The Trobriand Islanders vs H.P. Grice:
Kilivila and the Gricean maxims of quality and manner

Prof. Gunter Senft
Max Planck Institute for Psycholinguistics

Abstract:

The Gricean conversational maxims of Quality – “Try to make your contribution one that is true” – and Manner “Be perspicuous”, specifically “Avoid obscurity of expression” and “Avoid ambiguity” (Grice 1967; 1975; 1978) – are not observed by the Trobriand Islanders of Papua New Guinea, neither in forms of their ritualized communication nor in forms and ways of everyday conversation and other ordinary verbal interactions. The speakers of the Austronesian language Kilivila metalinguistically differentiate eight specific non-diatopical registers which I have called “situational-intentional” varieties. One of these varieties is called “biga sopa”. This label can be glossed as “joking or lying speech, indirect speech, speech which is not vouched for”. The biga sopa constitutes the default register of Trobriand discourse and conversation. This contribution to the workshop on philosophy and pragmatics presents the Trobriand Islanders’ indigenous typology of non-diatopical registers, especially elaborating on the concept of sopa, describing its features, discussing its functions and illustrating its use within Trobriand society. It will be shown that the Gricean maxims of quality and manner are irrelevant for and thus not observed by the speakers of Kilivila. On the basis of the presented findings the Gricean maxims and especially Grice’s claim that his theory of conversational implicature is “universal in application” is critically discussed from a general anthropological-linguistic point of view.