Beyond basic grammar: Connections with the real world

Conversational postulates (Grice)

In 1967 (published in 1975) Grice wrote about the "rules of conversation". The rules are, of course, not really rules at all but rather are a set of conventions that can be used to characterize the interaction which takes place during a conversation.

Grice (1967; 1975xxx)

Rules of conversation:
1. Quantity: Be as informative as required.
   Be no more informative than required.
2. Quality: Say only what you believe to be true.
3. Relevance: Be relevant.
   Don't be ambiguous.
   Don't be obscure.
   Be succinct.

Of course, Grice's rules seem to characterize an ideal conversation in which the sole objective is the transfer of information. As Lakoff pointed out in one of her articles, the transfer of information is often secondary to what I would term "phatic" communication—politeness, making the other person feel good, building and maintaining bonds, etc. Thus, when there is a conflict between information transfer and politeness, politeness often wins out.

A psychiatrist's transcript (Bandler and Grinder)

Generalization

There is a very real sense in which it can be said that we do not act in response to the ‘real’, but instead we act in response to our own personalized models of the real world. As long as there is a fairly close match between our idealized perception of reality and ‘reality’, the fact that we act on the basis of our own idealized perceptions causes no intolerable problems. However, when for whatever reasons, our idealized perceptions of reality do not match well with the actual facts, there is considerable potential for trouble. When we create our own models of the world it is through a process of generalization. However, the same process of generalization that creates a manageable model of the world at the same time creates a somewhat impoverished model. That is our generalized model may lack the full detail and full richness of our experiences. Since we often react not on the basis of our experiences in the real world but on the basis of our own generalizations about our experiences, an overly and misleadingly generalized model may cause us problems. For instance, the specific experience “Lois doesn't like me” may generalize to “Women don't like me.” (p. 80-82)

In therapy, the purpose of challenging the client's generalizations is to:

1. Re-connect the client's model with his experience.
2. Reduce the insurmountable obstacles which result from overgeneralizations by replacing these with more specific, more definite experiences which can be coped with.
3. Provide a model with more detail, more richness, and more options, thus creating choices for the client which were previously "unthinkable".

The process of clarifying the client's model naturally precedes the process of challenging the model. This process of clarification involves (1) replacing generalizations with specifics that is, replacing terms which have no specific, real world referent with terms possessing a referent in the real world and (2) making statements (and thus the model) less vague through asking the client to specify information that was left unspecified.

What is of interest to us as students of language is not the therapy itself—that is beyond the scope of the class and, I might add, beyond the expertise of the instructor—but rather the insights that the materials provide into how we use (and misuse) language. Using the material below, we intend to deal with the following topics:

1. Referentiality.
2. Mind reading.
3. Presuppositions.
4. Deletions: Restoring the "missing" parts.

1. Terms without a clear referent.

Referential or not. Sometimes the terms we use do not refer to actual entities in the real world; instead, the terms are being used to talk about not our experiences but about our mental model of the world. At other times, the reference is simply too vague to be understood without further clarification. In the material below, sometimes the therapist is able to connect the non-referential terms with referents in the real world.
Examine the underlined words in the following sentences. Notice that some of these are generalizations which have no real world referent. These terms need to be replaced by terms that have a referent in the real world. Other terms (or phrases) are so vague that it is not clear whether they lack a real world referent or if the reference to the real world is just too vague to allow identification. In either case, further specification of the term may be called for.

(1) Nobody pays any attention to what I say.
(2) I always avoid situations I feel uncomfortable in.
(3) I like dogs that are friendly.
(4) I saw my mother-in-law yesterday.
(5) One should respect others' feelings.
(6) It's painful for us to see her this way, you know.
(7) Let's not get bogged down in details.
(8) There's a certain feeling in this room.
(9) Everybody feels that way sometimes.

[Answers: 1. Nobody and what have no referent. 2. The referent for situations I feel uncomfortable in is unclear. 3. Dogs that are friendly has no referent. 4. Both I and my mother-in-law have a referent. 5. One, others', and feelings have no referent. 6. It, us, and this way are unclear in one way or another. 7. Details has no referent. 8. A certain feeling does not have a clear referent. 9. Everybody and sometimes lack a real world referent, while that way is unclear.]

2. Mind reading

Mind reading. Sometimes we report as real, things that we cannot possibly know except indirectly, particularly when reporting how others feel about things. Such reports are often little more than mind reading.

Bandler and Grinder have an interesting category of verbs they term 'mind reading' verbs. These verbs "involve the belief on the part of the speaker that one person can know what another person is thinking and feeling without a direct communication on the part of the second person" (p104).

(211) Everybody in the group thinks that I'm taking up too much time.

Notice that the speaker claims to know what everyone in the group thinks. The question now becomes whether this claim is based on something knowable or whether the speaker just "knows".

Bandler and Grinder then offer the following examples, instructing the reader to decide which sentences involve "mind reading" and which are directly observable.

(212) Henry is angry at me.
(213) Martha touched me on the shoulder.
(214) I'm sure she liked your present.
(215) John told me he was angry.
(216) I know what makes him happy.
(217) I know what's best for you.
(218) You know what I'm trying to say.
(219) You can see how I feel.
In addition to these, there are also certain other common structures that presuppose that some other person is able to read the speaker's mind.

(220) If she loved me, she would always do what I would like her to do.
(221) I'm disappointed that you didn't take my feelings into account.

3. Presuppositions

Presuppositions. Certain sentences presuppose certain things about the structure of the world. The classic example is the question 'Have you stopped beating your wife?' You are only slightly better off answering yes than answering no, because in either case the sentence presupposes that you at least one time beat your wife.

Exercise: Attempt to discover what the sentences below presuppose.

1. I realize that my husband doesn't love me.
2. I'm afraid that my son is going to turn out to be as lazy as my husband.
3. If you are going to be as unreasonable as you were last time we discussed this, then let's skip it.
4. If Judy has to be so possessive, then I'd rather not be involved with her.
5. If Boyd enjoyed my company, he wouldn't have left so early.
6. If you knew how much I suffered, you wouldn't act this way. (3 interesting presuppositions; I suffer and two others)
7. Since my problem is trivial, I'd rather not take up valuable group time.

4. Deletions: Restoring what's missing

Deletions. Sometimes we leave out part of the sentence, a part that gives crucial information about what is going on. For example, let's take a sentence which I occasionally hear in one form or another This is too difficult. Notice that the sentence is incomplete in the sense of too difficult for who? For the speaker? For the whole class? For the instructor? It is not too difficult in general as I no longer have trouble with it. So the sentence as spoken is underspecified.

As another example, take a sentence like Women are impossible to get along with. Like the previous example this sentence is underspecified. For who? Once the sentence is made a little more specific, it becomes much clearer where the problem lies.

Exercise. Attempt to discover what has been deleted in the sentences below. Occasionally, the number of deletions has been indicated after the sentence.

1. I'm scared.
2. I have a problem.
3. I'm interested in continuing this discussion.
4. I'm upset.
5. I talked to a man who was bored.  
   (2 deletions; 1 with talked, 1 with bored)
6. I hoped to see my parents.  (0)
7. You're disturbing.  (1)
8. My husband claimed he was frightened.  (2)
9. You always talk as though you're mad.  
10. My brother swears that my parents can't cope.  
11. Everybody knows that you can't win.  
12. I laughed at the irritating man.  
13. You always present stupid examples.  (2)
14. Running away doesn't help.  (3)
15. This exercise is boring.  
16. Communicating is hard for me.

The transcript

"Transcript 1," the transcript below consists of the verbal interaction between Ralph, the client, and the therapist. The whole of the actual interaction in the transcript has been duplicated below, but the commentary represents my own recasting of the commentary—changing how the original commentary was phrased but changing little of the essence of the original. The recasting was necessitated because the terminology used in the commentary on the transcript had been set up by the preceding 112 pages of text. Thus, the commentary has been recast for those who have not read this material.

[Note: The recasting loses some of the precision and some of the detail found in the original. In this sense as well as other senses, it is thus a poor substitute for the original.]

"Ralph is 34 years old and works as an assistant manager of a division of a large electronics firm. The client was asked what he hoped to get out of the interview and began:"

(1)  Ralph: Well...I'm really not sure...
       The sentence 'I'm not sure...' is incomplete. Specifically, the word sure implies the existence of something that Ralph is unsure about.

(2)  Therapist: You're not sure of what?
       The therapist tries to find out what Ralph is not sure about.

(3)  Ralph: I'm not sure that
       this will be helpful.
       It is not clear what this refers to. The verb will be helpful is incomplete in two ways: helpful to whom? and helpful for what purpose?

(4)  Therapist: You're not sure what, specifically, will be helpful to whom?
The therapist tries to get a clarification of both incomplete parts of the verb will be helpful.

(5) Ralph: Well, I'm not sure that this experiment will be helpful. You see, when I first went to Dr. G., he asked me if I'd be willing to participate in this experiment,...and well, I feel that there's something I really need help with but this is just an experiment.

(6) Therapist: How will this just being an experiment prevent you from getting the help you need?

(7) Ralph: Experiments are for research, but there's something I really need help with.

(8) Therapist: What, specifically, do you really need help with?

(9) Ralph: I don't know how to make a good impression on people.

(10) Therapist: Let me see if I understand you - you are saying that this being just an experiment will necessarily prevent you from finding out how to make a good impression on people. Is that true?

(11) Ralph: Well...I'm not really sure...

(12) Therapist: (interrupting) Well, are you willing to find out?

(13) Ralph: Yeah, o.k.

(14) Therapist: Who, specifically, don't you know how to make a good impression on?

(15) Ralph: Well, nobody.

(16) Therapist: Nobody? Can you think of anybody on whom you have ever made a good impression?

(17) Ralph: Ah, mmm.... yeah, well, some people, but...

(18) Therapist: Now, then, whom, specifically, don't you know how to make a good impression on?

(19) Ralph: ...I guess what I have been trying to say is that women don't like me.

(20) Therapist: Which woman, specifically?

(21) Ralph: Most women I meet.

(22) Therapist: Which woman, specifically?

(23) Ralph: Well, most women really... but as you said that, I just started to think about this one woman—Janet.

(24) Therapist: Who's Janet?
Ralph: She's this woman I just met at work.

Therapist: Now, how do you know you didn't make a good impression on Janet?

Ralph: Well, I just know...

Therapist: How, specifically, do you know?

Ralph: She just didn't like me.

Therapist: How, specifically, do you know that Janet didn't like you?

Ralph: She wasn't interested in me.

Therapist: Interested in what way?

Ralph: She didn't pay attention to me.

Therapist: How didn't she pay attention to you?

Ralph: She didn't look at me.

Therapist: Let me see if I understand this. You know that Janet wasn't interested in you because she didn't look at you?

Ralph: That's right!

Therapist: Is there any way you could imagine Janet not looking at you and her still being interested in you?

Ralph: Well...I don't know...

Therapist: Do you always look at everyone you're interested in?

Ralph: I guess...not always. But just because Janet is interested in me doesn't mean that she likes me.

Therapist: How, specifically, do you know that she doesn't like you?

Ralph: She doesn't listen to me.

Therapist: How, specifically, do you know that she doesn't listen to you?

Ralph: Well, she doesn't ever look at me (beginning to get angry). You know how women are! They never let you know if they notice you.

Therapist: Like who, specifically?

Ralph: (angry) Like my mother...ah, God damn it! She never was interested in me.
Therapist: How do you know that your mother was never interested in you?

Ralph: Every time I tried to show her that I cared about her, she never noticed it (begins to sob)...why didn't she notice?

Therapist: How, specifically, did you try to show her that you cared about her?

Ralph: (sobbing softly) Like all the time I used to come home from school and do things for her.

Therapist: What things, specifically, did you do for her?

Ralph: Well, I always used to clean up the living room and wash the dishes... and she never noticed...and never said anything.

Therapist: Ralph, does your mother's not saying anything to you about what you used to do mean that she never noticed what you had done?

Ralph: Yeah, since she never noticed what I did for her, she wasn't interested in me.

Therapist: Let me get this straight: you're saying that your mother's not noticing what you did for her means that she wasn't interested in you?

Ralph: Yes, that's right.

Therapist: Ralph, have you ever had the experience of someone's doing something for you and you didn't notice until after they pointed it out to you?

Ralph: Well..., yeah, I remember one time...

Therapist: Did you not notice what they had done for you because you weren't interested in them?

Ralph: No, I just didn't notice...

Therapist: Ralph, can you imagine that your mother just didn't notice when...

Ralph: No, it's not the same.

Therapist: It? What's not the same as what?

Ralph: My not noticing is not the same as my mother not noticing - see, she NEVER noticed what I did for her.

Therapist: Never?

Ralph: Well, not very many times.

Therapist: Ralph, tell me about one specific time when your mother noticed what you had done for her.
(69) Ralph: Well, once when...yeah (angrily), I even had to tell her.

(70) Therapist: Had to tell her what?

(71) Ralph: That I had done this thing for her. If she had been interested enough she would have noticed it herself.

(72) Therapist: Interested enough for what?

(73) Ralph: Interested enough to show me that she loved me.

(74) Therapist: Ralph, how did you show your mother that you loved her?

(75) Ralph: By doing things for her.

(76) Therapist: Ralph, did your mother ever do things for you?

(77) Ralph: Yes, but she never really...never let me know for sure.

(78) Therapist: Never let you know what?

(79) Ralph: She never let me know for sure if she really loved me (still sobbing softly).

(80) Therapist: Did you ever let her know for sure that you loved her?

(81) Ralph: She knew...

(82) Therapist: How do you know that she knew?

(83) Ralph: I...I...I guess I don't.

(84) Therapist: What prevents you from telling her?

(85) Ralph: ummm...ummm, maybe nothing.

(86) Therapist: MAYBE?

(87) Ralph: I guess I could.

(88) Therapist: Ralph, do you guess you could tell Janet how you feel about her?

(89) Ralph: That's a little scary.

(90) Therapist: What's a little scary?

(91) Ralph: That I could just go up and tell her.

(92) Therapist: What stops you?
(93) Ralph: Nothing, that's what's so scary. (laughing)