Is there a maxim of truthfulness?

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1 Introduction

It is now over 25 years since Paul Grice, in his *William James Lectures*, sketched a theory of utterance interpretation based on a Co-operative Principle and maxims of truthfulness, informativeness, relevance and clarity (Quality, Quantity, Relation and Manner). The Quality maxims went as follows:

(1) *Grice's maxims of Quality*
Supermaxim: Try to make your contribution one that is true.
(i) Do not say what you believe to be false.
(ii) Do not say that for which you lack adequate evidence.

The supermaxim of Quality is concerned with the speaker's overall contribution (what is communicated, either explicitly or implicitly), while the first and second maxims of Quality relate only to what is said (i.e. the proposition explicitly expressed). While much attention has been paid in pragmatics to the maxims of Quantity, Relation and Manner, Grice's formulation of the maxims of Quality has generally been taken for granted. In this paper, I will look more closely at their role.

Grice saw the first maxim of Quality, which I will call the maxim of truthfulness, as the most important of all the maxims. He says in the *William James Lectures*:

> It is obvious that the observance of some of these maxims is a matter of less urgency than is the observance of others; a man who has expressed himself with undue prolixity would, in general, be open to milder comment than would a man who has said something he believes to be false. Indeed, it might be felt that the importance of at least the first maxim of Quality is such that it should not be included in a scheme of the kind I am constructing; other maxims come into operation only on the assumption that this maxim of Quality is satisfied. While this may be correct, so far as the generation of implicatures is concerned it seems to play a role not totally different from the other maxims, and it will be convenient, for the present at least, to treat it as a member of the list of maxims (Grice 1989: 27).

In the 'Retrospective Epilogue', written 20 years later, this view is apparently maintained:

> The maxim of Quality, enjoining the provision of contributions which are genuine rather than spurious (truthful rather than mendacious), does not seem to be just one among a number of recipes for producing contributions; it seems rather to spell out the difference between something's being and (strictly speaking) failing to be, any kind of contribution at all. False information is not an inferior kind of information; it just is not information (Grice 1989: 371).

Notice, though, an interesting shift. While he talks of 'the maxim of Quality', Grice's concern here is with the speaker's contribution as a whole; indeed, there is room for doubt about whether he had the first maxim of Quality or the supermaxim in mind. I believe that this is not a minor detail. My aim is to show that the function Grice attributes to the Quality maxims - ensuring the quality of the speaker's overall contribution - can be more effectively achieved in a framework with no maxim of truthfulness at all.

In a number of recent works, Dan Sperber and I have been developing a theory of communication in which Grice's Co-operative Principle and maxims are replaced by a single Principle of Optimal Relevance. *Relevance* is defined in terms of contextual effects and processing effort. An utterance is *optimally relevant* if and only if it achieves adequate contextual effects for no gratuitous processing effort.[1] Within this framework, instead of looking for an interpretation consistent with the Co-operative Principle and maxims, the hearer should look for an interpretation consistent with the Principle of Optimal Relevance. We claim that in many cases, the relevance-theoretic framework offers better descriptions and explanations of the phenomena of verbal communication than are achieved by the Gricean approach.

It is easy to see how the maxims of Quantity, Relation and Manner might be replaced by a single Principle of Relevance. An utterance that is optimally relevant in our sense should also satisfy Grice's maxim of Relation ('Be relevant'). An utterance that is optimally relevant in our sense should give neither too much nor too little information, thus satisfying the Quantity maxims. The effect of the Manner maxims, with their emphasis on clarity and ease of comprehension, is achieved in the relevance-theoretic framework by the ban on gratuitous processing effort. It thus

[1]For modifications to this definition of optimal relevance, see the Postface to the forthcoming second edition of *Relevance* (Sperber & Wilson 1986), where what I am calling the Principle of Optimal Relevance is renamed the Second, or Communicative, Principle of Relevance.

seems reasonable to grant, at least in principle, that the maxims of Quantity, Relation and Manner might be subsumed by a single Principle of Relevance.

Things go differently when it comes to the Quality maxims. In an early paper (Wilson and Sperber 1981: 171), Dan Sperber and I claimed that these were indeed subsumed by the Principle of Relevance:

> A speaker aiming to [achieve optimal] relevance will generally succeed in doing so if he does his best to speak truthfully and on the basis of adequate evidence. Thus, in most cases, the Principle of Relevance subsumes the maxims of Quality. However, there are certain cases in which the Principle of Relevance and Grice's maxims of Quality make rather different predictions... In such cases, it seems to be the Principle of Relevance which makes the correct predictions.

We have also tried to show that a framework with a maxim of truthfulness encounters serious difficulties in dealing with metaphor and irony. Many Griceans, while willing to contemplate reductionist programmes for other maxims, remain unconvinced. Larry Horn says in his recent book on negation:

> If I assume (with Horn 1984b and most other work in this area, and against Sperber and Wilson 1986) that Quality (or what Lewis 1969 has called a Convention of Truthfulness) is primary and unreducible, I can attempt to boil the remaining maxims and submaxims down to two fundamental principles... (Horn 1989: 194).

Levinson (1987: 76) says of Sperber & Wilson, 'Their reduction of Quality just seems to me to be spurious; in any case it is not central to their claims.'

What is perhaps surprising is that these comments have not been accompanied by any attempt to rebut our arguments, or to show how the Gricean framework can deal with the problems we raise. In what follows, I will briefly reiterate these arguments, and try to show that the central features of the relevance-theoretic solutions are quite compatible with the Gricean framework, and could be accepted even by those who remain uncommitted to the relevance-theoretic programme as a whole.

2 Problems with the maxim of truthfulness

2.1 Violating the maxims

As Grice makes clear, the purpose of the Quality maxims is to ensure that the speaker communicates only information she believes to be true. In the exchange in (2), Mary's utterance in (2b) might explicitly express the proposition in (3a) and implicate the one in (3b):

(2) a. *Peter*: Did you buy the bread and milk?
b. *Mary*: I bought the bread.

(3) a. Mary bought the bread.
b. Mary didn't buy the milk.

If Mary is obeying the maxims of Quality, she should utter (2b) only if she believes both (3a) and (3b). An objection that is sometimes made to these maxims is that speakers occasionally tell lies. A lie knowingly violates both the maxim of truthfulness and the supermaxim of Quality, as when Mary utters (2b) and commits herself to (3a) without believing it. A similar objection to the supermaxim of Quality might be that speakers occasionally mislead, as when Mary utters (2b) and commits herself to (3b) without believing it.

Lies are not the only type of case in which the speaker knowingly violates the maxim of truthfulness. Jokes, fictions, metaphors and ironies are further examples: in each case, the speaker expresses a proposition that she does not literally believe. In the case of lies, the speaker (deceptively) commits herself to the truth of the proposition expressed; with jokes, fictions, metaphors and ironies, she does not. Grice is well aware of these examples and the differences in speaker commitment that they involve. He notes (Grice 1989: 30) that his maxims may be violated, and lists three categories of violation, each with its own characteristic effects. Lies are examples of *covert violation*, where the hearer is meant to assume that the maxim of truthfulness is still operative and that the speaker believes what she has said. In jokes and fictions, the maxim of truthfulness is overtly *suspended* (the speaker overtly *opts out* of it); the hearer is meant to notice that it is no longer operative, and is not expected to assume that the speaker believes what she has said. Metaphor, irony and other tropes represent a third category: they are *overt violations* of the maxim of truthfulness, in which the hearer is meant to assume that the maxim of truthfulness is no longer operative, but that the supermaxim of Quality remains in force, so that some true proposition is still conveyed.

The treatment of tropes as involving overt violation of a maxim of literal truthfulness has a long history in the classical rhetorical tradition. Consider (4) and (5):

(4) The leaves danced in the breeze. (Metaphor)

(5) John Major spoke in his usual forceful fashion. (Irony)

When utterances like these are figuratively intended, they do not commit the speaker to the truth of the propositions expressed. They must therefore be treated as violations of the maxim of truthfulness in any framework which contains such a maxim. Grice treats them as deliberate and blatant violations. When the maxim is deliberately and blatantly violated, the hearer is supposed to notice the violation and look around for some related true proposition that the speaker might have wanted to communicate, thus ensuring that at least the supermaxim of Quality is satisfied. Different tropes are characterised by different types of related proposition: in the case of metaphor it would be a simile, with irony it would be the opposite of what was said, with hyperbole it would be a weaker proposition and with understatement it would be a stronger one. Thus, Grice might analyse (4) as implicating (6), and (5) as implicating (7):

(6) The leaves moved in the breeze as if they were dancing.

(7) John Major spoke in his usual unforceful fashion.

Given a framework with a maxim of truthfulness, it seems there is nothing else to be done. Figurative utterances exist; if there is a maxim of truthfulness, it is patently violated by figurative utterances. The only possible solution seems to be to treat the violation as a deliberate trigger for some process of figurative interpretation. In taking this line, Grice joins himself firmly to the classical rhetorical tradition.

Dan Sperber and I have sided with Romantic critics of the classical tradition and tried to show that this approach to figurative utterances creates more problems than it solves.[2] If figurative language violates a basic principle of communication, why does it arise naturally, spontaneously and universally, without being taught or learned? Why do the same figures arise repeatedly in culture after culture? Why are there not *more* figures? For example, why is there not a figure based on the exchange

[2]See, for example, *Relevance*, chapter 4, sections 6-9; Sperber & Wilson 1985-6, 1990; Wilson and Sperber 1988, 1992.

of subject and direct object, so that an utterance such as (8), which patently violates the maxim of truthfulness, would be taken to implicate (9)?

(8) The cricket pitch drenched a thunderstorm.

(9) A thunderstorm drenched the cricket pitch.

Why is it clear that there *could not* be such a figure?

There is also a more general problem about what is communicated by figurative utterances. In the classical tradition, a metaphor such as (4) or an irony such as (5) is merely an indirect and decorative way of communicating the proposition in (6) or (7). No explanation is given for why a speaker should make her hearer go through a totally unnecessary inference process to recover as a figurative meaning or implicature what could just as well have been literally and explicitly said. In the relevance-theoretic framework, such interpretations are ruled out by the ban on gratuitous processing effort. In a framework with a maxim of truthfulness, there seems to be no alternative to this sort of treatment; but there might be an alternative to the maxim of truthfulness itself.[3]

2.2 Do tropes violate the maxims of Quality?

The maxim of truthfulness says 'Do not say what you believe to be false'. It might seem obvious that in a metaphor or irony such as (4) or (5) above, the speaker says something she believes to be false. However, there is a question whether, in Grice's sense, she says anything at all.

There are two possible interpretations of the notion of saying, which yield two different interpretations of the maxim of truthfulness. On one interpretation - the one that seems to fit better with Grice's overall philosophy of language - the tropes do not violate the maxim of truthfulness, because nothing is said. On the other, something is said, and the maxim of truthfulness is violated. Grice seems to vacillate between the two interpretations. As a result, it is not even clear what the maxim of truthfulness means.

On the weaker interpretation, *saying* involves merely expressing a proposition, without any necessary commitment to its truth. Understood in this way, the maxim of

[3]A further problem with an approach to tropes in terms of maxim-violation is that the resulting implicatures do not seem to be calculable in the way Grice requires. This is pointed out in Hugly & Sayward 1979 and Sperber & Wilson 1986.

truthfulness means 'Do not express propositions you believe to be false', and the tropes will violate it as Grice claimed. The function of the maxim of truthfulness, and more generally of the Quality maxims, will be to account for the fact that the speaker of (2b) above generally commits herself to the truth of what is said and implicated, thus communicating that she believes both (3a) and (3b). On this interpretation, there would be no speaker commitment without the Quality maxims - speakers would be free to say whatever came into their heads.

On the stronger interpretation, *saying* involves not merely expressing a proposition but committing oneself to its truth. Understood in this way, the maxim of truthfulness means 'Do not commit yourself to propositions you believe to be false', and the tropes will not violate it because, in this stronger sense, they do not say anything at all. On this interpretation, saying already involves speaker commitment, and the function of the maxim of truthfulness, and more generally of the Quality maxims, will be to ensure that speakers do not make spurious commitments. This seems to fits well with Grice's remarks above about the function of the Quality maxim being to guarantee that contributions are genuine; but it leaves metaphor and irony unexplained.

Which notion of saying did Grice have in mind in formulating the maxim of truthfulness? There is evidence of some hesitation. On the one hand, he treats the tropes as 'Examples in which the first maxim of Quality is flouted' (Grice 1989: 34). On the other, he comments that in irony the speaker 'has said *or has made as if to say* [my italics]' something she does not believe, and that in metaphor what is communicated must be obviously related to what the speaker '*has made as if to say*' (ibid: 34). If the speaker of metaphor or irony merely 'makes as if to say' something, then the stronger notion of saying must be in force; but as shown above, if the stronger notion of saying is in force, then the maxim of truthfulness will not be violated, and Grice's analysis of metaphor and irony will not go through.

It seems that elsewhere in his philosophy of language, where the notion of saying plays a central role, it was the stronger rather than the weaker notion that interested Grice. He says, for example (Grice 1989: 87):

> I want to say that (1) "U (utterer) said that *p*" entails (2) "U did something x by which U meant that *p*.

For Grice, what is *meant* is roughly equivalent to what is *intentionally communicated*, i.e to the information put forward as true. On this interpretation, saying therefore entails speaker commitment, and where no commitment is undertaken, nothing will be said. Stephen Neale (1992: section 2) treats these broader considerations as decisive, and assumes that metaphor and irony are not cases of saying:

> If U utters the sentence "Bill is an honest man" ironically, on Grice's account U will *not* have said that Bill is an honest man: U will have made as if to say that Bill is an honest man.

If we accept this interpretation, the problem is not just that Grice has an unsatisfactory account of metaphor and irony; he seems to have no account at all.

2.3 Some further problematic examples

There are two further types of case for which Grice's framework offers no obvious analysis. The first is loose talk or rough approximation, as in (10)-(12):

(10) Holland is flat.

(11) Jane's face was oval.

(12) The lecture started at 8.00.

What do the Quality maxims tell us about the interpretation of (10)-(12)? Strictly speaking - and Grice was very keen on strictly speaking - these utterances are surely false: Holland is not strictly speaking flat, no-one's face is strictly speaking an oval, and lectures invariably start a few minutes after the appointed time. Since the speaker does not commit herself to the literal truth of these utterances, (10)-(12), like metaphor and irony, will violate the maxim of truthfulness on a weak interpretation, but not on a strong one. On a strong interpretation, the maxim of truthfulness will thus leave them unexplained. On a weak interpretation, an additional problem arises: although (10)-(12) violate the maxim of truthfulness, they do not seem to fall into any of the three categories of violation listed above. They are not covert violations, designed to deceive the hearer into believing the proposition expressed. They are not like jokes or fictions, which suspend the maxim entirely. Grice would presumably want them to function like deliberate, blatant violations, triggering the search for a related implicature (in this case a rough approximation to what was literally said). The problem is that they would not normally be perceived as violating the maxim of truthfulness at all. In classical rhetoric, they are not treated as tropes, involving the substitution of a figurative for a literal meaning; they do not have the striking or figurative quality that Grice saw as associated with deliberate maxim violation. On the assumption that loose talk and rough approximation are strictly speaking false, Grice's framework thus leaves them unexplained.

An alternative approach, which is currently being pursued both inside and outside the Gricean framework, would allow pragmatic interpretation processes to flesh out linguistically encoded meanings in such a way that the propositions expressed by (10)-(12) would be true rather than false.[4] Thus 'flat' in (10) might be interpreted as denoting a type of flatness appropriate to landscapes, 'oval' in (11) as denoting a shape appropriate to faces, and so on. This would then raise the question of whether metaphor and other tropes could not be given similar treatment. If so, then the claim that metaphors are overt violations of the maxim of truthfulness would have to be abandoned. If not, some principled distinction would have to be drawn between loose talk and metaphor, so that one could be treated as violating the maxim of truthfulness, while the other was not. Dan Sperber and I have argued that no such distinction can be drawn. If we are right, this approach to loose talk would thus lead to the abandonment of Grice's analysis of metaphor.

I am not saying that these are insuperable objections to Grice's framework. I am saying that someone who regards Grice's maxim of truthfulness as fundamental owes us an account of how these examples work - an account, moreover, that is not so unconstrained as to predict all sorts of other interpretations that would not in fact be found: for example, an interpretation on which someone who says 'It's 101.76 kilometres to London' would be taken to implicate that it is roughly 100 kilometres.

The second type of problematic case for which Grice's framework offers no obvious analysis is free indirect speech. Consider (13):

(13) a. I just watched Hugh Grant on television. b. He did a bad thing.

In a framework with a maxim of truthfulness, the speaker should not utter (13b) unless she believes (14):

(14) Hugh Grant did a bad thing.

This is, of course, a possible interpretation of (13b). However, there is another, very natural interpretation, on which the speaker is trying to communicate not (14) but (15a) or (15b):

(15) a. According to Hugh Grant, he did a bad thing.
b. Hugh Grant said he did a bad thing.

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[4]See, for example, Bach 1994; Récanati forthcoming; Sperber & Wilson 1986, chapter 4, section 2.

On this interpretation, (13b) is a case of free indirect speech. Here, the speaker does not commit herself to the truth of the proposition she has literally expressed: she is not expressing her own belief but implicitly attributing a belief to someone else. What do Grice's Quality maxims tell us about how free indirect speech is understood?

On a weak interpretation of saying, most cases of free indirect speech will violate the maxim of truthfulness or the supermaxim of Quality, because the speaker will not believe the proposition strictly and literally expressed — i.e. (14) above in the case of (13b). As with loose talk, the only obvious solution will be to treat the utterance as an overt violation, with resulting implicature: the speaker says (13b) in order to implicate the related true proposition (15a) or (15b). However, similar problems arise to those we have seen with loose talk. Free indirect speech is not normally classified as a trope; it is not normally perceived as a violation of the maxim of truthfulness - let alone a deliberate and blatant one. Thus, Grice's framework sheds no light on how it is understood.

On a strong interpretation of saying, free indirect speech will not violate the maxim of truthfulness, because the speaker does not commit herself to the proposition literally expressed, and no insight will be offered into how the interpretation process goes. One might argue that there are pragmatic interpretation processes which allow (13b) to be understood as directly expressing not (14) but one of the propositions in (15), which will then not violate the Quality maxims at all. However, as Dan Sperber and I have tried to show, there is a good case for treating verbal irony as simply a variety of free indirect speech. If we are right, then the end result of this approach would be to show that irony, like free indirect speech, does not violate the Quality maxims, and Grice's analysis would have to be abandoned.

Let me emphasise again that these are not meant as insuperable objections to the Gricean programme. It might be possible to develop an adequate account of loose talk and free indirect speech in a framework with a maxim of truthfulness. The fact is, though, that no one seems to have tried. I will now sketch an alternative framework, with no maxim of truthfulness, in which metaphor, irony, loose talk and free indirect speech all receive a straightforward explanation.

3 An alternative framework

A framework with Grice's maxims of Quality makes the following claim. Given a declarative utterance that strictly and literally expresses a proposition P, the hearer is entitled to assume that P is identical to a belief of the speaker's. Dan Sperber and I have argued that better explanations result if this claim is weakened in two specific ways. The first weakening accounts for free indirect speech and irony, plus a range

of straightforwardly literal utterances; the second accounts for loose talk and metaphor, plus a range of straightforwardly literal utterances. The resulting framework thus deals with the full range of examples that we have looked at so far.

The first weakening proposed in *Relevance* is as follows. Instead of assuming that the proposition expressed by an utterance is automatically treated as representing a belief of the speaker's, we claim that it is treated as representing a belief that the speaker wants to attribute to *someone*: either herself or someone else. The requirement imposed by the maxim of truthfulness is, of course, a special case of this more general claim.

It is easy to see how free indirect speech can be dealt with in this framework. Take (13b). The difference between the literal interpretation in (14) and the free indirect interpretations in (15) is simply a difference in whether the proposition expressed by (13b) is treated as representing a belief of the speaker's or a belief the speaker wants to attribute to someone else. How does the hearer decide which interpretation is intended, and whose beliefs are being represented? Here a Gricean might appeal to the Manner maxims, with their supermaxim 'Be perspicuous'. Relevance theory claims that in this aspect of interpretation as in any other, the hearer should accept the first interpretation consistent with the Principle of Relevance; all other interpretations are disallowed.[5]

Let us now extend the framework to deal with irony. In a number of papers, Dan Sperber and I have argued that irony is merely a variety of free indirect speech. In representing someone else's opinion, the speaker may indicate, or leave the hearer to gather, her own attitude towards the opinion echoed. In (13b), for example, she may echo Hugh Grant's utterance in such a way as to indicate that she agrees or disagrees with it, with the fact that he has chosen to express it, or the way he has chosen to express it. Suppose she utters (13b) in a weary, wry or contemptuous tone of voice - a tone of voice that dissociates her from some aspect of the echoed utterance. The result will be a case of verbal irony. Verbal irony, on this analysis, involves the echoing of an opinion in circumstances where it is clear that the speaker is dissociating herself from it, or from the utterance used to express it. In such circumstances, (13b) would communicate not only (15) but (16):

(16) It was ridiculous of Hugh Grant to say he did a bad thing.[6]

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[5]For recent outlines of the assumptions of relevance theory, see Sperber 1994; Wilson 1994.

[6]For a more detailed analysis of verbal irony and its relations to free indirect speech, see Sperber & Wilson 1986, chapter 4, section 9; Wilson & Sperber 1992.

In the case of (5) ('John Major spoke in his usual forceful fashion'), although no prior utterance is echoed, the speaker can be seen as making fun of the idea (entertained, perhaps, by John Major, his advisers or sympathetic commentators) that his speech could have struck someone as forceful.

This account has two main advantages over Grice's. First, it does not treat irony as violating a maxim of truthfulness, with all the resulting problems sketched above. Second, it shows that irony, like free indirect speech, is a quite natural and rational form of utterance, which could be produced and interpreted spontaneously without being taught or learned. This is achieved simply by dropping the requirement imposed by the maxim of truthfulness, that the proposition expressed by an utterance must invariably represent a thought of the speaker's own, and substituting for it the slightly weaker requirement that this proposition must represent a belief attributed to *someone* - either the speaker herself or someone else.

The second weakening proposed in *Relevance* has a similar structure. Instead of saying that P, the proposition literally expressed by an utterance, must be *identical* to a thought of the speaker's (or, more generally, to a thought that the speaker wants to attribute to someone), we claim that the proposition expressed must merely *resemble* this thought to some degree. Two propositions resemble each other in a given context to the extent that they share logical and contextual implications in that context. Consider (17a-c):

(17) a. Peter is a rock musician.
b. Peter is a musician.
c. Peter plays loud music.

(17a) and (17b) share the logical implication that Peter is a musician, and whatever further contextual implications this leads on to; they thus resemble each other in every context. (17a) and (17c) have no logical implications in common, but they would resemble each other in a context containing the assumption in (17d):

(17) d. Rock musicians play loud music.

In this context, (17a) would contextually imply that Peter plays loud music, which is logically implied by (17c). The more implications the two propositions have in common, the greater the resemblance between them. Identity is, of course, a special case of resemblance: two identical propositions share all their logical and contextual implications in every context. Hence, the requirement imposed by the maxim of truthfulness is merely a special case of a much more general claim.

Consider how this general claim would apply to a rough approximation such as (10), understood as expressing the proposition that Holland is strictly and literally flat. In a framework with a maxim of truthfulness, a speaker should utter (10) only if she believes the proposition strictly and literally expressed. In the framework just outlined, she is entitled to utter (10) as long as this proposition *resembles* the thought she wants to communicate: that is, as long as the two have implications in common. Suppose Peter has suggested to Mary that they spend their walking holiday in the Netherlands, and Mary replies, 'Holland is flat'. In a framework with a maxim of truthfulness, Peter should assume that she is speaking literally and expressing the proposition that the surface of Holland is a perfect plane. On the relevance-theoretic account, he should merely assume that she wants to endorse enough of the implications of this proposition to make her utterance worth his attention. He might thus take her to implicate that a walking holiday in Holland will be effortless, will present little physical challenge, few visual surprises, little incentive to go in one direction rather than another, and so on. Other implications of the proposition literally expressed - for example that the fields of Holland are good for rollerblading - will not be taken to be shared by the thought she wants to communicate, and will be discarded.

With an approach along these lines, it is easy to see that metaphor and hyperbole are merely varieties of rough approximation, and will be understood in exactly the same way as (10)-(12). Indeed, each of (10)-(12) might be thought of as a hyperbole rather than a rough approximation: the borderline between tropes and rough approximations is not clear. To see how the interpretation of metaphor would go in the relevance-theoretic framework, consider (4) above ('The leaves danced in the breeze'). If this were literally intended, the speaker would be endorsing not only the proposition literally expressed, but all the logical and contextual implications derivable from it in the intended context. On a metaphorical interpretation, by contrast, the speaker would be endorsing merely some of these implications. Let's suppose that the intended context consists of the hearer's knowledge of leaves and dancing. Then on both literal and metaphorical interpretations, the speaker would be taken to endorse the implications that the leaves moved gracefully and lightly, creating the impression of an overall pattern, and lifting the observer's spirits. What distinguishes the literal from the metaphorical interpretation is the treatment of other implications: for example, that the leaves had legs, were capable of forming plans for action, or responding to each other, and so on. On a literal interpretation, these implications would be treated as endorsed by the speaker; on a metaphorical interpretation, they would not.

On this approach, the difference between literal and metaphorical utterances lies in whether the speaker is taken to endorse *all* the implications derivable from the proposition expressed, or only some of them. How many implications should the speaker be taken to endorse? Here there is a clear empirical difference between

Gricean and relevance-theoretic frameworks. According to Grice, a less-than-literal interpretation should not even be considered unless the strictly literal interpretation fails. According to relevance theory, the hearer should choose the most accessible interpretation consistent with the Principle of Relevance. Because the less-than-literal interpretation involves only a subset of the implications of the literal interpretation, it will often be more accessible, and if it is consistent with the Principle of Relevance, it should therefore be preferred.[7]

The relevance-theoretic framework also sheds some light on when loose talk is acceptable, and to what extent. For example, the figures used by a doctor prescribing medicines, by a cartographer making a map or an engineer drawing a blueprint should be much more strictly interpreted than those used in a recipe, a tourist guide or an estimate of household expenditure. Relevance theory explains why. An utterance should be strictly understood when minute variations in the state of affairs described make a substantial difference to relevance; it should be loosely understood when minute variations in the state of affairs described have few significant consequences, and when the formulation chosen gives access to the intended implications at less processing cost than alternative, stricter formulations. In other words, what governs the choice between loose and literal talk is not truthfulness but relevance.

4 Conclusion

I have tried to show that Grice's framework, with its maxim of truthfulness, sheds little light on the interpretation of metaphor, irony and a range of further examples involving loose talk and free indirect speech. I have sketched an alternative account which makes no appeal to a maxim of truthfulness. I will end by briefly considering two further questions. First, could Griceans drop the maxim of truthfulness and incorporate some of these ideas into their framework without swallowing relevance theory whole? Second, how does relevance theory account for the fact that in many ordinary, non-figurative utterances, the speaker does commit herself to the truth of the propositions expressed and implied?

It might be thought that a Gricean could not even contemplate dropping the maxim of truthfulness, given his above remarks about its importance in his framework. In fact, as I have tried to show, on a strong interpretation of *saying*, the maxim of truthfulness has little or no pragmatic function. The important pragmatic work of identifying the speaker's commitments must be done independently, and the maxim of truthfulness merely performs the quasi-moral function of guaranteeing that these

[7]See Gibbs 1994 for discussion of this point.

commitments are genuine. If the supermaxim of Quality is seen as playing a similar role, then it too will be pragmatically redundant.

To play a genuine pragmatic role, the maxim of truthfulness must receive the second interpretation, on which it is responsible for creating speaker commitments, and is overtly violated by metaphor and irony. My claim has been that the resulting analysis of metaphor and irony creates more problems than it solves. A solution might be to abandon the maxim of truthfulness but retain the supermaxim of Quality, similarly understood as generating speaker commitments to the set of propositions that constitute the speaker's 'contribution'. This approach would be quite compatible with the relevance-theoretic analysis of loose talk, free indirect speech, metaphor and irony, which are precisely designed to allow for the fact that the proposition strictly and literally expressed in these cases is not part of the speaker's 'contribution'. The result would be a genuine explanation of why the speaker of an ordinary assertion is committed to the truth of the proposition explicitly expressed, whereas in this further range of cases she is not.

How, then, does the relevance-theoretic framework account for speaker commitment without either maxims or supermaxims of Quality? The answer lies in the notion of relevance. In order to achieve optimal relevance, an utterance must modify the hearer's existing assumptions, by providing evidence for or against them, or by adding new assumptions with some degree of strength. It follows that a speaker aiming at optimal relevance must intend her contribution to be not merely entertained by the hearer, but accepted as true or probably true. In this way, a framework with a Principle of Relevance can dispense with the Quality maxims entirely.[8]

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[8]In this paper, I have been solely concerned with the connection between relevance and truthfulness. For an account of the connection between relevance and truth, see the forthcoming Postface to the second edition of *Relevance*.

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