

# THE OBSERVANCE OF THE COOPERATIVE PRINCIPLE IN COMMUNICATION OF DIRECTIVES ADULTS USE WITH CHILDREN

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## **Abstract**

The cooperative principle describes how effective communication is achieved in common social situations and it indicates that interlocutors must act cooperatively in order to come to a mutual understanding. It is indisputable that observing and obeying the cooperative principle might be helpful for people to improve the flexibility and accuracy of language communication. This paper is an exploration of the language and directives adults use with children. The aim of this study is to determine the extent to which the cooperative principle operates and can be applied to communication adults use with children. This paper is based on the quantitative micro-research which was performed in a form of an audio record data collection of forty (40) various communicational situations to demonstrate the feasibility or defeasibility of the hypothesis that adults in communication with children use higher proportion of direct directives since it is assumed they are better understood. The different content dimensions are exemplified by collected data and the results reveal (un)successful communication.

**Key Words:** Cooperative principle, language pragmatics, communication, directives, politeness

## **Abstrakt**

Kooperatívny princíp opisuje ako sa dá dosiahnuť efektívna komunikácia v bežných sociálnych situáciách a naznačuje, že účastníci rozhovoru musia konať kooperatívne, aby dospeli k vzájomnému porozumeniu. Je nesporné, že pozorovanie a prejavovanie kooperatívneho princípu môže byť pre ľudí nápomocné k zlepšeniu flexibility a presnosti jazykovej komunikácie. Táto štúdia je prieskumom jazyka a príkazov, ktoré dospelí používajú v komunikácii s deťmi. Cieľom tejto štúdie je určiť rozsah v akom kooperatívny princíp funguje a môže byť aplikovaný v komunikácii, ktorú dospelí používajú s deťmi. Táto práca je založená na kvantitatívnom mikro-výskume, ktorý bol vykonaný vo forme zbierky nahrávaných audio dát štyridsiatich (40) rôznych komunikačných situácií, ktoré demonštrujú realizovateľnosť alebo nerealizovateľnosť hypotézy, že dospelí v komunikácii s deťmi používajú väčšiu časť priamych príkazov, keďže sa predpokladá, že sú porozumené lepšie. Rôzne dimenzie obsahu sú doložené príkladmi nazbieraných dát a výsledky odhaľujú (ne)úspešnú komunikáciu.

**Kľúčové slová:** Kooperatívny princíp, pragmatika jazyka, komunikácia, príkazy, zdvorilosť

## **Introduction**

Language as a complex structured system used for communication has always been a topic of many discussions, arguments and disputes. Linguists all over the world have studied, searched, questioned, compared and have concluded results of great number of aspects that influence languages, their usage and development.

Language plays an important role for an individual and for a society as a whole since they are closely related to each other. In other words, a language influences a society and a society influences a language. Also, there exists an increasing tendency for research works based on its social relations analyses.

The cooperative principle describes how effective communication is achieved in common social situations and it indicates that interlocutors must act cooperatively in order to come to a mutual understanding. A British-American linguist Paul Grice, who introduced it, provides the definition of this principle and four maxims under it in the book *Logic and Conversation* (1975). The cooperative principle is one of the major principles guiding people's communication to be successful and effective. Applying the Gricean maxims of quality, quantity, relation and manner is a way to explain the link between utterances and what is understood from them. Lacking cultural knowledge can make people result in unsuccessful communication, not only in intercultural environment.

It is indisputable that observing and obeying the cooperative principle might be helpful for people to improve the flexibility and accuracy of language communication. The concern of this study is to explore the issue of the cooperative principle in communication adults use with children, and to reveal the potential conflicts and the role of some social factors and cultural aspects.

## **1 Human understanding and interpretation**

The first to talk about human knowledge and understanding was an English philosopher John Locke in his work *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding* (1690). He describes the mind of a person born as a blank slate (tabula rasa) which is during the life time filled with experience. Taken this information into account it occurs that even such a thing as culture is learned in a particular society. The understanding of the world around us, however big or small it may seem, forms our thoughts and subsequently our speech and language we use to express ourselves.

“Life and interaction with the world shapes our thoughts and language. What people of a language community find important to be expressed in their life will definitely be expressed in that language.” (Kecskes, 2013) However, it also works vice versa and it pulls ideas from us, speakers, and helps us build the complex knowledge systems we have.

In the use of language the individual and the social are intertwined. In communication individuals try to fit their language to a social situation and, simultaneously, the situation that speakers are in requires the use of a certain language (Kecskes, 2013).

The ways of communication adults use with children in many cases can be very different in their essence. There also appears a question of the background understanding and, most importantly, if communication adults use with children can be successful by following, or not, the cooperative principle. Therefore, the concern of this research which comes to the foreground of interest is the question to which extent it is possible to apply the Grice's maxims in communication adults use with children.

## **2 Communication misunderstandings**

Without cooperation, human interaction would be far more difficult and counterproductive. Therefore, the cooperative principle and the Gricean maxims are not specific to conversation but to verbal interactions in general. For example, it would not make sense to reply to a question about the weather with an answer about groceries because it would violate the maxim of relevance. Likewise, responding to a simple yes/no question with a long monologue would violate the maxim of quantity.

However, it is possible to flout a maxim intentionally or unconsciously and thereby convey a different meaning than what is literally spoken. Many times in conversation, this flouting is manipulated by a speaker to produce a negative pragmatic effect, as with sarcasm or irony. One can flout the maxim of quality to tell a clumsy friend who has just fallen off that her gracefulness is impressive and obviously intend to mean the complete opposite (Kaufers, 1981). The Gricean maxims are often purposefully ignored by comedians and writers, who may hide the complete truth and manipulate their words for the effect of the story and the sake of the reader's experience (McCulloch, 2014).

Speakers who deliberately flout the maxims usually intend for their listener to understand their underlying implication. In the case of the clumsy friend, she will most likely understand that the speaker is not truly offering a compliment. Therefore, cooperation is still taking place, but no longer in literal level. Conversationalists can assume that when speakers intentionally flout a maxim, they still do so with the aim of expressing some thought (Kaufers, 1981). Thus, the Gricean maxims serve a purpose both when they are followed and when they are flouted.

Communication as such involves at least two parties: the speaker and the listener. Sometimes there are involved three parties: in-between people carrying messages from one person to another, or the media, which transmit information as its primary goal. Problems can be caused by all three of these sources.

One of the most common problems in communication is that speakers are often not clear about what exactly they mean, which almost assures that what they say will be unclear as well. Even when people know what they mean, they do not say it as clearly as it is necessary. They may hide their true feelings or ideas intentionally or unintentionally. Either way, people often get confused about other people's messages. This is especially common when people from different cultures try to communicate. Even if their languages are the same, culture acts like a lens through which we see and interpret the world. If their cultures are different, it is easy for the same statement to mean one thing to one person and something different to someone else. Thus intercultural communication is especially prone to communication and understanding errors.

Listeners are also sources of communication problems. People often do not listen carefully. They may assume that they know what the other person is saying or will say because they have heard it before or they assume that one person is just like another person from the same group. Also, when people are in conflict, they often concentrate more on what they are going to say in response to their opponent's statement, rather than listening to their opponents' words with paying their full attention. The result, again, is misunderstanding, and often unnecessary conflicts.

### **3 Social role and cultural aspects of communication**

Grice's theory is often disputed by arguing that cooperative conversation, as with most social behaviour, is culturally determined, and therefore the Gricean maxims and the cooperative principle can not be universally applied because of intercultural differences.

“Communication is becoming more and more intercultural because it involves interlocutors who have different first languages, communicate in a common language, and represent different cultures (Kecskes, 2013).”

In the context of intercultural pragmatics culture is seen as a set of various kinds of knowledge structures which are socially constituted and to which individuals turn to as a relevant situation enables. It is a system of shared beliefs, norms, values, customs, behaviours, and artifacts

to be used by members of society to cope with their world and with one another (Bates & Plog, 1990).

With the social role of languages the use of politeness principle is also concerned. According to Geoffrey Leech (1983), this principle together with conversational maxims is similar to those formulated by Paul Grice. This principle varies from culture to culture: what may be considered polite in one culture may be strange or even rude in another. Generally, the goal of politeness is to make all of the interlocutors relaxed and comfortable with one another.

“For example: Russians are polite in a different way than Americans are, and they have all the means they need to be polite the way their communalities require them to.” (Kecskes, 2013).

In some cases the Gricean maxims can be misinterpreted to be a guideline for etiquette and politeness, instructing speakers on how to be polite and cultivated. However, these maxims are strictly meant to describe the commonly accepted traits of successful cooperative communication.

#### **4 Research design**

The purpose of this study is to apply methods of the quantitative research to demonstrate the feasibility or defeasibility of the hypothesis that adults in communication with children use higher proportion of direct directives since it is assumed they are better understood than indirect directives and thus the communication is supposed to become successful.

This paper is based on the quantitative micro-research which was performed in a form of an audio record data collection of various communicational situations. The collected data have been gathered among adults talking to primary school children (aged 6 to 15) in supermarkets, toy stores, fast-food restaurants, bus stops and during family gatherings and routines. For the purpose of this study forty (40) common social situations have been included. The research took place in Poprad, Slovakia and the dialogues were realized in Slovak language.

After the collection of the research data corpus, it was subsequently analysed and collated. The author in the text examined provides her own English translation of the dialogues. Its mutual comparison and summary demonstrates research findings.

#### **5 Research results**

Generally, the results of the conducted research show that the communication between adults and children is supposed to be more successful and reach the positive end when it is

performed in a polite way, in a calm and peaceful manner, and without any traces of nervousness, anger, pressure or irritation. Moreover, all the aspects of the voice, its tone, pitch, intonation and the use of body language and facial expressions contribute to the children's understanding of the adults' speech.

Also, the important factor is when adults set an optimistic atmosphere by the use of kind and pleasant language and polite vocabulary when giving directives to children. Adults try to raise children's interest, get their attention and trust to provoke their positive reactions, and so they adjust their talk accordingly. This tendency is supported by one of many examples:

*Mum: "Hi, honey, it's time to get up from your bed! You'll be late for school again."*

*Child: "Ah. Just five more minutes, please."*

*Mum: "No, sorry, dear. It's already been more than five minutes! Don't worry; it's gonna be a lovely day today."*

*Child: "Oh. Ok, you're right."*

The most common observed way of giving directives by adults is by using of indicative mood. In case a child does not react an adult usually runs out of patience and begins to use imperative mood. The situation intensifies if the child still does not react or even talks back. Then the adult uses not only imperative mood but also negative emotions such as high intensity voice, scream, irritation, fast gestures and furious facial expressions, unfortunately, occasionally even the use of offensive vocabulary and insults, e.g.:

*Mum: "It is necessary to take the rubbish out."*

*Child: "Okay. I'll take it out later."*

*Mum: "No. Take it out now."*

*Child: "Mum, not now. I don't feel like it now."*

*Mum: "It's gonna be dark soon. You'll go now and we're finished with this talk!"*

*Child: "Mum, couldn't I..."*

*Mum: "No! Do what I say!"*

In some cases adults are not so strict and do not vehemently insist on their initial directive. They are also willing to negotiate with a child. See an example:

*Mum: "Get ready, please, and go to the grocery shop."*

*Child: "Can I buy some things for the party, please?"*

*Mum: "Okay. But first you need to buy all the necessary things."*

*Child: "Yes, I will."*

Another interesting finding is that when an adult gives a directive to a child, he/she stops insisting on performing it after a certain opposition or a disregard from the child's side. In some cases, the adult even becomes apathetic about the initial directive, as in the example:

*Dad: "Tidy your room before mum comes!"*

*Child: "I need to learn to school."*

*Dad: "Excuse me?"*

*Child: "Okay. I'll do it in five minutes."*

*In five minutes.*

*Dad: "Have you already tidied your room?"*

*Child: "I'm gonna do it now."*

*In five more minutes.*

*Dad: "I can see you haven't even started yet."*

*Child: "I'll do it now."*

*Dad: "Don't worry. Mum's just come."*

The use of the "magic" words such as *excuse me, please, sorry, thank you* and phrases such as *would you be so kind, could you do me a favour, etc.* help to communicate directives easier and are subsequently performed better since they are perceived as indirect and polite. Moreover, children feel that the use of this kind of words eliminates imperative mood which feels more like the wish clause. That is why the hearer becomes more willing and ready to help and fulfill a request. See examples:

*"Could you tidy up your room, please?"*

*"Would you be so kind and lend me your toy, please?"*

Sometimes, however, in Slovak environment a misunderstanding in interpretation can arise when the recipient confuses imperative mood for a request with yes/no answer. On the other hand, this type of polite imperative is common in English speaking countries and its occurrence in the research is recorded only a few times, e.g.:

*"Do you want to do the dishes, please?"*

Another interesting finding is that the younger a child is the more indirect and polite adults' directive is. More kind and expressive words are added, too. Therefore it can be assumed that children's age influences the use of direct or indirect directives addressed to a child.

Moreover, from the research data it is clear that adults use different kinds of directives with their own children than with other children. It has been recorded that adults are more strict, serious and firm to their own kids and more open and polite to other kids, e.g.:

*Mum to her daughter: "Adelka, go to the bathroom and wash your hands before dinner, please."*

*Mum to her daughter's friend: "Would you like to go with her?"*

From the research data it is clear that children perceive the use of indirect directives not only as polite and friendly but also as liberal. They feel such a directive gives them certain freedom to decide and values their own opinion and individuality. On the other hand, the use of direct directives is perceived as authoritative, communication becomes one-sided and it has higher probability to be understood and performed successfully.

## **Conclusion**

It is known that life and interaction with the world shapes our thoughts and language. What people of a certain language community find important to be expressed in their life will be expressed in their language. This scheme, however, also works vice versa pulling ideas from speakers and helping them build the complex knowledge systems (Kecskes, 2013).

The outlined paper strives to determine the extent to which the cooperative principle operates in the language and communication of directives adults use with children. The research data evaluated and collected in a quantitative micro-research were aimed to demonstrate the feasibility or defeasibility of the hypothesis that adults in communication with children use higher proportion of direct directives since it is assumed they are better understood than indirect directives and thus communication is supposed to become successful.

According to results of the research it can be concluded that it has shown the feasibility of the hypothesis stated. The results confirm that clear language and authoritative approach of adults has evident understanding and performance of children. On the other hand, there are also noticed certain disadvantages to the direct directives, as well since they are perceived as not very polite and limiting to children. Moreover, children's performance of the directives should not be done out of fear or any kind of violence. That's why this study identifies and suggests the use of kind and motivational directives which have positive effect on children, and the adults-children mutual communicative cooperation and understanding.

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