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The Model of Conversational Cooperation and Public Debates

Abstract: This article posits a new dichotomy between conditions of possibility of public debates (rules that a speaker is acquainted with before engaging in a public debate and that enable its inception) and conditions of reality of public debates (rules that are intrinsic to the proper unfolding of a debate and which, when flouted, lead it to a deadlock). We argue that Grice's conversational maxims can be a condition of possibility of public debates, and we focus on how their observance positively impacts debates, on how such maxims operate in the proper unfolding of public debates and on what slippages could occur. Our research findings support the applicability of the Gricean model to public debates, as an explanatory tool to unpack their specific discursive mechanisms.

Keywords: public debates, conditions of possibility, conditions of reality, cooperative principle, conversational maxims.

1. How are public debates possible?

The answer to the question "how is a public debate possible?" – a question that almost automatically calls to mind the Kantian precautions concerning the understanding of knowledge – can circumscribe an inquiry into the *conditions of possibility* of certain discursive constructions of this type. When these conditions are not met, the whole system (the public debate) would be jeopardized from the point of view of its existence and of its natural unfolding, either at the level of all its constituent parts, or only at the level of some of them. It is noteworthy that irrespective of how these slippages manifest themselves, under these circumstances, public debates cease to have any ground to at least aspire towards being considered

a significant moment in the attempt to approach the ideal.

The conditions of possibility must be differentiated from the *conditions of reality*. It may be that this distinction that we are just about to institute seems a sought-for subtlety rather than a necessity of clear and distinct knowledge of a phenomenon. From our point of view, this potential criticism is not valid. The conditions of possibility refer to that "a-perceptive given" that all participants in a debate must agree on and that they have to internalize as norms of discursive behaviour, so that a discursive act of this type can unfold. In fact, these pre-conditions constitute the minimal normative framework of a public debate (compulsorily) joined by anyone who wishes to participate in it (and is accepted as a participant), as a necessary condition for the proper unfolding of the discursive act. For instance, the rule according to which the only means to

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persuade the others is to produce and manage proofs is a rule that is part of the conditions of possibility of a public debate. Each participant must be aware that he or she may take the floor in a debate in order to express arguments and not to offend, scold, be ironical or make personal allusions etc. The latter procedures constitute, in fact, factors that distance public debates from what they should be. Consequently, the conditions of possibility constitute a set of rules or norms that potential participants are acquainted with prior to the actual unfolding of the public debate: if they agree to them, then they are potential participants; if they do not, they are not participants.

The conditions of reality of a public debate are constituted by the set of rules that all participants must observe and that pertain to the internal mechanisms of the practical unfolding of a discursive intervention of this type. For instance, the rule according to which each participant must use the strongest proofs (if we can institute such a rule) concerns the practical way in which a critical discussion unfolds (the force of a proof is determined by the context, the opponent's proofs etc.) and it cannot be imposed as a pre-condition to all participants (each participant organizes his or her strategy according to their own criteria). A series of elementary rationality norms, which are easier to grasp when they are flouted (avoidance of contradictions, preservation of the identity of the thesis, preservation of the same meanings for the terms used) or of discursive norms (the precise reception of the opponent's point of view, avoidance of its intentional alteration) can make up a well determined set of requirements that constitute the substance of the conditions of reality of public debates.

Let us highlight one point here: the distinction between a public debate's conditions of possibility and conditions of reality is far from having an absolute character, i.e. it does not stand under the sign of exclusiveness. Some requirements that we see as rather populating the sphere of conditions of possibility could, in other contexts, be ranked, without too much hesitation, in the area of conditions of reality. The same holds true the other way round. For instance, the rule "let us avoid to be equivocal in critical discussions with interlocutors", which can be easily considered a condition of possibility of the dialogue between interlocutors (one cannot initiate a debate if the interlocutors are deliberately equivocal in their statements), could be easily registered in the sphere of conditions of reality, more precisely in the area of norms of practical language use when we are in dialogue with the others. Similarly, some people would be tempted (and not totally without good reasons) to consider the norm "let us not contradict ourselves in our statements during a debate" - which is ranked, as we have already seen, with conditions of reality, - a pre-condition of the unfolding of the discursive action as such.

In our opinion, this is a matter of *dominating tonality* of the norm vis-à-vis the natural unfolding of public debates: if a certain condition is one without which one cannot initiate a public debate, then it is part of the set of possibilities; if it is a condition without which one can initiate the discursive action but one stumbles during the process of its unfolding unless it is observed, then it will be ranked with conditions of reality.

The subtlety and even the depth of such a distinction – in which we believe without reserve – are also highlighted by the mutual passage from one class to

another through their minimal rearrangements. For instance, the rule "it is necessary to argue in the dialogical relations of a debate" is an element of the conditions of possibility of public debates, while the rule "it is necessary to argue well in the dialogical relations of a debate" is unequivocally ranked under conditions of reality. One cannot ask a participant, as a pre-condition, to argue well, but only to argue! If he or she has entered the game, then he or she will be imperatively required (by the other participants who will criticize him or her) to argue well (i.e. correctly) and not only to simply argue.

2. The principle of cooperation and conversational maxims

We are interested, in our investigation into the concept of public debate, to practically identify the conditions of possibility of this discursive construction. Our starting point is the *model of conversational cooperation*, proposed by Herbert Paul Grice (1996; 1980) – a model that has been heavily discussed and analysed in linguistics and discourse studies. Grice stars from a relatively simple observation, that had been a contended topic especially in the last century of development of logical investigations, namely the "meaning gap" between the formalized language of Logic and its expression by means of equivalent terms in natural language. Experts know quite precisely what is understood by signs such as „&", "v", „→", yet they find it hard to approximate this understanding via terms such as "and", "or", "if,…, then". This is, as Grice himself pointed out, the old dispute that pits "formalists", on the one side, against "informalists", on the other side, and that, probably, will not cease too soon, without

great losses for the knowledge and use of various types of languages.

If our understanding of Grice's investigation and results is correct, his intention was to show that this gap – certainly overemphasized by each side by highlighting (seemingly, more than they should have) the virtues of their own option – is only apparent; it is the result of a "banal confusion", a regrettable one, of course, but one that is responsible for so much effort that could have been channeled for more significant results somewhere else. It is possible – this is what we take Grice's unstated conclusion to be – to bring natural language and its expressions used in common talk to the same precision of understanding as that of logical symbols. How could this be achieved? By observing an essential condition: to pay attention to norms that the exercise of common talk with the others must observe. The perfect form of this common talk with the others is called *conversation*.

The central concept that orders these conditions is that of *implicature*[1]. This concept reiterates one idea – which is not an element of novelty introduced by Grice's text - that in many situations, when an individual makes a statement, it

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[1] The French translation of Grice's text uses the equivalent term *implicitation*, an ad-hoc construction that does not even exist in the most frequently used dictionaries (Larousse, Hachette), with the following note regarding this option: „Nous traduisons *implicature* par implicitation, *implicate* par impliciter et *implicatum* par implicat: impliciter nous semblant corriger avec raison ce que impliquer pouvoir avoir d'assertif, en y encluant l'idée de présupposition" („We translate *implicature* by implicitation, *implicate* by impliciter and *implicatum* by implicat: impliciter seems to us to properly correct what impliquer could have of an assertive notion, by including the idea of presupposition" [our translation] (H. P. Grice, „Logique et converstion", Communications, 30, 1980, p. 59);

comes with a plethora of "alluviums", beyond the standard meaning that has become naturalized by use. The idea of implicature refers to all that a word or a combination of words could unearth in a well determined context of use[2], beyond the usual meaning. In Grice's words, the idea of implicature refers to "that which is insinuated", "that which would be left to be understood", "that which would be intended to be said" via what is being said in fact. In our verbal exchanges with the others, we are almost always tempted to think that they insinuate something through what they say, that they would like to make us understand something else than what they say or that they even would like to say something else than what they are saying. We make cognitive efforts to decipher such subtleties of the exteriorized thought. Undoubtedly, our interlocutors do the same.

Grice's examples are illustrative. We shall not resort to them because we can find plenty of other examples close at hand. Let us analyse Caragiale's statement about an anonymous fellow writer:

> "May God forgive him for all his verse and prose with which he enriched our young literature."

We can easily notice that the statement does not communicate, in fact, what it means to say, but something completely different. In any case, a series of "presuppositional" questions emerge right away: "Has the person really enriched the young Romanian literature?", "Has he had such

significant contributions so that we should feel compelled to thank God for granting him to us?", "Why should God forgive him, when forgiveness is invoked for the mistakes that an individual has made?", "Couldn't it be that the person is utterly value-less, and this is what the author meant to say here?". Only for the simple fact that the statement embodies a rhetorical process (irony), it is full of connotations that go beyond the direct meaning that derives from the meaning of the words that compose it. This situation can also occur in common talk. If the following dialogue takes place between two persons:

> "What is your opinion about our new colleague?"
> "You'd better not ask!"

then we realize that the answer has one of the richest "implicatures," that is quite remote from what the words directly communicate.

What is the source of this misunderstanding that is so frequent at the level of natural language, and obvious in our verbal exchanges with the others? The answer lies in the diversity and multitude of implicatures that terms and their combinations unearth. The source of our incapacity to understand with enough precision the ingredients of natural language and the source of the difference in precision between the signs of formalized language and those of natural language lies in our thinking that the exteriorized thought of the other is not, in reality, his or her real thought.

What can be done in this situation? Grice's answer is the following: let us assume a *Cooperative Principle* between participants in verbal exchanges, a cooperative principle founded on the assumption of certain rules called *conversational maxims*,

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[2] Subtle distinctions between *statement* and *use* of a statement, configured in an attempt to overcome the inconveniences in Russell's conception of "definite description", can be found in P. F. Strawson, "On Referring", in: P. F. Strawson, *Logico-Linguistic Papers*, Methuen et Co Ltd, London, 1971, pp. 1-27;

whose observance could tone down some of the suspicions with which an individual meets the discursive productions of his or her interlocutors. If we observe them, the ensuing result could be the more precise understanding of the statements made by the other interlocutors; we could also reach more easily the results desired by all parties engaged in a verbal exchange. Here is the essence of this Cooperative Principle in Grice's text:

> "We might then formulate a rough general principle which participants will be expected (ceteris paribus) to observe, namely: 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" (H. P. Grice, "Logic and Conversation", in: A. P. Martinich (ed.), *The Philosophy of Language*, third edition, Oxford University Press, New-York, Oxford, 1996, pp. 158-159).

What are the requirements that make this cooperative principle operational? They are identified by Grice according to the Kantian tetradic criterion of systematising judgments: quantity, quality, relation, and modality. Why does Grice resort to the tutelage of the Kantian criterion? Though he does not state this explicitly, we believe that we can identify the main reason of this option: the Kantian tetrad of quantity, quality, relation and modality covers, if not exactly all of what could be manifested as judicative act, then at least a very ample area of our verbal productions of this type. Consequently, the rules established on this basis of maximal scope will be able to hold under control the largest part of language excesses that dominate participants in verbal exchanges.

So, what are these rules that the author has transformed in conversational maxims? In the contingence of the *quantity* criterion, Grice proposes two rules. The former refers to the equilibrium between given and required information so as to reach the communicative intentions that underlie the statements with which we participate in a verbal exchange. This equilibrium is seen on the line of sufficiency: *a participant's contribution in information must ensure the normal and adequate unfolding of the verbal exchange, so that it should reach its purpose.* As we have already mentioned, what is at work here is the principle of the sufficient grounding for the fulfillment of the purpose of the verbal exchange: one should provide as much information as is sufficient to meet our purpose. For instance, if we are asked the question: "What time does the afternoon train for Bucharest leave?", in the spirit of the requirements of the first maxim we should reply: "At 3.22 pm", because, by this answer, we have met the purpose of our conversation, that of informing the interlocutor about the train's departure time. If we answer by: "Probably after 3 pm", we flout the requirements of this maxim, because we have not met the purpose of the question, that of giving precise information about the train's departure time.

The second rule identified by the criterion of quantity incriminates the super-saturation of information with which we, as interlocutors, accompany our verbal exchanges: *we must not make the statements that we contribute to a conversation more informative than is required in order to meet the purpose of the exchange.* This rule contains the principle of the necessary grounding of the purpose of the verbal exchange: provide just as much information as is necessary to obtain the expected result. If we answer the question "What time does the afternoon train for Bucharest leave?" by saying: "At 3.22 from platform 2", we flout the requirements of this latter conversational maxim because we put more

information in the answer than is needed to meet the purpose of the verbal exchange. If we meet our purpose by saying: "At 3.22 pm", why say more? It is not necessary, even if this "more" (i.e. the extra information concerning the platform where the train leaves from) is, maybe, welcome in the general context of the conversation. Where does this precaution not to give more than necessary come from? From the suspicion that, maybe, sometimes, this supplementary information could even hinder the fulfillment of the goal of the verbal exchange. This is similar to the situation when supplementary data deliberately offered to someone who is attempting to solve mathematical problems lead to errors in the practical solving of the problem! We deal here with the principle of parsimony in action.

From the point of view of the criterion of *quality*, Grice places conversational maxims under the authority of a principle, that of truthfulness. We understand that, in the vision of the author, quality stands under the sign of truth. The first requirement incriminates the use of intentional falsity: *participants in a verbal exchange should not say anything that they believe to be false.* Two points need to be emphasized with respect to this maxim of quality. The former: the possibility of saying something false is not fully crossed out in verbal exchanges. If a user does not become aware that certain statements are false, they can be ingredients of the dialogic relation. We believe that this precaution is grounded at a deeper level: there are so many fields of verbal exchange where it is plainly difficult, if not impossible, to distinguish between what is true and what is false, that the exhaustive enforcement of this requirement would simply block the possibility of dialogical relations. The latter: what a participant to the verbal exchange

is allowed to do via this requirement (to use false statements if he or she is not aware of their falsity) jostles as against a wall in the critical attitude of interlocutors who, beyond the constraints of the assumed conditions of possibility, will constantly be alert so that no one would ever gain a discursive competition by dishonest means. If you are not aware that you are using false statements, we'll show you that what you are saying is false and, following this effort of alethic clarification, you must comply with the just mentioned rule! If the dialogue between a pupil and a school master is materialized in this discursive sequence:

> "Why were you late for the morning class?"
> "Because the tram got stuck in the University area."

and the schoolmaster checks and finds out that the tram did not get stuck, that the pupil was not on the tram that got stuck etc., then we can easily notice that a false statement was deliberately used in the verbal exchange.

The second quality rule incriminates the gratuity of statements made in a verbal exchange: *do not say anything for which you lack evidence.* This rule calls to mind the imperative to ground all statements that we make in our discussions with the others. After all, an ungrounded statement is anomalous in a debate or in any verbal exchange in which it appears. In the discursive sequence:

> "What do you think about the guilt of the accused?"
> "I think he will get away without punishment."
> "Why?"
> "Because he has a large family."

we encounter an instance of flouting a conversational maxim that we are going to analyze, because the statement: "The

accused has a large family" is far from being an argument, as it is presented, in fact, in supporting the thesis: "The accused will get away without punishment". We deal here with a would-be argument, not with a real one, because the statement "The accused has a large family" is not a sufficient condition of the thesis: "The accused will get away without punishment" (i.e. the truth of the former statement does not entail the truth of the latter). A dialogue that observes the rule that we allude to would be the following:

> "What do you think about the guilt of the accused? "
> "I think he will get away without punishment."
> "Why?"
> "Because there is no adequate evidence."

where the statement "There is no adequate evidence in favour of the prosecutor" is a sufficient condition to support the statement "The accused will get away without punishment".

Grice's observations on the order that the *relation criterion* could institute, parsimonious as they are, are nevertheless quite interesting. There is a single rule, itself expressed lapidary: *"be relevant" in your verbal exchanges*. In highlighting this maxim of relevance, Grice most frequently brings into focus the idea of *pertinence*, much invoked and discussed by other authors as well (Sperber and Wilson, 1986; 1989). If with Grice one does not encounter too many elements via which one could identify fairly precisely the concept of pertinence and its role in verbal exchanges, we can resort to another author who started from Grice's study and continued his work in its essential elements. We refer to Dan Sperber who, in his essay on cognitive rhetoric (Sperber, 1975: 389-415), considers that information is pertinent if, when it is joined to the knowledge that we already possess, brings about new conse-

quences. In Sperber's view, there are two fundamental requirements and they can constitute criteria according to which one determines whether a statement is pertinent or not in a verbal exchange: the requirement of integrality (information brought by the statement made must integrate with the already existing knowledge) and the requirement of cognitive progressivity (in order to be considered pertinent, information gained via the statements made must bring about an increase in the knowledge of the one who receives it). If we answer the question: "What are the results of the elections that took place last Sunday?" by saying: "Our politicians are good for nothing", our statement suffers from the point of view of pertinence (it is true, but not entirely), because it does not integrate in the sphere of individualised knowledge connected to the question asked. If we answer the same question by the statement: "It is good that the elections have taken place", we have pertinence problems again because, although information is integrated in the general pool of knowledge induced by the question asked, it brings nothing new in comparison with what the person who asks knew about the reality that this question is concerned with. By emphasising these points, we believe that we have clarified, though probably not exhaustively, the requirements imposed by the maxim of relevance (pertinence) in the normal handling of the verbal exchange in which individuals are engaged.

Finally, the *criterion of modality* stands, just like the one of quality, under the jurisdiction of a principle – the *clarity* principle. It imperatively expresses the ideal of clarity that verbal expressions used in dialogal relations must meet. The clarity of statements in a communication relation has as a starting point the verbal resources of a language (Williams, 1989). A state-

ment is considered clear when the meaning intended by the author is received as such by the interlocutor. One aspect must be highlighted here: our statements will be clearly expressed when the ideas that we would like to circulate are clear in our mind! It is nonsensical to have obscure ideas and claim to express them clearly for the others! Clarity of thought means a harmonious development of the ideas that we would like to present: neither too many (we would enter the realm of ambiguity), nor too few (we would enter the realm of obscurity) but in the natural order of their determination. Clarity of ideas is a necessary condition of the clarity of their expression via language, yet it is not sufficient. It is necessary to make a transfer of clarity from ideas to their linguistic expressions used in verbal exchanges. This is not in the least an easy task, nor is it available to any novice. Wittgenstein warns that:

> "Language disguises thought. So much so, that from the outward form of the clothing it is impossible to infer the form of the thought beneath it, because the outward form of the clothing is not designed to reveal the form of the body, but for entirely different purposes" (Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*, Routledge, London, New York, 2001, p. 22).

Despite the warning, this does not mean, however, that it is not worth trying. The goal of the attempt is precisely clarity.

A first rule subsumed to the principle of clarity concerns the avoidance of obscurity: *the statements that we make must leave the receiver the possibility to grasp a meaning.* Otherwise, our statements are considered to be obscure. Obscurity is a serious obstacle to the communication relation because any reply of the interlocutor is conditioned by the meaning that it has gathered from the statements of the other interlocutors. Or, obscurity leaves no room for the grasping of such a meaning. Let us take the following discursive sequence:

> "There are quite a few people in the ale house as well. An acquaintance takes a seat next to him.
> 'Well ! what do you think?'
> 'What could I think? answer I... it's fine.'
> 'What do you mean fine? Is this fine?'
> 'Well ! say I. How could I know?'
> 'What do you mean, how could I know? If you, a citizen with claims to be…'
> 'Sorry – say I – excuse me, but I have no claims.'
> 'It's not that you have claims, you really are; you are someone, so to say, more educated, and you have a duty, you see; because, if someone like you sits like that, indifferent and takes no interest, then let me tell you…'"
> (Caragiale, "Atmosferă încărcată" [Charged Atmosphere], in: *Momente si schițe* [Moments and Sketches], Ion Creangă Publishing House, Bucharest, 1972, pp. 93-94).

It is obviously obscure and, therefore, there are few chances for both participants in the dialogue to reach a remarkable result.

The second rule expresses the requirement to avoid ambiguity: *statements that we make must not leave room for multiple meanings and various interpretations.* If we encounter such a situation, then our statements are affected by ambiguity. As we all know, ambiguity is a serious inconvenience to proper communication with the others: there is the possibility that, out of the multiple possible meanings, the receiver might make an uninspired choice, i.e. assume a meaning that does not fit or is inappropriate in the context imposed by the verbal exchange. If following a conversation such as the one below:

> "Will you help me?"
> "Yes, sure."
> "Then, please bring me the horn."
> "Right away."

the person who made the request received the musical instrument instead of an animal's horn, we realize that the result of the verbal exchange was distorted by the ambiguity of the term "horn", which the former interlocutor used with the meaning of "a hard pointed part that grows, usually in pairs, on the heads of some animals, such as sheep and cows", while the latter understood it as "a simple musical instrument that consists of a curved metal tube that you blow into". The intention of the verbal exchange was far from being met[3].

The last two rules of the Manner criterion warn us of the obstacles to verbal exchanges that are raised by every participant's *prolixity* (their tendency to say all that they know about a certain issue), and the virtues ensured by the *methodical order* that the participants must assume as a behaviour norm. In different interpretations, these rules are somewhat redundant in relation with some of the rules identified via the other criteria. The first rule of the criterion of quantity requires to contribute sufficient information to our statements in order to reach our purpose, the second

warns us to contribute only the necessary information. In essence, both require us to be short, not to be prolix! On the other hand, the requirements of quality connected to producing evidence, as well as those of relation connected to pertinence, ensure, somehow, the imperatives of methodical order.

3. Conversational maxims and public debates

We are interested in how we could face a transcensus of applicability from the model of conversational cooperation to the functionality of these maxims in the framework of public debates. Starting equally from the fact that connections between the act of conversation and the forms of discursive grounding have been suggested earlier (Moeschler, 1985; Schreier, Groeben, Christmann, 1995: 267-289), let us specify something that is commonsensical, that debates constitute special forms of verbal exchanges between individuals. It is true that they have certain particular features that distinguish them and individualize them in relationship with other forms of verbal exchanges (for instance, oratorical discourse), but, eventually, their genre is the concept of "verbal exchange" for which, from the point of view of categorical determinations, they are a species. Hence the possibility, which we find productive, to accomplish this transcensus: notional species always preserve the features of the genre, but obviously, they do not preserve their elements.

Consequently, the rules of possibility of a verbal exchange between interlocutors ("conversational maxims") could regulate, in the same quality, this special verbal exchange constituted by public debates. Obviously, there are certain particular features that can result from the

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[3] Without intending to diminish the merits of this attempt at systematisation that Grice invites us to undertake, let us draw your attention to the fact that these aspects connected to the accuracy of dialogal speech were noticed much earlier. Dealing with "the force of words" to signify when they are used in a debate, Augustine also highlights its obstacles: "… let us now look at the hindrances which may arise because of the force of words – a matter about which we have just now made some scattered remarks. Either obscurity, or ambiguity hinders the hearer from discerning the truth in words. The difference between what is obscure and what is ambiguous is this: in what is ambiguous more than one thing is presented, but one does not know which of them is to be understood; in what is obscure, on the other hand, nothing or very little appears to be considered" (Augustine, *De Dialectica*, D. Reidel Publishing Company, Dordrecht-Holland/Boston USA, ed. Pinborg, Jan, 1975, pp.103-105);

special nature of such a discursive action. We shall therefore attempt to highlight how each conversational maxim of Grice's model operates in the case of public debates, by making the appropriate effort to answer at least the following questions:

> **(1)** Why is the respective conversational maxim a condition of possibility of public debates?
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> **(2)** What are the facilities that its observance ensure in order to fulfill the purpose of the debate, i.e. adhesion?
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> **(3)** Under what form should such a requirement act in the actual manifestation of public debates?
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> **(4)** What are the main "slippages" that could interfere in the operation of the conversational maxim at the level of public debates?

The first conversational maxims ensuing from the discriminatory action of the quantity criterion is that of *sufficiency of information to meet the purpose of the debate*. Let us try to answer the four questions. Participants in a public debate aim, individually, to be victorious in their confrontation with the others. In order to reach this purpose – to determine the interlocutors to adhere to the idea that they support – they mobilize their whole pool of knowledge on the topic to be debated so as to have present at hand the cognitive field out of which to choose the means to fight: arguments, techniques, discursive means. Not everything that is close at hand is equally useful to reach their purpose. Yet, as a means of methodological precaution, it is good to have more than he or she uses directly in order to obtain adhesion.

A careful analysis of the a-perceptive background that he or she possesses will show them that certain elements are con- stituted as proofs with an impressive persuasive power, others do not have such an impact. He or she will have to make a selection and keep what they consider to lead them to success. In this case, the conversational maxim is met and the debate has, from the point of view of the respective participant, all favorable condi- tions to manifest itself. The selection is a pre-condition of public debate: everybody must put his or her thoughts in order with respect to the topic of the debate before it starts! This is why the conversational maxim concerned is part of the conditions of possibility of public debates.

What are the facilities that result from the observance of these rules? First, their observance ensures that public debates become operational: since the proofs are clear and strong enough to support the point of view proposed, they can be used immediately, with no evaluation syncope and ceaseless searches that would hinder the progress of public debates. This is so because one "administrative" condition in organizing public debates is that they run for a reasonable time. Second, observance of the maxim makes these discursive exchanges more dynamic. The actual way of running debates is the result of the re- action of each participant to the others' "way of being" in a debate. The rapid production, following the pre-selection of the strong proofs "forces" the interlocu- tor to do the same, i.e. to answer rapidly and forcefully to the argumentative chal- lenges of the others. Hence, maybe, the spectacular dimension of public debates. Undoubtedly, there are other good things that observance of rules brings about at the level of the functioning of public debates, but they could be identified by the actual analyses of discursive acts.

How should the requirements of these rules be actually inserted in public

debates? On the one hand, they can act as a regulator of the interventions of participants in public debates. The moderator of the debate has a fundamental role at this point. If the participant proves to be well prepared for the requirements to fulfill the purpose of the debate, then he or she must be capitalized on in the construction of the success of a public debate. If, on the contrary, he or she proves to be a hindrance for the proper unfolding of the debate, then it is advisable for the moderator to be more restrained in using it. On the other hand, the requirement could act directly as the moderator's premial or penal sanctions, depending on the participants' observance or flouting of the maxim in the public debate. The moderator is not and cannot be totally "indifferent" to the topic of the debate. On the contrary, success in fulfilling his or her mission is conditioned by his or her advanced knowledge of the subject and of the appropriate proof-construction means. Under these circumstances, in order to facilitate the proper progress of a debate, he or she can occasionally, and without abusing it, provide evaluations on how participants observe rules. The role of these evaluations, beyond the equidistance that the moderator must preserve towards each participant, is to tone down some of the asperities of a debate and to ensure the continuity of productive elements.

As far as possible slippages are concerned, they can be identified in relation to the ideal of a perfect observance of this requirement. Let us mention just a few of them, with no claim to exhaust the subject. One instance of slippage vis-à-vis the proper development of a public debate could be the case when only few participants are capitalized on at the highest level, most often because they observe this maxim at the highest level. It is de-sirable that a public debate capitalize on everybody's contribution, because only then can one ensure the diversity of points of view and their appropriate confrontation. One could consider it an anomaly in how the first conversational maxim works if, during the verbal exchange, some participants - always the same - fail in their dispute with the others. This means that the participants do not have fairly equal forces. This shows that the pre-selection of participants was deficiently organized. A public debate is successful when the partial successes and failures, assumed during the discursive act, are almost equally allotted, even though eventually there is a winner. If the winner is foreseeable from the first moments of the debate, this is not a single actual gain from the discursive manifestation that we refer to.

The second conversational maxim pertaining to quantity concerns what is necessary from the point of view of the information supplied in order to reach the purpose of public debates. While the first rule draws our attention to what we should select from our cognitive encyclopedism for the successful unfolding of a debate (let us select and use what is sufficient to convince the interlocutor), the second rule states that it is necessary that many of our cognitive elements be dropped aside because they do not contribute to the fulfillment of our goal. The rule is an embodiment of the principle of economy: why should we use more information if we can obtain the same result with less? It is almost identical in its result with the first rule, and the latter is a condition of possibility of the debate, because it is a measure of precaution for any verbal exchange of this kind.

With respect to facilities, we could emphasize that observance of the norm

can diminish the sensation of oversaturation of ideas and points of view given by the participants' lack of reticence in parading all that they know about the topic of the debate. This sensation, far from being a matter of individual psychological experience, can be considered one of the conditions for the normal development of public debates. A good public debate is grounded on the imperative that each participant – and especially the moderator – master and manage in full awareness both the scope of debate topics and the mechanisms to capitalize on them during the discursive action. Or, under the circumstances of a permanent invasion of data and facts, arguments and contesting positions, at a given moment there could emerge the feeling that one can no longer master, from a cognitive and procedural point of view, what happens to us and in our presence. Violation of the above-mentioned rule can lead to one's incapacity to distinguish between what is essential and what is not essential at the level of the debate topic. The more one says about one issue or another, the more difficult it is, both for the locutor and especially for the interlocutors, to differentiate between what is important in that topic and should be capitalized on and what is less important and should be left aside. This aspect has significant consequences from the point of view of the practical development of public debates: what argumentative reaction could the interlocutors have about a participant's points of view since they cannot distinguish between what is essential and what is not, from among these diverse points of view? Finally, in this potential inventory of facilities, we warn that observance of the norm could, to a certain extent, diminish the unjustified and even gratuitous agglomeration of a dialogue discursive action that, essentially, does not require such an effort that participants commit themselves to, with undisguised enthusiasm.

It seems more difficult, at the level of this maxim, to identify the concrete forms of action. Certain remarks meant to warn about the imperative to concentrate on the essential aspects of the topic, coming from the moderator or other participants ("Which would be, from everything that you have stated, the ideas that you support?"; "From among all proofs, which do you consider to have a deeper impact to support the point de view?"; "What connection could the idea that you state have with the support for your own point of view or with the rejection of the points of view proposed by your interlocutor?") could enforce at least the temporary observance of this rule of parsimony. Certainly, the constant presence of the interventions of those who ask for clarifications and explanations, or of those who correct the interlocutor's parsimonious discursive interventions, hinders the progress of public debates. Yet, such interventions are absolutely necessary.

As far as slippages are concerned, there are a few interesting observations that we would like to make. An obstacle to this rule is the situation when the participant in a public debate continues to bring proofs, to augment grounding even after his or her interlocutors have declared that they are satisfied with the proofs that have already been brought and have expressed their adhesion to the point of view proposed. The normality of the debate would ask that, at this point, the individual should stop. He or she fails to do it and thus, his or her behaviour is a deviation from the ideal of discursive intervention. Another slippage from the above mentioned norm would be the situation when, in the framework of public

debates, there would emerge certain poles in which exaggerated verbal flow would be immediately recognized by the audience. The danger would be that the attention and concentration (both the audience's and the moderator's, and even of the other participants) might go to those who usually talk more.

The third conversational maxim is concerned, to a certain extent, with the sincerity of the one who participates in the public debate, and it incriminates the situation when participants could deliberately circulate false statements. In order to initiate a debate it is necessary to believe in the sincerity of our interlocutor, more precisely, it is necessary to grant all participants the presumption of innocence with respect to the truth of the statements that they make use during the debate, even though they turn out to be false. The necessity of this precaution is determined by the fact that, to the extent that debating a topic together with the others aims to uncover the truth, this result cannot be necessarily reached starting from the truth only ("anything results from false arguments"). This is why this rule is ranked with conditions of possibility of public debates.

With respect to facilities, a few aspects deserve mentioning. The first important one has just been highlighted above, but we would like to dwell on it more. The presupposition that we start from in our debate, according to which participants circulate statements that they believe to be true, constitute the basis of trust without which no public debate can operate. If interlocutors do not share mutual trust, then their argumentative reactions cannot manifest themselves appropriately, because it is not clear who could be the target of the arguments or of the counterarguments expressed. Could a

statement made by an opponent be considered trustworthy? Or should it be considered untrustworthy? There remains, however, a state of argumentative indeterminacy and indecision that hinders the proper development of a debate. Or, the presupposition that everybody is telling the truth is the point that we can rely on in order to construct our argumentative strategy in relation with the strategies elaborated by our interlocutors. The second aspect that is worth highlighting is the following: observance of rules is a significant ground concerning the certainty that the debate is an advance in genuine knowledge. A debate needs to be grounded in this aspect concerning its cognitive purposes; participants need to be aware that the debate does not proceed chaotically and without a method, but with a significant amount of trust in genuine knowledge.

The concrete forms of action of this principle are highlighted in the most diverse situations. Thus, the fiercest guardian at the gate of the truth of statements in public debates is the opponent. Each participant in a debate will seek with extreme preciseness all that could be false in the discourse of the opponent. Why is this so? Because by discovering falsities, he or she could easily reject the proposed point of view. This can be easily noticed if we follow the actual progress of public debates: objections to the opponents' proofs are the most frequent interventions of participants!

If we stop to consider the asperities that we could encounter in a debate and that can result from violating this rule, we need to emphasise that when the other participants repeatedly prove the falsity of statements made by an interlocutor, this plants the seeds of suspicion in the moderator as well as in the other partici-

pants, with respect to discursive confrontation, especially with respect to its results. This has a negative effect on how the discursive relation unfolds. On the other hand, the same fact can make the interlocutors more circumspective of the suspected interlocutor's intention to be successful by means of procedures that are morally condemnable in public debates. Last but not least, such a repeated notice breeds suspicion of the respective participant's intention to manipulate, i.e. to mislead the others by circulating apparent truths. Each participant and all together, as a group, can have a negative impact on how public debates unfold in practice.

The fourth maxim sanctions the gratuity of the points of view that were introduced during the debate: one does not introduce a point de view or an idea if one lacks sufficient proofs to support it. It is commonsensical to notice that this rule is a condition of possibility of debates: one cannot engage in debating a problem unless one agrees that this means to support and reject ideas rationally, i.e. by producing arguments. This is one of the "objects of the agreement" that Perelman and Olbrechts-Tyteca mentioned in their neo-rhetorical analysis of argumentation.

What facilities does the observance of the norm ensure? They are rather numerous. First: observance of the norm ensures the essence and normality of public debates. One cannot talk about a public debate without thinking, almost automatically, of providing evidence, arguments, and proofs. Second: observance of the norm represents a genuine correctness test in the verbal exchange of this type. If an individual produces undisputable proofs in defense of his or her point of view, the opponent will be forced to look for arguments that are at least as strong in

order to be able to reject them. Under the circumstances, the highest level of correctness is ensured in the development of a public debate: permanent confrontation of arguments of a significant force. Third: observance of this norm trains and develops critical spirit in a group, in relation with the ideas that are circulated. When there is such an intention, each participant will make a critical analysis of his or her points of view (can they be supported?) and of the proofs that he or she has (can they support the points of view strongly enough?), as well as of the discursive productions of their opponents (can their defense be attacked in certain points?; are their grounding techniques correct?) so as to decide on how to best act in the given situation.

In practice, we believe that this rule applies in the context of public debates just like the previous one: the opponents are the most alert in spotting lack of proofs, apparent proofs, false proofs, or incorrect reasoning on which the evidence is grounded. Which situations of flouting this norm could be symptomatic as disfunctions of the mechanism of a public debate? For instance, the situation when a participant in a debate considers that he or she can support the thesis that he or she has proposed for the simple reason that his or her opponents have not managed to produce sufficient proofs to reject it is a manifestation of the incapacity to observe this rule and, consequently, a slippage of the debates. Why is that so? Because if the opponents could not reject the thesis by relying on their arguments, this does not necessarily mean that they cannot find other arguments to reject it: the absence of rejection does not automatically entail the presence of support. The situation in which a participant, who was asked to provide further arguments in support of

the point of view proposed, requires himself or herself that his or her opponents bring arguments to reject the same point of view, is a way to by-pass the requirements of the above mentioned norm, which escapes the vigilance of common sense. We are confronted here with what Van Eemeren and Grootendorst call inversion of proofs (Van Eemern, Grootendorst, 1984; 1996 : 132-140).

The fifth conversational maxim, identified by the criterion of relation, brings into focus the imperative of relevance or pertinence. The rule has, in our opinion, a singular position with respect to its contingence with the sphere of conditions of possibility of public debates. Why should one ask a participant in a public debate, as a pre-condition, to make only pertinent statements, i.e. statements that should increase the receiver's knowledge? Are not there so many situations in which statements made in the framework of debates do not have the role to increase knowledge but to simply consolidate it, or to order the existing pool of knowledge? What is more: how can participants "commit" themselves to make only pertinent statements since pertinence is revealed in relation to the receiver's knowledge? What is pertinent for an interlocutor can fail to be so for another. Can he or she know in detail the cognitive side of each other participants so as to take such a precaution? It seems to us that, as intention or desideratum, this rule can stand as a condition of possibility: we have to be pertinent in a debate, i.e. strive to make statements connected with the topic and that offer something new to the interlocutors. However, in its practical manifestation, it is a condition of reality of the manifestation of public debates: only when we are confronted with the others,

can we adjust our statements to what we observe to be the others' knowledge.

The main benefit brought by the observance of the pertinence maxim is the fact that it enables all requirements of the other conversational maxims to function at normal parameters. If our statements are pertinent, then we have all chances to provide the required information so as to fulfill the purpose, to provide only the required information and nothing more in order to reach the same result, not to deliberately give erroneous information, to produce the most adequate evidence, to avoid obscurity and ambiguity. Why is that so? Because pertinence, with its requirements to coherently integrate new knowledge with the existing knowledge, keeps possible extravaganza under control vis-à-vis the requirements of rationality, discursiveness, and contextuality.

It is somehow difficult to identify the concrete forms under which the requirements of this rule are inserted in the actual manifestation of public debates. Yet, we can make a few suggestions, even though they may not be convincing enough. If, during the debate, several participants ask questions of the kind: "What is the connection between the statement and the topic of the debate?", then we witness some forms of manifestation of the exigencies of this norm. As far as slippages are concerned, if we notice that statements made by participants in a debate are at sizeable cognitive distance one from the other, there is no doubt that, pertinence-wise, we are in a space of negativity.

Let us deal with the first two maxims of the criterion of Manner (to eliminate obscurity and ambiguity from our statements) together, because there are enough similarities between them. In a public debate, each potential participant should

take all measures so that his or her inter-locutors could understand him or her, otherwise he or she remains outside the discursive game. The main means to meet this objective is to avoid the obscurity and ambiguity of the statements that he or she makes. Distorted comprehension is the mostly present occurrence in these cases. Must this principle (i.e. take all measures so as to be understood by interlocutors) be an imperative demand prior to engaging in public debates? Yes, definitely, all participants must start from the idea that they will make all possible efforts to be understood. Whether they succeed or not, this is an operational problem in the actual performance of a debate. Consequently, both rules are conditions of possibility of these forms of discursive activity.

We can rank with facilities the fact that the observance of these norms ensures the precise and quick reception of information that the others offer. We can know precisely the interlocutor's intentions of signification if we identify a precise meaning in his or her statements and unless a plurality of meanings surfaces out of his or her speech. On the other hand, the elimination of obscurity and ambiguity, as much as possible, is a necessary condition so as not to charge the interlocutor with what he or she had no intention to say, just like it acts as precaution so as not to misunderstand the interlocutor. These precautions, as well as others that could be identified, make a public debate possible, by all canons of efficiency.

As forms where we could identify the practical manifestation of the norm, we can distinguish various questions that come from the moderator or the inter-locutors: "What do you understand by this fact?" (the requirement to eliminate obscurity), "Which meaning do you assume for the concept that you are using?" (the requirement to eliminate ambiguity). Finally, if a public debate reaches a deadlock sometimes, the cause is, in many cases, that interlocutors do not understand precisely what the others' statements are about, so as to be able to formulate informed counterarguments.

4. Brief conclusions

This attempt to apply conversational maxims to one of the most frequent instances of verbal exchange – the public debate – provides us with fairly numerous reasons to state that there are serious grounds to use, with remarkable results, Grice's explanatory model so as to better understand the mechanisms according to which such a discursive intervention is built. The question "How is a public debate possible?" can be answered as follows: it is possible if we use the necessary information so as to reach our purpose, if we do not deliberately make false statements, if we produce the required proofs to persuade the others, if our statements are relevant, if they are not obscure or ambiguous, if we are concise and methodical. As we can easily see, it is not really accessible to anyone to organize (or successfully participate in) such a discursive construction.

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