

Some neo-Gricean Maxims for Aboriginal Australia  
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I will claim in this paper that the specificities of Australian Aboriginal culture and society provide some challenges for the basic Gricean framework. Based on longterm fieldwork in Aboriginal Australia as well drawing on observations of other scholars I wish to propose some neo-Gricean Maxims for Aboriginal Australia.

After Grice proposed 4 maxims: Quantity, Quality, Relevance and Manner, a number of commentators have made attempts to modify these foundational principles. In particular Levinson (1987) has proposed the Q and I principles. Levinson's Q-principle is basically Grice's Maxim of Quantity while the I-Principle connects with the Maxim of Manner.

A little read but highly insightful discussion of interactional practices in Aboriginal Australia is already available in Murray Garde's PhD thesis (2002). In that account he draws on the insights of Levinson and demonstrates that we need something that I will refer to as a Maxim of Intentional Vagueness in Aboriginal interaction. In this paper I want to build on the substantial foundation provided by Garde and add some proposals of my own.

One of these is the Maxim of Autonomy whereby the 'rule' is: Speak for yourself; do not speak for others. This and other maxims more specific to Aboriginal contexts derive from my own tentative theory of Aboriginal interaction (e.g. Walsh 1994, 1997). These include the Maxim of Epistemic Discretion: speak of what you know, unless: your age is inappropriate; your gender is inappropriate; there are others who should speak instead

Such neo-Gricean maxims reflect the cultural distance between Aboriginal and other societies. In particular the fundamental importance of kin in Aboriginal social interaction poses problems for some key features for the Maxim of manner: Avoid obscurity of expression; Avoid ambiguity; Be brief. To be brief: it is more appropriate pragmatically in personal reference to give the impression – from a non-Aboriginal perspective – that one is obscure in expression, ambiguous and long-winded. Similar issues arise in relation to Aboriginal management of knowledge.

This brief account is a first step towards setting out some fundamental differences in interactional practice but ultimately I would seek to accommodate culture-specific practices in Aboriginal Australia with more general patterns of conversational interaction.

#### References

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