Begging Questions, Their Answers and Basic Cooperativity

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Abstract. We consider game-theoretic rationales for minimal cooperativity, in particular responses to questions or requests for help with false answers. Lying enables preservation of property and face for both speaker and hearer and constitutes a Pareto-optimal outcome. Rationales for this behavior include expectations of reciprocity, other-regarding, and maintenance of face.

1 Introduction

Cooperativity is a hallmark of almost every philosophical and linguistic theory of conversation. Much of this is due to the influence of Grice (1975) but also of Lewis (1969) and his work on signalling games. Typically, cooperativity, when made formally explicit in theories of conversation, entails an alignment of interests and sincere and honest cooperation among conversational participants—for instance, in Gricean cooperative conversation people should answer questions with what they believe to be true answers. We call this strong form of cooperativity \textit{Grice cooperativity} (Asher & Lascarides, 2011). Actual examination of conversations, however, shows that cooperativity is a more nuanced affair. Conversation, like all rational interaction, is driven by preferences or interests. Agents may have only partially aligned interests but nevertheless engage in basic forms of linguistic cooperativity: people tend to reciprocate greetings to strangers, ask questions when they aren’t interested in the answers, and answer questions, even when they don’t answer truthfully. These forms of interaction form the basis of rhetorical coherence in dialogue (Asher & Lascarides, 2003). The question we want to look at is, what rational principle underlies speakers’ commitment to rhetorical coherence?

To sharpen our analysis, we concentrate on one of these basic forms of linguistic exchange. What is the rationale for deciding to answer a question, and whether to answer it truthfully or not? Consider the following conversation:

(1) a. \textbf{Beggar:} Do you have any money?

b. \textbf{Passer-by:} No I don’t.
The passer-by may in fact have money; in this case it appears as though the passer-by is basic cooperative but not Grice cooperative. He is providing an answer, but not a truthful one. One might argue that this is not the case, because the beggar is not asking the question literally meant by the interrogative. The beggar's question, so the argument goes, is shorthand for:

(2) Do you have any money that you can spare?

However, we think that trying to fold the implicatures of the speech act into the question is not a useful strategy. The sense of can here is still underspecified. To be sure, if the passer-by is a well-to-do academic, then in some sense of can he has money he can spare. In either case, we think it is relatively clear that the passer-by in our situation has not answered truthfully.

There are other conversational options that the passer-by could have used. He could simply have not answered the question and walked away (which sometimes happens). He could have answered truthfully—

(3) I have some change, but I don’t want to give you any.

2 Social Dimensions of Questions and Answers

When considering the replique in (3), most people think this is not a likely or an appropriate response. But why would the interchange not go this way? The answer lies in a facet of language and linguistic usage that is not directly related to truth conditional content. According to Brown and Levinson's (1978) strategic theory of politeness, language does not have the role merely to convey or ask for propositional content. Language also serves a second role in negotiating the relationships between speakers and hearers, in particular what they call their “positive” and “negative” face. Positive face involves an agent's reputation and image from the perspective of his interlocutors, while negative face involves the agent's “distance” from his interlocutors, his freedom from constraints imposed by them on his possible actions. While these terms aren’t precisely defined, they define relatively intuitive dimensions of an agent’s social status in a community. Face is the medium through which conversational participants recognize and negotiate their partner’s potential status/ needs/ autonomy.

The problem with many speech acts is that they are inherently face-threatening. Brown and Levinson term these face-threatening acts FTA’s, and argue that the second capability of language helps us to manage situations where the face of one or more of the conversants is in jeopardy. Speakers must therefore derive an appropriate strategy by weighing their own preferences, those of the hearer, and the potential of an FTA. Politeness theory has so far concentrated on alternative dialogue actions for a given conversational turn—for example, discussing the differences in face threatening level of a question, an indirect speech act, a deferential request, or a bald command. We will apply the notion of an FTA to complex discourse acts and alternative discourse structures, by exploiting work on discourse structure.

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