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Cooperation or conflict?

On the problematic (but fruitful) relationship between pragmatics and rhetoric

Since its first formulation later revised by the same author (cfr. Grice 1989), Grice's principle of cooperation has caused considerable controversy. On the one hand, it was considered by many scholars the pivot on which to establish the connection between rationality and communication, on the other hand it was considered too restrictive and not adequate to account for what happens in many cases of linguistic practice. So, for example, it has been recently questioned by Pinker (et alii 2008) in the perspective of evolutionary biology. According to Pinker (et alii), existing theories of indirect speech are flawed because they are based on the premise that human conversation is an exercise in pure cooperation, in which conversational partners work together toward a common goal. A fundamental insight from evolutionary biology, however, is that most social relationships involve combinations of cooperation and conflict. While Pinker's (et alii) observations seem to us to be partly misguided, we believe that a rethinking of the relationship between cooperation and conflict in communication is of utmost importance especially as regards the public sphere. On the other end, Grice himself claimed: «I have stated my maxims as if [the particular purpose that talk is adapted to serve] were a maximally effective exchange of information; this specification is, of course, too narrow, and the scheme needs to be generalized to allow for such general purposes as *influencing or directing the actions of others*» (Grice 1989: 28 our emphasis). We believe that the connection between a rhetorical and a pragmatic perspective allows us to show that what Grice says at the end of quotation is not an exception but a typical and paradigmatic case of human communication (cfr. Dascal-Gross 1999; Larrazabal - Korta 2002; Piazza 2013). More specifically, inspired by the proposal formulated by Liu-Zhu (2011; cfr. Nemesi 2013) to identify a principle of non-cooperation (PNC) as the basis of rhetorical practice, we will try to show how, in many cases, communication, in particular in the public sphere, derives from a complex mix of cooperation and conflict «since it is far from certain whether what counts as true, sufficient, relevant and clear (Gricean maxims) can be meaningful apart from the social and political contexts of particular speech acts» (Harris 1995: 118).

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