

GRICE'S MAXIMS AND THE PRINCIPLE OF  
SELECTIVENESS:  
AN ADVERTISING LANGUAGE PERSPECTIVE<sup>1</sup>

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The ability of being selective, i.e. saying the right thing at the right time and place, is essential for successful interaction. This article examines the dynamic process of expression and comprehension in language interactions and deals with two issues. The first is that if selectiveness is common and indispensable in language use it should be accepted as an appropriate communication device. The other issue is how the selectiveness principle fits in with Grice's (1975, 1989) four conversational maxims. This study will be conducted primarily in the context of real estate advertising language, by analysing how real estate agents use selectiveness to convey their intended information and hearers work out the inferential meaning based on their common knowledge and contextual cues.<sup>2</sup>

Over the past three decades, there have been continuous debates on Grice's maxims. This study will propose the inclusion of the selectiveness principle into Grice's maxims. The proposal is based on an analysis of advertising language which will show that language users tend to be selective while still managing to fit in with Grice's framework. Being selective is not an ad hoc characteristic of advertising language; it is a pervasive, legitimate, tactful and effective communicative device used in everyday language. Following the selectiveness principle is a matter of following one's common sense. This research will argue that while selectiveness doesn't violate Grice's maxims, it is different in that it is used to achieve appropriateness in terms of cultural and social norms. Differences are drawn between inferential meaning and Grice's conversational implicature to justify the proposed modification of Grice's maxims with the addition of the selectiveness principle.

I A Pervasive, Legitimate, Tactful and Effective Communicative Device

Being selective in language use is to choose an appropriate utterance suitable to the particular context. For example, a neighbour's teenage girl

has a weight problem and is very self-conscious about it. When asked about her weight, one may stop short by saying 'she looks fine to me, no need for everyone to have a supermodel figure'. Another example, commenting on a fellow student's essay, one may say 'it reads well and has no typos'. Hearers would be able to work out that the speakers are being selective about what they say. They don't want to hurt their neighbour or fellow student but don't want to lie either. Thus they have to choose words carefully, in order to avoid talking about any negatives regarding the girl's weight or the student's essay.

While it is not rare to see selectiveness in everyday language use, this kind of language behaviour occurs most frequently in advertising due to its commercial nature. Imagine that one is looking through a property press and reads a description of a house as: "a house with character". What would the reader think of it? It would not be surprising that the reader infers that the house is old, possibly in bad shape. From the advertiser's point of view, he is not lying by being selective or skilful with his words. Instead of using 'old, not in good shape' he chose 'character'. Fortunately, readers are, most of time, able to get the inferential meaning out of the literal meaning of the text<sup>3</sup>.

This phenomenon demonstrates how people use language in reality. It is common practice that language users are selective whenever necessary and selectiveness is also part of language competence. The more skilfully one uses the principle of selectiveness, the more tactful and effective one becomes in language communication. This poses a challenge to linguists and others to go beyond the semantic meaning when studying language and work out the pragmatic meaning conveyed by utterances.

### 1.1 Advertising Language and Selectiveness

Let us analyse examples of selectiveness in real estate advertising, extracted primarily from issues of *Property Press*, published in Auckland, New Zealand.

a. 'A classic villa/character charmer'

Probably a place falling apart, in any event an old house. The agent uses 'classic' to avoid saying that the villa is aging and inferior. The word 'classic' attracts people's attention more in its positive aspects: stylish, creative, artistic and established.

b. "A first buyer's home/a great place to start/suit young couple/affordable living"

Probably a cheap, run down place with not much space. However, the right phrases are chosen to steer buyers' attention away from those negative aspects to their own realistic situation, making the house appear to be worth considering.

- c. "A house with great potential/potential to redevelop and renovate/do up/polish up & prosper"

Probably a house in bad shape. Agent selects the above descriptions to lead people to think what they can do with the property in the future, rather than focusing on the present state which is probably undesirable. Providing the buyer a rosy picture for the future would certainly increase the chances of selling the property.

- d. "Needs tender loving care"

Possibly a pretty bad situation inside and out. The agent shifts attention from the house to the potential buyer and places the responsibility of taking care of the house on them. Someone might buy into it thinking that he is the one who will be able to look after the property well.

- e. "Easy living/care section"

Possibly a small outdoor area. The focus is on the positive side of a small outdoor area, meaning there is no need to spend a lot of time looking after the garden and mowing the lawn.

- f. "No need for cars, walk to everywhere"

Most definitely no car park or garage. The agent knows very well that people consider parking space something essential. He figures that if he says that there is no need for a car then clients may be more likely to accept the property. The logic is if there is no need for a car then it is all right having no car park.

- g. "Cosy and neat"

Probably a small house. However, since 'small house' would not go down well with buyers, 'cosy and neat' would do a better job. Advertised from the positive side of being cosy and neat would give people a warm and comfortable feeling about the place, they may be more inclined to buy the house.

- h. "Investment opportunity"

May not be suitable for owner to live in, possibly due to the shabby conditions of the house. Saying that it is for investment may open a new opportunity for the property to sell. Buyers for investment would certainly be interested in taking a look.

Examples like the above are everywhere in real estate advertising. Agents need to think very hard in order to come up with the right thing to say when advertising. They have to be skilful when it comes down to using the principle of selectiveness.

## 1.2 Why Selectiveness

The above examples illustrate that agents select words carefully by focusing on positives and avoiding negatives in order to maximize the benefit of advertising. They know full well that at the end of day, many buyers would figure out the contextual/pragmatic meaning<sup>4</sup>. The reason

agents continue using selective language generation after generation is that it may at least get people through the door. Once their prospective buyers arrive, they can then have something to build from and hopefully their skilful persuasion will result in a sale.

Therefore being selective in advertising is crucial in the real estate business, and it is also a fact of life in the context of commercials: no one would advertise the negative aspects of their products unless required to do so.

Selectiveness is not unique to commercials. The strategies real estate agents use are not very different from those we use in everyday speech. For example, when describing a girl who is fat, we might select the expression “a big boned girl”. When writing a recommendation letter, we tend to use “with potential to become a good teacher/researcher” or “given time he will thrive”, instead of saying “lacks teaching/research experience”. When asked to comment on a lousy cook, we may say that the dish looks great, creative and artistic in order to avoid commenting on the fact that the food tastes awful. Similarly, when commenting on someone, we would be happy to describe how great his personality is and how helpful he is to his elderly neighbour, but stop short of saying that he is not very intelligent.

So, why are people selective in using language? One obvious reason is that it is our society's norm to say the right thing at the right time. By conforming to this protocol, one can fit nicely into our society; otherwise one will not go very far nor have many friends. However, the most important reason for being selective is that it is a tactful and effective communicational device. As mentioned above in the real estate agent's situation, it certainly serves his purpose very effectively. In everyday life, being selective is also a more tactful way to communicate. Let us revisit the case of commenting on the lousy cook. Imagine at a formal dinner if a guest said straight to the cook's face that his food tasted awful, it would upset others, especially the cook. Instead, one might tactfully praise the cook by saying something like the presentation of dish is great-

One remaining question then is whether or not the selectiveness is legitimate, i.e. if it is the right thing to do. Are we lying by being selective? Probably not, because we do not deny the facts, e.g. saying food tastes good when in fact it does not, or saying there are three bedrooms when in fact there are only two. All we do is to utilize the principle of selectiveness to do the right thing. The principle of selectiveness is used by just about every profession and everywhere in daily life, although perhaps some may use it more frequently and effectively than others. Commercials rely on it for business profits, while in everyday life people use it for purposes of showing politeness, keeping face, etc., as long as it is suitable at a specific moment. Having argued that selectiveness is a pervasive, legitimate, tactful

and effective communicational device, next we discuss where it fits in with Grice's conversational maxims.

## II. Grice's Conversational Maxims and Selectiveness

What has been discussed above raises a question of whether or not the selective principle could be in line with Grice's cooperative principles and conversational maxims, the focus of this section.

### 2.1 Grice's Maxims

Grice's cooperative principle is a principle of conversation, claiming that participants expect that each will make a "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" (Grice 1975: 45). The idea of Grice's maxims is to make it clear to language users what good communication practice is and if we all make an effort to follow them we can become more effective in talking to each other. The maxims are not rules but rather conventions or right things to do.

A number of works have been done regarding Grice's framework, such as Kasher (1976, 1982, 1986, 1987) and Keenan (1976). It has been argued that Grice's maxims are not held by speakers of various cultures. For example, Keenan (1976) stated that people in Madagascar tend not to give information when required, which intentionally and systematically violate Grice's Quantity Maxim. Keenan questioned the feasibility that the maxims can apply universally and independently of culture, style and genre. Kasher (1982) suggested that Keenan's and similar apparent counter-examples to Grice's maxims could be better explained in terms of the rationality principles and its consequences, if proper attention is paid not only to its "most effective" component but also to its "at least cost" component. It was observed that Malagasy speakers seemed to try to strike some balance between being most effective in presenting their beliefs, while paying the least cost in terms of commitments they wish to spare (Kasher 1982).

Clyne's (1994) revised maxims for intercultural analysis have more regard for the communicative patterns of non-English cultures; however, they don't altogether meet the needs of inter-cultural communication. The universality of Grice's Co-operative Principle and Brown and Levinson's theory of politeness (Brown and Levinson 1987) has been questioned (Wierzbicka 1985, 1991/2003 and Goddard and Wierzbicka 1997) on the basis of the cultural relativity and different cultural scripts. For example, there would be different expectations and interpretations of sincerity and relevance in a given communication, or the ranking of imposition when making a request.

Wilson and Sperber (2002) question the view that verbal communication is governed by a maxim, norm or convention of truthfulness

which applies at the level of what is literally meant, or what is said. They argue that verbal communication is governed by expectations of relevance, raised by literal, loose and figurative uses alike. In addition, they state that the notions of “literal meaning” and “what is said” play no useful theoretical role in the study of language use, and that the nature of explicit communication would have to be rethought.

A number of questions have been raised, including the source of the cooperative principle and maxims (e.g. whether they are culturally specific or universal), definition of terminologies (e.g. vagueness of 'relevance') and adequate explanation of comprehension procedure (e.g. exactly how hearers identify conversational implicatures).

In general, there have been three directions for the development of Grice's original proposals:

- a. To further develop Grice's maxims while remaining close to the spirit of the original maxims, including Levinson (1983, 2000), Brown and Levinson (1987), Horn (1973, 1984) and Clark (1996).
- b. To propose alternative principles and maxims, including R. Lakoff (1973, 1976), Leech (1983), Attardo (1997, 1999, 2000).
- c. To substitute Grice's original proposal with a more general cognitive principle, i.e. Sperber and Wilson's relevance-theoretic framework (1986/1995, 1998, 2002, Wilson and Sperber 2004)

It should be pointed that Grice's maxims depict a rosy, idealised and simplified language use, whereas reality is a much more complex and multi-dimensional. In actual conversations, telling the whole truth might be seen as impolite or somehow inappropriate. There also tend to be cross-cultural differences, not always following a universal principle. It seems that some cultures/languages (e.g. Chinese) prescript their speakers quite frequently to express things in an indirect manner, which means they are unable to follow Grice's maxims. In such cases, there is a clash between Grice's maxims and the pragmatic rules of conversation, which are culturally sensitive. For example, when being offered a drink, a typical Chinese would habitually say no the first time while expecting the offer would be made at least twice or three times. This is a kind of phatic language communication, i.e. saying no and not really meaning no. In this sort of situation, if someone doesn't play by the cultural norm, then he would sound odd.

## 2.2 Grice's Maxims and the Selectiveness Principle

First, let us examine if selectiveness violates any of Grice's maxims.

Maxim of quality: “‘Try to make your contribution one that is true’...

1. Do not say what you believe to be false. 2. Do not say that for which you lack adequate evidence’. (Grice, 1975: 46).

*Fu Jen Studies: Literature & Linguistics*, 2004, Vol. 38, pp. 127-144

Being selective is not necessarily untruthful. For example, an agent says that a house 'suits young couples or first home buyers'. While the inferential meaning of the description could be that the house is small and not luxurious, as far as the speaker is concerned, all he does is to select one particular aspect of the house to suit his purpose. In any event, the agent is telling the truth because he believes that the house does suit young couples or first homebuyers. Only when the house has one bedroom but is advertised as having two, does the agent violate the quality maxim. Here the agent doesn't give false information, he is just being selective, and therefore no rule has been broken as far as the maxim of quality is concerned.

Maxim of 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' (Grace, 1975: 45).

One may think that selectiveness seems to violate this maxim, due to its nature of being less informative. For example, real estate agents tend only to touch on certain desirable aspects (character, great potential, suitable to first home buyers, etc.), but do not provide negative information (old, scruffy conditions, etc.). The same applies to situations in everyday life when people only say what is considered to be polite.

However, it is not quite the case, because the maxim here says that we should be as informative AS REQUIRED, giving NO MORE and no less information. Required by what? For example, as far as the real estate commercials are concerned, they are not required by their cultural protocols to use words like 'old' and 'scruffy', they may, as they prefer, advertise in a positive tone by using words like 'character' and 'great potential'. Similarly, in social situations we are also not required by our cultural norms to tell someone straight to his face that he is 'slow to learn and incompetent'<sup>5</sup>; rather we would prefer to say something like he is 'kind to others'. So, going back to the question of whether or not selectiveness violates the maxim of quantity, the answer is negative. The argument is that although it may not give the full information from both positive and negative sides, the reality is that in situations where selectiveness prevails, there is probably no requirement for language users to give more information than they want to.

There is a distinction between requirements from language itself and requirements from the culture where the language is used. The requirement could be the context at a specific moment, in which language consideration alone may not be enough. In the case of the principle of selectiveness, cultural considerations play a huge role. Very often language users behave the way their cultural protocols require them to. For example, out of politeness, not articulating someone's shortcomings unless it is necessary. This is a cultural factor, which often supersedes the language factor itself. That is to say, when there is conflict between language correctness and

cultural correctness, the latter tends to prevail. It is also expected to be the case that some cultures (e.g. Chinese) may embrace more indirectness than other cultures, so we see more application of the principle of selectiveness in these languages than in others.

Maxim of relevance: 'Be relevant' (Grice, 1975: 46).

This one is relatively straightforward. Selectiveness doesn't violate this maxim. By applying the principle of selectiveness we usually try to avoid talking about the negative side of things and focus on the positives. This doesn't mean that the positive side of information is irrelevant. It could be just as relevant as the negatives. So we are not breaking any rules on relevance.

Maxim of manner: "'Be perspicuous'... 1 Avoid obscurity of expression. 2. Avoid ambiguity. 3. Be brief (avoid unnecessary prolixity). 4. Be orderly' (Grice, 1975: 46).<sup>6</sup>

Being selective doesn't prevent one from being perspicuous.

It is interesting to note that maxim of quantity and maxim of relevance may not accommodate the way the Chinese tend to communicate. For example, when talking about sensitive issues (e.g. borrowing money), the Chinese tend to beat about the bush, saying things seemingly superfluous and irrelevant. The purpose of this indirectness is to prevent being totally embarrassed by asking bluntly. Although this kind of language behaviour may well violate Grice's maxims, it is the typical Chinese way to communicate and the right way as far as the Chinese are concerned.

It seems that language use is just like driving a car; everyone on the road must follow road rules. If someone doesn't follow the rules, then car accidents may happen. However, the problem here is what rules are truly appropriate to govern our language use. The rules for language use are not as clear-cut as road rules. Grice's conversational maxims state what should be said and how it should be said; however, without cultural considerations, they would always remain as idealized conventions. While conversational maxims like Grice's certainly help, it would be mistaken to think that his maxims would be able to accommodate all the communicative devices people use in reality.

The above analysis on selectiveness based on real estate advertising language provides a similar observation as stated in Kotthoff (in press). Based on an analysis of conversation humour, Kotthoff points out life-world relevance is quite different from the cognitive relevance that Sperber and Wilson (1986) focus on. In order to determine how specific jokes work, we need knowledge of the social milieu with its social norms and normal ways of speaking. Cultural relevance is particularly important in humour.

Along the same line, selectiveness is sensitive over different situations (e.g. formal or informal, intimate or distant) and cultures (e.g. Chinese or New Zealand, men or women, academic or corporate). An in-depth analysis



and systematic classification of these situations and cultures would require a separate research project.

Next, we will discuss selectiveness and Grice's maxims from a different angle: the nature of inferential meaning derived from selective utterances, helping us to understand more about the principle of selectiveness.

### III. Inferential Meaning and Implicatures

In this study, the concept of inferential meaning is defined in a more specific way, different from Grice's conversational implicatures, in a bid to show the uniqueness of the selectiveness principle.

#### 3.1 Inferential Meanings

Prior to discussing the inferential meaning, let us first look at a related concept: connotative meaning.

According to Crystal (1993: 74), a connotative meaning is the 'emotional associations (personal or communal) which are suggested by, or are part of the meaning of, a LINGUISTIC UNIT, especially a LEXICAL ITEM.' For example, the connotations of the word 'Paris' may include 'romantic', 'luxurious', 'high class', etc.

The similarity between inferential meaning and connotative meaning is that both are not literal meanings, and both need recourse to context/knowledge of interlocutors for a specific interpretation. However, the two differ in a number of aspects.

- a. Connotations tend to relate more to a lexical item, but inferential meaning relates more to linguistic units broader than a lexical item, such as phrase, sentence, utterance, etc.
- b. Connotations could be part of lexical item's meaning. For example, one of the connotations of 'dog' in Chinese is a person of unquestioning obedience, typically to a gang leader or the like (Xihua Dictionary, 1996: 152). This is unlikely the case for inferential meaning. For example, the inferential meaning 'old' inferred from '(house with) character' would not be any part of the original item's meaning.
- c. Connotations are intended meanings that the speaker wants the hearer to know. For example, if someone looks unhappy during Chinese New Year, and I say to him, 'Come on, it's Chinese New Year', the connotative meaning of 'New Year' is 'happy and joyful'. I as a speaker certainly want the hearer to know the connotative meaning, which is 'you should cheer up during this joyful season'. However, inferential meanings are not necessarily intended to be recognised by hearers. In fact in the case of real estate advertisements, agents rather hope that their readers are not

able to work out the inferential meaning behind the advertisements (see Section 3.2 for more discussion).

Take an example from real estate advertisement, a house ‘with great potential’. The speaker’s intended meaning in this case would be just the semantic (literal) meaning; a house has an excellent opportunity to prosper. However, thinking through the semantic meaning, a pragmatic (or contextual) meaning that a hearer may infer is that the current condition of the house is not that great, probably needing renovation of some sort. The speaker would hope that the hearer stick to the focus (‘great potential’) given in the advertisement and not work out that the house is in an undesirable state at the moment. The type of meaning we are dealing with here is inferential meaning inferred with resource to context or the hearer’s knowledge, as opposed to semantic meaning (cognitive/denotative/referential meaning).

Next, we shall discuss the characteristics of Grice’s conversational implicatures, which can also help us to understand more about the nature of the principle of selectiveness characterised with inferential meaning.

### 3.2 Implicatures

Implied meaning usually refers to a meaning derived from the given text. For example, John came back to his shared flat and turned his stereo on. Mary said to John, ‘Someone has to study!’ The implied meaning is obvious: she wants John to turn the volume down. Is this kind of implied meaning similar to the inferential meaning?

They have one thing in common: being inferred from a certain context. If it were not for the above specific context, the implied meaning of the sentence ‘Someone has to study!’ could be something different. For instance, if this is said by a teacher to a student, then the implied meaning could be that the teacher is telling the student to study more; otherwise he would fail exams and not be able to graduate. The inferential meaning is also context sensitive. For example, a real estate advertisement refers to a house ‘with great potential’; viewers may infer that the house is of little worth in its present state. However, if a colleague says it, they may at least take a look, because usually a colleague wouldn’t have a hidden agenda.

However, the difference between implied and inferential meaning is that, again, the inferential meaning is not intended to be known by the hearer. By contrast, the implied meaning is. For example, for the sake of politeness, someone says that a Ph.D. thesis ‘is interesting’ to avoid saying ‘it is poorly written’ or ‘it has no original ideas’, etc. It would be assumed that the speaker does not want the hearer to know what he really thinks of the thesis. The inferential meaning here would be entirely the hearer’s making, he would have to work it out by himself, without much help from the speaker. The implied meaning, however, is usually intended for hearers

to know. For instance, Mary would very much hope that John got her message of 'turn your volume down' by saying 'someone has to study'. Otherwise, there is no point for Mary to utter that sentence at all. One other example is irony. A stand-up comedian uses irony with the definite intention of making his audience know the implied meaning of the irony. If he doesn't, then he could expect a gloomy future.

The difference of whether or not the implied/inferential meaning is intended for the hearer to know brings up another difference between the inferential meaning and implied meaning: different purposes for communication. The former is used often for the purpose of being selective, focusing on one particular aspect in order to minimize some other undesirable aspect(s). A typical case is real estate commercials. On the other hand, the implied meaning serves somewhat different purposes. One typical case is irony, in which the speaker overtly flouts Grice's maxims for humorous effect.

One other related concept is fuzzy meaning, which is defined as a semantic meaning that has no clear-cut meaning boundaries. For example, how tall is 'tall' and how beautiful is 'pretty'. The meaning of the two varies from context to context, individual to individual. There are differences among the four concepts of fuzziness, vagueness, generality and ambiguity, see Zhang (1998) for a detailed discussion of the topic.

A similarity between fuzzy meaning and inferential meaning is that they both contain an undetermined meaning. Fuzzy meaning has, needless to say, grey areas and with inferential interpretation there is often a 'maybe' situation, not an absolute one. For example, when we see an ad with 'needs tender loving care', what we infer from it can be different, due to different contexts and our various backgrounds and knowledge of the world.

However, fuzzy meaning is part of a lexical item's denotative meaning, which is different from inferential meaning because the latter is unlikely a part of the original meaning of the utterance given. Also, fuzzy meaning can hardly be resolved by context. For example, most likely we would not be able to provide a universal standard for application of the word 'intelligent' no matter what context we are in. However, inferential meaning could be determined by a specific context. For example, in the context of a real estate ad, the hearer would be able to infer 'a shabby house' from 'house with great potential'.

To sum up, while inferential meaning associated with selectiveness has similar features to Grice's conversational implicatures, it differs primarily in terms of the speaker's intended meaning. Below is an overall profile of the similarities and differences of the four meanings discussed in this section.

	Denotative meaning	Speaker intended meaning	Sensitive to context and undetermined	Part of lexical meaning	Implied or inferred	Resolved by context
Inferential	No	No	Yes	No	Yes	Yes
Implicature	No	Yes	Yes	No	Yes	Yes
Connotative	No	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Fuzzy	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	No	No

#### IV The Inference Process of Selectiveness

In this section, the focus is on the inference process of selectiveness through a comparison with Grice's conversational implicatures. Grice discussed during his 1967 lectures at Harvard University what he called 'conversational implicatures', concerning how hearers try to get the complete message when speakers mean more than they say. It was first proposed in the 1960s and later revised in Grice (1989).

Grice's maxims can be violated (intentionally or unintentionally) to achieve certain conversational implicatures. Grice proposed that the implicature could be worked out based on:

- a. The literal linguistic meaning of what is said
- b. Information indicated in the context
- c. A belief that the speaker would follow the cooperative principle

Let us compare the following two examples:

Example 1 (conversational implicature): a teacher walks in a classroom and said: 'It is stuffy here'. He implies that the window(s) should be opened, which would be inferred by students in the room.

Example 2 (inference in selectiveness): In Chinese, out of politeness people tend to say someone's physical condition is 'really strong' when in fact this someone is overweight. The hearer would normally be able to work out the message of being 'overweight'. Another example would be real estate advertisements. The readers may get the sense of 'old or possible shabby' from 'a house with character'.

What, then, are the differences between Grice's conversational implicatures and the inference guided by principle of selectiveness then? They are as follows.

- a. As previously mentioned, in Grice's conversational implicatures, speakers would like their hearers to know the information that is implied. In Example 1 above, the teacher would certainly hope that his students in the classroom could get his hint and open the windows. Interestingly, in the case of inference for selectiveness speakers certainly do not intend hearers to work out any information that is not good as far as the speaker is concerned.

That is, usually the speaker does not mean to imply any different meaning except the literal meaning. As shown in Example 2, neither the Chinese speaker of the polite remark nor the real estate agent wants their hearers to know anything other than what has been said. In any event, the speaker, who knows hearers may work out something more, would not be willing to disclose that something more to hearers.

- b. In Example 1, the speaker means more than they say. By contrast, in Example 2 the speakers do not mean more than what they say. They mean exactly what they say, and they want their hearers to infer nothing more from it. In selectiveness, usually there is no implicature from the speaker's end. If hearers get anything other than the semantic meaning the speaker gives, it would not be the speaker's intention.
- c. In Grice's conversational implicatures, the speaker is supposed to make an effort to let their hearers know what is implied by what has been said. That is, the speaker is supposed to somehow manage to make their flouting of maxims known to the hearer. But in the case of selectiveness, speakers may have no such intention; they would prefer that the hearers understand exactly what they tell them. The reason is simple: these speakers don't intend to have any implicatures from their utterances. If there are any, it would be entirely the hearer's job to work them out by themselves. That is, working out the inferential meaning depends solely on hearers' ability to recognize the selectiveness.
- d. Based on the above three, it is expected that the hearers in the case of selectiveness have a tougher job working out the inferential meaning. Although it is a tougher job, hearers are usually able to work it out eventually. For example, in Example 2 above, hearers are expected to be able to infer 'old, scruffy' from a real estate advertisement of 'a house with character' or 'a house with great potential'. Similarly, hearers, given the specific context, should also have no problem knowing that the person referred to is overweight, through the semantic meaning of 'really strong'.

Furthermore, let us examine the inference process of conversational implicature and selectiveness:

Conversational implicature:

- a. The speaker means more than he says; he says A but actually means B.
- b. Both speaker and hearer are aware that the speaker has, either intentionally or unintentionally, violated a maxim.

- c. The speaker assumes that the hearer will, one way or another (via context, knowledge and common sense, etc.), manage to figure out B from A.

It should be noted that one of the reasons for using conversational implicature is that the speaker counts on the hearer being able to work out what is implied.

Selectiveness:

- a. Speaker is being selective in giving certain information and using certain words to suit certain purposes (e.g. advertising or politeness). They say A and mean A.
- b. Both speaker and hearer are aware that the speaker, either intentionally or unintentionally, is being less informative on certain aspects (but not necessarily violating the maxims). Usually the hearer is aware that the speaker may withhold certain information.
- c. The speaker hopes that the hearer cannot work out the information they are trying to withhold.

As shown, the inference process for selectiveness and the conversational implicatures is not quite the same. In the former case, the interesting thing is that the speaker probably knows at the start that the hearer would eventually work out the unspoken part of the information (although it is not their intention), but since being selective is common practice and people from both ends master it well, we keep doing it. In the case of being polite, both parties know that the speaker is just being polite by not saying anything bluntly. It is not a matter of using a correct language form to state the fact; but a matter of pragmatic requirement (not being rude). Meanwhile, the hearer's inference has not come through systematic logical reasoning; it is an informal inference/reasoning in an everyday situation.

Finally, in terms of how the inferential process is made by the hearer in the case of the selectiveness principle, two elements are crucial: common sense and background knowledge shared with the speaker; and pragmatic meaning of the linguistic items used in a specific situation. For example, seeing the wording 'a cosy and easy care house' in a teal estate ad, readers should normally be able to infer that this house is probably 'small' by using their common sense and reading between lines.

## V. Conclusions

The principle of selectiveness is discussed together with Grice's conversational maxims. Based on what has been discussed, it is concluded

that the applicability of Grice's maxims is a matter of degree. The maxims cannot be taken as absolute rules; this would be neither right nor practicable. Language is not as clear-cut as mathematical formulas; it integrates with culture, society, etc. As shown in this study, cultural/pragmatic considerations tend to be a deciding factor for what communicative principles to use in order to achieve a successful outcome. Very often when language form and cultural norm clash, culture norm supersedes language form, as in advertising and situations where politeness is required. When communicating, people must follow certain cultural and social conventions, suited to particular contexts.

The reason that communicators will make recourse to selectiveness is because it is appropriate to do so for various purposes (personal interests, business profits, cultural and social normality, politeness, etc). In the case of real estate advertising, agents can benefit from not making the shortcomings of houses so obvious. Similarly, in everyday conversations selectiveness is very important in situations like socializing. If one doesn't master the principle of selectiveness, one may not be able to fit into society successfully.

It should be noted that language users would normally be as informative as required except where this goes against their abilities, their own interests or preferences. Whether or not we employ selectiveness is a matter of need. It is in the communicator's own interests to make their utterance as informative or otherwise as selective as possible; it all depends on circumstances.

While the principle of selectiveness doesn't seem to violate any of Grice's maxims, it is not adequately represented by any of them either. As shown, inferential meaning associated with selectiveness is different from Grice's conversational implicatures in that speakers do not want the hearers to work out anything other than the literal meaning of the utterances. Based on the fact that selectiveness in language use is a way of life and should therefore be represented, it is proposed to add into Grice's maxims a maxim of appropriateness governing pragmatic/cultural considerations. Practices like the principle of selectiveness could be placed under this banner, which could then compensate for a weak point of Grice's maxims, i.e. the lack of cultural considerations.

The implication of this study is that we should never underestimate the impact that cultural and other pragmatic factors have on our language use. Any adequate study of language use should take into account the integration of language and culture.

## Notes

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<sup>1</sup> I wish to thank Joe Murphy and Gretchen Lee of *Fu Jen Studies* and the anonymous reviewers for their valuable help.

In this paper, for reasons of simplicity the term ‘speaker’ includes ‘speaker and author’; similarly, ‘hearer’ includes ‘hearer and reader’. Pragmatic meaning is defined here as meaning conveyed in a certain context. Context includes linguistic (the text where an utterance occurs) and non-linguistic (shared and general knowledge).

<sup>2</sup> The cultural setting from which the real estate advertisement data is taken is the New Zealand English speaking community; the examples come primarily from *Property Press* published in Auckland, New Zealand.

<sup>3</sup> Please note that the advertising language discussed in this study has no deceiving element in it. False advertising is not of interest in this project. What is of interest here are advertisements that are selective yet not deceptive.

<sup>4</sup> Property ads normally come with a picture, which may help buyers to see what a house looks like. However, usually the picture has been taken on a selective basis too; probably it shows only what the agent wants us to see.

<sup>5</sup> Of course in some cases we may be required to say these words, for example when being asked by a potential employer or his parents.

<sup>6</sup> One may be demanded to be more mannered in some situations like teaching or a job interview, while in other situations, for example with one’s family or best friend, the maxim of manner could be relaxed a little.

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