**Pretending in a Language Game**[[1]](#footnote-1)

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*This paper:* Appealing to the existence of **conversational pretense** allows us to extend the traditional Gricean framework to manifestly non-cooperative conversations.

*Teaser trailer:* This is part of a broader project in which I argue that conversation is fundamentally about the appearance of the exchange of information, not necessarily information exchange itself.

1. **Orthodox Griceanism**

Traditional Gricean pragmatic explanation (GPE):

Suppose that A and B are talking. A utters some sentence that conventionally maps (in context) to the proposition *p*. A means some other proposition *q*. B recovers the fact that A means *q*.

1. How is A’s act of meaning *q*, and B’s recovery of the fact that A means *q* **possible**?
2. How is A’s act **rational**?
3. How is B’s belief about what A meant **justified**?

GPE relies on a particular chain of reasoning, *loosely* reconstructed here:

1. (It’s common knowledge that) A is rational.
2. (It’s common knowledge that) A and B share the goal of exchanging information (on some topic).
3. **Cooperativity Requirement:** If A and B share some goal *g*, then A and B are rationally required to do those things that efficiently advance *g*.
4. If A had meant *p*, then A would not have advanced the goal of exchanging information (on some topic).
5. If A had meant *p*, then A would not have been rational.

(by Cooperativity Requirement)

1. A is rational. (by 1)
2. A didn’t mean *p*.

I will ignore the further step (from 7 to “A meant *q*”) in this paper.

1. **Manifestly Non-Cooperative Conversations**

Bank dialogue

Questioner: Have you ever had a personal bank account in a Swiss bank?

Samuel: (flat tone) The company had an account

there for about six months, in Zurich.

*Implicature*: No, I never had a personal

account in a Swiss bank.

*Context:* Imagine a conversation in which it’s common knowledge that the questioner suspects that Samuel has been funneling money into a personal bank account.

*Problem:* In this context, it’s not common knowledge that

Samuel and the questioner share the goal of exchanging information (on a particulartopic). So, we can’t rely on GPE to derive the implicature.

Objection #1: In this context, Samuel doesn’t actually make

the implicature.

Objection #2: Samuel and the questioner are minimally

cooperating.

1. **My Proposal**

New discourse goal: Samuel and the questioner share the goal **of pretending to share the goal of information exchange (on a particular topic).**

What it is to pretend to *phi* is parasitic on what it is to actually *phi*. So, what is instrumental to the new goal is generally parasitic on what is instrumental to the old Gricean goal (to exchange information on a particular topic). This means that the new discourse goal allows us to preserve the general structure of GPE.

New general

discourse goal: Interlocutors share the goal of **appearing to**

**share the goal of information exchange (on a particular topic).**

They can do this sincerely (paradigm Gricean conversations) or insincerely (e.g. the courtroom case).

1. **Fun extra: Implausible Deniability and the Common Ground**

Date dialogue

Alice: (1) Do you want to get coffee?

(2) Do you want to go on a date?

Bob: Sorry, I only like you as a friend.

Alice: Oh—I didn’t mean romantically.

Bribery dialogue

Viola slips a $50 note in the pages of the reservation book. Pierre sees the note and meets Viola’s eyes.

*Indirect Bribe*

Viola: Are you sure you don’t have a table for

us?

Pierre: We don’t accept bribes here.

Viola: Excuse me?! I wanted you to double-

check whether you have a table.

*Direct Bribe*

Viola: Will you seat us in exchange for this

money?

Pierre: We don’t accept bribes here.

Viola: ?? Excuse me?! I wanted you to double-

check whether you have a table.

*Nature of the common ground:* The common ground tracks the

information that the interlocutors *appear to hold in common*, not the information they actually do hold in common

1. This handout of the paper will be available on my website for the next 24 hours. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)