

1-1-2011

Communicating Qualitative Analytical Results Following Grice's Conversational Maxims

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Recommended APA Citation

Chenail, J. S., & Chenail, R. J. (2011). Communicating Qualitative Analytical Results Following Grice's Conversational Maxims. *The Qualitative Report*, 16(1), 276-285. <https://doi.org/10.46743/2160-3715/2011.1053>

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Abstract

Conducting qualitative research can be seen as a developing communication act through which researchers engage in a variety of conversations. Articulating the results of qualitative data analysis results can be an especially challenging part of this scholarly discussion for qualitative researchers. To help guide investigators through this difficult communicative process, the authors suggest Grice's (1989) Conversational Maxims of Quantity, Quality, Relation, and Manner as general guidelines to follow when formulating and presenting findings in qualitative research products as well as basic assumptions to guide readers when judging the quality of result representations.

Keywords

Qualitative Research, Qualitative Data Analysis, and Grice's Conversational Maxims

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Acknowledgements

This paper was presented September 23, 2007, at the 8th International Interdisciplinary Advances in Qualitative Methods Conference, Banff Centre, Banff, Alberta, Canada.

Communicating Qualitative Analytical Results Following Grice's Conversational Maxims

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Conducting qualitative research can be seen as a developing communication act through which researchers engage in a variety of conversations. Articulating the results of qualitative data analysis results can be an especially challenging part of this scholarly discussion for qualitative researchers. To help guide investigators through this difficult communicative process, the authors suggest Grice's (1989) Conversational Maxims of Quantity, Quality, Relation, and Manner as general guidelines to follow when formulating and presenting findings in qualitative research products as well as basic assumptions to guide readers when judging the quality of result representations. Key Words: Qualitative Research, Qualitative Data Analysis, and Grice's Conversational Maxims

Conducting qualitative research can be seen as a developing communication act through which researchers engage in a variety of conversations. Initially researchers question scholarly communities to learn what gaps appear to exist in the published accounts regarding a certain phenomenon. As these discussions evolve investigators begin to articulate a focus to their study and a plan for carrying out the research. With a method in place, qualitative researchers then converse with research participants in the field to generate data for analysis or reflect upon their own observations of others. In the analytical steps of a project, researchers commit themselves to describing, interpreting, explaining, or criticizing the data, or more simply stated researchers attempt to say something about something. As researchers become more confident of what they are saying about the data, they may ask participants or peers to comment on the results of this communicative act. Researchers then report the results of these discussions to scholarly juries who pass judgment on the evidence. If the verdict is favorable, the results of these conversations become part of the ongoing discussion on the interrogated phenomenon and the cycle begins anew as the next researcher attempts to invigorate the talk via another line of inquiry.

Mastering the communication competencies entailed in becoming an articulate qualitative researcher takes considerable training and effort. To assist in this endeavor commentators have suggested rules or guidelines for producing and judging the process and outcome of this flow of academic discourse (e.g., Drisko, 1997; Parker, 2004; Russell & Gregory, 2003). These attempts at articulating "best practices" such as the popular Critical Appraisal Skills Programme's (CASP) *10 Questions to Help You Make Sense of*

Qualitative Research (2006) have helped to bring a sense of continuity and standards to the world of qualitative research. But the rise of such checklists have not been without its critics (e.g., Barbour, 2001) who suggest that such guides can be taken too prescriptively by researcher and reviewer alike leading to a focusing on technicalities while missing the methodological context in which these procedural choices are understood and practiced. Others argue (e.g., Sandelowski, 1998) that due to the variety of approaches to qualitative research no one style guide would hold for qualitative research in general and as result researchers “must select from an array of representational styles and formats those that best fit their research purposes, methods, and data” (Sandelowski, 1998, p. 375).

Keeping in mind qualitative research’s diversity of style and offering an alternative to methodological checklists we suggest turning to the world of linguistics for some guidance to aid researchers and reviewers in managing these series of conversations especially when formulating and presenting findings as well as when judging the quality of result representations. To this end we offer Grice’s Maxims of Conversation (1989) to serve as a rational approach to the conduct of qualitative research inquiry and to remind us that at its essence qualitative research is a conversation.

Grice’s Maxims of Conversation

Paul Grice, a philosopher and linguist, believed that conversation is a cooperative activity in which both speaker and addressee (hearer) engaged each other using the same (understood) guidelines. According to Grice the speaker intends to communicate in an understandable fashion; the addressee intends to understand that communication. In other words, both agree to do what is needed for communication.

Grice (1989) formulated these goals into one general principle and four underlying categories called maxims. Grice’s Cooperative Principle is stated: “Make your 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” (p. 26). To help readers appreciate the appropriateness of these maxims as guidelines to assist researchers in reporting their qualitative research findings, we will first present Grice’s general principle in terms of its four maxims: Quantity, Quality, Relevance and Manner and then suggest each maxim’s applicability to qualitative research.

The first maxim, the Maxim of Quantity, relates to the amount of information provided in a conversational exchange. The maxim has two sub-maxims:

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. (Grice, 1989, p. 26)

In conversation it is certainly valuable to provide enough information to the hearer without overloading the conversation with additional and unnecessary information. While the additional information may be interesting (to either speaker or hearer, or to both), it does not add to the *current* purpose of the conversational interchange.

The Maxim of Quantity can be applied to reporting research data in the following manner. Once the research question to be answered has been decided upon, the

researcher, taking the position of “speaker,” must provide enough information *as is required for understanding* to the reader (the audience for whom the report is given). At the same time, the researcher must question any data that may be “more informative than is required” for the current purpose. The researcher must remain aware that the reader/audience will try to assimilate the data provided into a comprehensible communication. Unnecessary data will confuse the reader and lead him or her from the main research question. The responsible researcher tries to keep the data pertinent and informative, keeping in mind that additional data may not only confuse the reader but may also mislead the reader into thinking that there is a reason why the data have been included in the report.

The second guideline is the Maxim of Quality. The primary maxim is “Try to make your contribution one that is true.” Grice (1989) divided this into two sub-maxims:

1. Do not say what you believe to be false.
2. Do not say that for which you lack adequate evidence. (p. 26)

For most conversations, the speaker and hearer rely upon the cooperative nature of truthfulness, in which each believes that the other is saying that which is truthful. Of course, there are conversations in which either the speaker is deliberately false or the hearer does not believe the speaker is speaking truthfully. However, we will not address these types of conversations and will consider them special situations where the primary intent is not communication but some other need (self-interest, as an example).

As researchers, we hope that we have found some “truth” in our data and findings and that this “truth” needs to be reported to others. Researchers do not normally desire to report false data. It is more likely that the second sub-maxim may not be followed (“Do not say that for which you lack adequate evidence.”). Researchers must be careful not to report a finding for which there is not adequate evidence. Is there enough evidence to support each finding or conclusion? As a researcher following this maxim it would be important to ask yourself if the data are sufficient to sustain each finding. This maxim also suggests that the burden of adequate evidence falls upon the researcher, as the reader/audience has no input on the data or the lack of data.

The Maxim of Relation is brief: “Be relevant” (Grice, 1989, p. 27). In conversation, each conversational turn must be related to the previous turn. It would also hold in conversation that the speaker and hearer may agree to change the relevant focus of the conversation. Relevance is not maintained if only the speaker or if only the hearer desires to change the focus.

From the perspective of Grice’s Relation Maxim, when reporting research findings, the researcher would control the relevance of the findings. The researcher must be careful to maintain relevance to the research question, the method of collecting data, the decisions made in organizing and reporting the data, and in determining the findings, conclusions, and implications. It is difficult to change the focus of relevance in a written report since the researcher/writer cannot obtain the agreement of the reader. Consequently, as the researcher develops the report, the researcher must keep the focus unified and relevant. That which is not relevant to the report being written must be set aside.

The fourth and final Maxim, that of Manner, is different from the other maxims previously discussed. The Maxim of Manner does not focus on *what* is said; instead, it looks at *how* a statement is to be said. Grice (1989) proposed a super-maxim for Manner: “Be perspicuous” (p. 27). In simpler words, Grice with this maxim suggests a statement should be clearly expressed and easily understood. There are four sub-maxims under Manner:

1. Avoid obscurity of expression.
2. Avoid ambiguity.
3. Be brief (avoid unnecessary prolixity).
4. Be orderly. (p. 27)

Grice himself suggested that there might be other Maxims of Manner, such as “‘Be polite’ that are also observed by participants in talk exchanges” (Grice, 1989, p. 27). In this discussion we will only consider the basic four sub-maxims since politeness is usually not an issue in reporting research findings.

In conversation, if the speaker’s talk is full of obscure expressions or is ambiguous, the talk would not be satisfactory, but the hearer has a possibility of asking for clarification. Without such clarification, the hearer may neither understand the obscure expressions nor be able to discern the truthfulness of the exchange if it is ambiguous. In reporting results from a study, it would also be crucial for the researcher/writer to consider the readership of the report being developed and avoid language that may be obscure, arcane or too technical. The researcher should be aware of ambiguous terms and strive to use language which is clear.

The third sub-maxim “Be brief” is powerful in its simplicity. If a talk interchange is satisfactory and the speaker is understood, wordiness is not required to get the message communicated. It would also hold for researchers that the reporting of research data does not require undue prolixity. The researcher/writer must continue to review the research question throughout the report development process. If the research question has been answered, if sufficient and “truthful” or adequate evidence has been provided for the research question, and if all finding and conclusions are directly relevant to the research question, then nothing further is required.

“Be orderly”, the fourth sub-maxim under Manner, may seem to be an obvious guideline to many who are reading this paper. Organization is at the heart of talk exchanges and of good writing. A speaker knows to put his or her thoughts in order, particularly when trying to persuade or convince another. The speaker’s organization should be logical and fit the topic and purpose of the talk. As writers, qualitative researchers may have to organize the report along established formats such as with a thesis, dissertation, or journal article. Within these formats, however, researchers may need to further organize their report with the use of inductive or deductive reasoning, time or spatial ordering, or by some other organizing method. Research findings may not be understood if presented in a random or haphazard fashion. It requires an orderly manner.

A Gricean Approach for Communicating Qualitative Analytical Results

As intended with their application to any conversation, the Gricean Maxims present qualitative researchers discussing their findings a general set of guidelines from which to organize and judge their output. In doing so we hold that qualitative researchers and their readers would be well served if researchers would attend to issues of quantity, quality, relation, and manner in all of their conversations regarding the presentation of the results of their inquiries. As with most theoretical propositions, the challenge is putting simple, straightforward prescriptions into practice. To aid in bringing the ideal realm into the real world, we have formulated a series of suggestions informed by the Gricean Maxims to help researchers improve how they form, present, and evaluate their qualitative analysis results and assist reviewers, editors and readers in their assessment of this process and outcome.

In performing this exercise we will focus our discussion on the type of qualitative research called “qualitative description” (Sandelowski, 2000) or what others refer to as “generic qualitative research” (Caelli, Ray, & Mill, 2003). This “basic or fundamental” (Sandelowski, 2000, p. 335) style of qualitative research “entails the presentation of the facts of the case in everyday language” (Sandelowski, 2000, p. 336) and “is especially amenable to obtaining straight and largely unadorned (i.e., minimally theorized or otherwise transformed or spun) answers to questions of special relevance to practitioners and policy makers” (p. 337).

Employing some type of qualitative content analysis, researchers using a qualitative description methodology produce a “straight descriptive summary of the informational contents of data organized in a way that best fits the data” (Sandelowski, 2000, pp. 338-339). In presenting the results of their content analysis, these researchers typically draw distinctions in the form of themes or categories to mark significant patterns found or discerned in the data. In turn these themes and categories are presented with their supporting exemplars so the researchers can illuminate these critical distinctions within and between the categories and themes.

Due to a lack of specific guidelines found with the “designer” methodologies such as phenomenology (Colaizzi, 1978), grounded theory (Glaser & Strauss, 1967), or ethnography (Spradley, 1979), there is great latitude with how the evidence is derived and shared (Chenail, 1995; Sandelowski, 1998) in the generic or qualitative description approaches. This diversity can also make the process of reviewing and critiquing such accounts difficult to accomplish. Because of this freedom of expression, we hold having some basic maxims upon which to call can aid in the daunting challenge of creating and communicating categories or themes (Constas, 1992), can also improve the quality of qualitative description reports, and can serve as an aid to those readers critically assessing the output of this process.

Maxim of Quantity

Grice’s Maxim of Quantity asks speakers to reach a “happy medium” between saying too much or too little in a conversation so recipients in the discussion are given enough information to understand the point being made without having to weigh through unnecessary words (Cruse, 2006, p. 101). Adopting this logic to the presentation of

categories or themes, it would then make sense for the researchers to share enough information so that readers can grasp the essence of the category's meaning as well as to learn what makes the category unique from the other categories being presented. In doing so the researcher would spare the reader from having to read through extraneous material which adds little or no value to the description and explanation of a category or theme. In following the Maxim of Quantity, researchers should ask themselves if the account of the category is as informative as necessary so a naïve reader can grasp the meaning of the distinction being drawn while challenging themselves to review each passage to see if any portion can be stricken to remove exuberant discourse that is unnecessary. This maxim would be especially important for authors trying to craft a journal article from a doctoral dissertation. A simple cutting and pasting approach would not guarantee that the category or theme representations in the paper are as trim and efficient as they should be if the Maxim of Quantity is followed.

Maxim of Quality

Grice's Maxim of Quality asks speakers to tell the truth by adopting two notions of quality as a default position in conversations and to "not depart without good reason" from this practice (Cruse, 2006, p. 101). For qualitative researchers it would hold that professional and ethical practice requires that research reports do not contain false statements regarding the participants' contributions and claims for which there is not adequate evidence.

In order to transparently adhere to this maxim it is critical for researchers to present evidence clearly supporting claims being made in the Findings and Discussion sections and to present exemplars that support every aspect of a purported category or theme and explain how the evidence provided supports the depth and breadth of each category or theme. In support of the Maxim of Quality it would also be important for researchers to share evidence that the integrity of the categories or themes and their respective exemplars has been ensured via a quality control activity (e.g., member checking, peer review, intensive or extensive exposure to the phenomenon). Lastly, researchers should share limitations where evidence is less than adequate and to employ hedging or hesitant language in making such claims so as to alert the reader that such findings are to be understood within in a cautious and restrained context (Chenail, Duffy, St. George, & Wulff, 2009; Holliday, 2007) which coheres well with the interpretive and descriptive nature of qualitative research approaches.

Maxim of Relation

Grice's Maxim of Relation is a straight-forward directive that acknowledges that although a statement may be truthful, its place in a conversation is in question unless the utterance can be shown to be relevant to the ongoing discussion. In other words, what is stated "must connect suitably with the rest of the conversation" (Cruse, 2006, p. 102).

To adhere to the Maxim of Relation, researchers should clearly state the relevance of the themes or categories to the focus of the research question guiding the inquiry. If a theme does not speak to the essence of the research question, then the researcher should most likely leave that extraneous categorization out of that particular research account. In

the same spirit, researchers should also describe the relevance of each exemplar to its respective theme or category. In a similar manner it would also be helpful if researchers made it overt how categories or themes related to each other and how exemplars within each category or theme were associated with other shared examples.

Maxim of Manner

Grice's Maxim of Manner suggests a particular etiquette when engaging in conversation. To this end if researchers wish to avoid obscurity of expression, they should state the meaning of the theme in everyday language. If specialized language is used, then supply an explanation so a non-expert could understand it. Researchers should also use examples to make the obscure concept or wording more understandable. To avoid ambiguity, researchers should state the meaning of each theme or category, provide exemplars for each category or theme, and explain how these examples clearly support the assertions being made as to the meaning of the theme or category. In the spirit of being brief, researchers should present the definition of each theme or category in a succinct manner and include exemplary quotes of sufficient length to provide clear evidence without overburdening the reader with extraneous information. In addition, the researchers should connect only the critical meaning of the exemplar's evidence to the essence of the theme or category. In the pursuit of being orderly, the researcher should develop a strategy for the order in which themes or categories and their respective exemplars are presented. To this end, researchers should describe the strategy and demonstrate that they indeed adhered to the strategy in reporting the results.

Some linguists observe that the Maxims of Quantity, Quality, and Relation can be combined into one maxim: "Make the strongest statement that can relevantly be made that is justifiable by your evidence" (Cruse, 2006, p. 102). We concur with this observation and would take it one step further by also combining the Maxim of Manner and suggest *qualitative researchers represent the results of their analyses by making the strongest statements that can relevantly be made and that are justifiable by the evidence while employing a clear, unambiguous, brief, and orderly style*. Furthermore, we encourage researchers to adopt this mission statement and adhere to it throughout the researching endeavor to ensure integrity and quality.

Discussion

Although we concentrated on applying the maxims to basic or fundamental qualitative description this choice on our part does not mean that we do not think utilizing these guidelines when conducting the designer or name-brand qualitative methodologies like grounded theory, ethnography, or phenomenology would be valuable. On the contrary, we enthusiastically encourage qualitative researchers to consider the maxims when engaging in all types of qualitative inquiry including those methodologies which besides providing information also favor performance, reformation, or transformation.

In considering the usefulness of these maxims we also think researchers would be well-suited to follow Grice's guidelines when engaging research participants in activities such as member checking or with colleagues in peer debriefing. Paying attention to the quantity, quality, relevance, and manner of the materials shared with the others should

make the experience of reviewing this information a more pleasant experience for them and potentially more useful to researchers. In this spirit we suggest researchers convert the maxims into a brief checklist when calling on others to provide feedback like in the following example.

As you read over the materials I have provided to you, please use the following questions to help you check the quantity, quality, importance, and organization of the information.

1. Do you find the material presented in this report to be informative from your perspective as a participant in this study? Yes or No; if no, then please note those instances where you find the material not being informative or helpful to you and make any comments or suggestions you wish.
2. Do you find any of the information presented to be unnecessary in order for you to understand the perspectives of the research participants or what I was trying to say in the report? Yes or no; if no, then please note those instances where you thought the information was not required and possibly redundant and make any comments or suggestions you wish.
3. Do you think any of the information is false or misleading? Yes or No; if yes, then please note those instances and explain what you find problematic with the material as well as making any comments or suggestions you wish.
4. Do find that any of the observations or conclusions I make in the material lack adequate evidence to support my ideas? Yes or No; if yes, then please note those passages and make any comments or suggestions you wish.
5. Do you find the material presented to be appropriate to the focus of the research question and relevant to your experiences? Yes or No; if no, then please note those instances where the appropriateness or relevance was not clear and make any comments or suggestions you wish.
6. Do you find the meaning of any words I used in the report to be unclear or obscure? Yes or No; if yes, then please note of these instances and make any comments or suggestions you wish.
7. Do you find any of the portions of the report to be ambiguous or too vague so you could not understand what I was trying to say? Yes or No; if yes, then please note these instances and make any comments or suggestions you wish.
8. Do you find any of the sections of the report to be too wordy or to contain redundant material? Yes or No; if yes, then please note these instances and make any comments or suggestions you wish.
9. Do you find the organization of the materials to be clear and easy to follow or did you find its flow to be disorderly or confusing? If you find the material to be unorganized, please note these instances and make any comments or suggestions you wish.
10. These Gricean-informed questions could also be used by faculty, reviewers, editors, and general readers to assess the quality of a research account and to focus their feedback to an author.

As with applying Grice's Maxims to everyday conversations, we find that there are limitations to their application to communicating research findings. For example, just as some linguists challenge the universality of Grice's maxims from a cross-cultural perspective (e.g., Wierzbicka, 2003) the same concern would also seem to hold when considering qualitative research output. For instance, what might constitute brevity of academic expression in one culture could be seen as being overly wordy or indulgent in another cultural context. The same cultural differences may also apply to what comprises an orderly structure of a research presentation. Given these concerns we suggest when using the Gricean Maxims that the methodological, disciplinary, cultural, and professional contexts of the writer and reader alike always be considered and applied appropriately.

Lastly, in applying Grice's Maxims to the construction and criticism of qualitative research accounts we remind the readers that the maxims were never intended to be rules of pure convention (Cruse, 2006), but rather "rules of conversational conduct that people do their best to follow" (p. 101). Having said that, linguists also understand that speakers even when generally trying to follow the maxims will find instances when it makes sense for them to bend and even flout the rules (Cruse). In such cases the conversationalists still find a way to understand each other even though the rules have not been followed to the letter. Following this tradition of practice, we encourage researchers and reviewers to consider Grice's Maxims seriously when participating in their qualitative research-focused interactions, but also to be playful with the guidelines and bend them on those occasions when the conditions suggest such flexibility is needed.

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This paper was presented September 23, 2007, at the 8th International Interdisciplinary Advances in Qualitative Methods Conference, Banff Centre, Banff, Alberta, Canada.

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Article Citation

Chenail, J. S., & Chenail, R. J. (2011). Communicating qualitative analytical results following Grice's conversational maxims. *The Qualitative Report*, 16(1), 276-285. Retrieved from <http://www.nova.edu/ssss/QR/QR16-1/grice.pdf>