, which implies that condition (1) is too demanding. For instance, in some places, there are social norms against premarital sex, but as a matter of fact, quite a few people secretly engage in premarital sex while thinking that others abstain. Because the behaviour is so private and difficult to detect (assuming that protection is used to prevent the spread of disease or pregnancy), the norm against it can flourish even though hardly anyone complies with it (13). This seems like a paradigmatic social norm, despite the widespread non-compliance.

As Bicchieri (2006, 13) notes, what we *do* have in the case of the norm proscribing premarital sex is a widespread *belief* that others are conforming to it. But looking to conversational norms, we can see that even after the retreat to belief, it's possible that the requirement could still be too strong, if we require a belief in too much conformity. Flouting is very widespread, and if speakers in some group were to become aware of this fact, we wouldn't want to say that their maxims would cease to be norms for them.

Now of course, one way to deal with this issue would be to place restrictions on which situations can play the role of S in Pettit's account, and perhaps somehow build in that they must not be situations in which flouting is occurring. Then it could still be true that people believe that others always (or nearly always) conform to each conversational principle in S, even while they are also aware that people don't conform in situations in which they are engaged in flouting. That would mean that the conversational norms just wouldn't apply to cases where flouting was going on.

But even if such a requirement could be plausibly formulated, doing so would be a mistake. In order for flouting to be possible, the conversational norms actually *do* need to be in effect in that situation. If a norm does not apply in my present situation, failing to comply with it will not be something that requires explanation, so the hearer will have no need to infer that I intend to convey some additional or alternate content. So, the fairly frequent non-conformity that flouting introduces to conversational norms (and people's awareness of it) needs to be compatible with their persistence as norms. Thus, conversational norms reveal that social norms require not regular conformity, or even belief in regular conformity, but rather just the belief that others comply with the norm at least usually.<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> This proposed revision to Pettit's account is modeled on one condition in Bicchieri's (2006, 11) account of social norms, but her condition is ultimately quite different because the belief in conformity component occurs as part of the antecedent of a conditional preference for conforming.

In keeping with our aim of avoiding an *ad hoc* account of social norms, it's important to note that there are other social norms that are believed to be complied with only *usually*. For instance, consider politeness norms. Most people fail to be polite somewhat frequently, perhaps due to stress, fatigue, or annoyance, and we are all aware of this fact. Nonetheless, politeness norms persist, just as conversational maxims do.

A second insight about social norms stems from the awkwardness that my approach to flouting creates for Pettit's condition (2) (*i.e.*, 'nearly everyone approves of nearly anyone else's conforming and disapproves of nearly anyone else's deviating'). Our discussion of flouting pointed toward a suite of fairly frequent cases in which, ultimately, the hearer ends up approving of the speaker's failure to comply with a conversational norm. So, if we're construing conversational principles as social norms, Pettit's condition (2) is too strong.

But it's also important to notice that in cases of flouting, disapproval of non-compliance with the principle being flouted *does* play an essential role. The generation of the implicature depends on the fact that Ferdinand's obviously irrelevant utterance seems to court disapproval while his demeanour suggests an expectation of continued approval. In other words, even though the hearer ultimately approves of the speaker's actions, including failure to comply with a particular conversational norm, the utterance *does* initially trigger a disapproval reaction, and in fact it must do so in order for flouting to work. So, I want to suggest that the right change to the account of social norms is not to lessen how often disapproval and approval are present, but rather to allow them to be merely *prima facie* approval and disapproval. Here, *prima facie* approval is approval that will be full-bodied approval unless it is undermined by further considerations.<sup>11</sup> *Prima facie* disapproval is to be understood similarly. Thus, in our example, Loretta's *prima facie* disapproval of Ferdinand's utterance is

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<sup>11</sup> This gloss of *prima facie* approval is closely modeled on Andrew Reisner's (2013) definition of a *prima facie* ought.



undermined by the consideration that he is providing her with useful information by failing to comply with the relevance norm, and she ultimately ends up approving.

To again circumvent the charge that we're moving toward an *ad hoc* account of social norms, we can think about non-conversational social norms that seem to involve something more like *prima facie* approval and disapproval. For instance, imagine a social norm according to which one ought to wash one's own dishes at a dinner party before leaving. Now imagine that some individual has just learned that their child (home with a babysitter) was seriously injured, and they rush out of the room without washing their dishes. When other attendees see the parent rush out of the room without washing up, they presumably *will* have an initial reaction of disapproval, even though they will ultimately end up approving of the parent's action. The fact that they will ultimately approve of the hasty exit when they understand the reason behind it is not evidence of the disappearance or fading of their dish-washing norm; it merely suggests that their disapproval was *prima facie*, and the consideration that the child was injured undermines that disapproval. Some social norms do have straightforward, full-bodied approval and disapproval reactions tied to them, such as the social norm in many places against torture. There the disapproval is not merely *prima facie*—there are no further considerations that could undermine the attitude. So, the appropriate requirement for an account of social norms is that the approval and disapproval be *at least prima facie*.

The above changes would result in an account of social norms much less demanding than Pettit's. This generates a worry that such an account may be *too* undemanding. Pettit originally required that there be a regularity of conformity, full-bodied approval and disapproval, and a connection between that approval and disapproval and the conformity. But now we're requiring mere *belief* in merely *usual* conformity, and only *prima facie* approval and disapproval. If there isn't much actual conformity, there won't be much opportunity for the

approval and disapproval to ensure any conformity (as in Pettit's condition (3)). So, now we're heading toward allowing a practice in which no one actually engages (though people believe others usually engage in it) and toward which people experience *prima facie* approval and disapproval for whatever reason, to count as a social norm. For instance, we might all for independent reasons happen to believe that others usually wear orange undergarments (though no one actually does), and we might all (for independent reasons) approve of this *prima facie*, and that would seem to count as a social norm. This seems terribly odd because there's really nothing social about it. It's not a widespread practice in any group, and people are just independently having certain attitudes.

Thus, the preceding two insights about social norms together provide new support for Seumas Miller's (2001, 134–137) claim that not only such conformity as there may be (as in Pettit's condition (3)), but also the attitudes of approval and disapproval, ought to be interdependent. With that change, even if no one actually conforms, and group members experience only *prima facie* approval and disapproval, their social norm remains deeply social because their approval and disapproval are influenced and sustained by others' approval and disapproval. If members of some group really do believe that others usually wear orange undergarments and they approve of that practice because others approve of it (that is, their approval is socially influenced), to me that does seem like a much better candidate for a social norm.

And even when we consider social norms to which group members *do* often conform, it still seems true that what makes those social norms so social is not just that people's attitudes influence each other's compliance, but also that their attitudes themselves are socially influenced. When we have a social norm, we're not just behaving how others want us to behave; our wants about others' behaviour are themselves influenced by others. So, in my

view, this proposed change to Pettit's account is plausible more broadly, as well. And because the consequences of the previous two changes motivated it, it is no more *ad hoc* than they are.

Now, there's quite a bit more work to do to arrive at an account of social norms shaped by these insights. We'd need to consider whether any further changes are needed, and make sure the revised account applies to a broad range of social norms that are not conversational maxims. Moreover, the work of determining exactly how to formulate a modified account in light of the insights we've considered here is nontrivial. All of this lies beyond the bounds of the present paper.

But still, informally, we can now flesh out the claim that conversational principles are social norms a bit more. It will be helpful to work with a specific example. In my linguistic group, people believe that others usually expend effort within a certain accepted range toward making sure that their conversational contributions are true.<sup>12</sup> Additionally, we approve of expending effort within that range toward making true contributions, and we disapprove of falling outside (or at least, below) that range. These attitudes are *prima facie*, as our acceptance of pragmatic phenomena such as irony and metaphor demonstrate. We do usually expend effort in the right range toward making true contributions when we speak, partly because we know others will approve if we do and disapprove if we don't (though this conformity is not required for the norm to obtain, as we've discussed). Furthermore, part of what causes our attitudes of approval and disapproval is that others hold those attitudes. Thus, we have a conversational norm enjoining a certain amount of effort toward truth.

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<sup>12</sup> This belief may never be brought to consciousness. But the idea is that with a bit of prompting, people in my linguistic group could be brought to assent to similar claims about how much effort toward truthfulness is required in their group, perhaps by drawing on comparisons to other actual or imagined groups.

## 7. Conclusion

Grice's notions of conversational maxims and conversational implicature have proven to be immensely useful theoretical tools. But his view about the *nature* of conversational principles as tenets of rationality runs into serious problems with possible intergroup variation. Shifting to seeing conversational maxims as social norms allows us to retain all of the usefulness of Grice's pragmatic apparatus while easily accommodating intergroup variation. As we've seen, this move also allows for a more psychologically plausible picture of flouting and provides some insights about the nature of social norms themselves. When we comply with our group's conversational maxims, we are not just acting as reason dictates; rather, we are engaged in a practice that depends on others' approval and disapproval in complex ways, as so many of our other social practices do.

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