

KEYNOTE ADDRESS

Rationality and Conversation

Herbert H. Clark

Department of Psychology

Building 420, Jordan Hall

Stanford University

Stanford CA, USA 94305–2130

email: clark@stanford.edu

Abstract

In the model of language use proposed by philosopher H. Paul Grice, people in conversation recognize “a common purpose or set of purposes, or at least a mutually accepted direction,” and they cooperate in contributing to those purposes. Grice went on to argue, “Talking [is] a special case or variety of purposive, indeed rational, behavior.” But Grice tacitly assumed a type of omniscient rationality: People in conversation have perfect knowledge of the language and the current common ground, and they have an unlimited processing capacity in choosing what to say. In reality, people’s rationality is bounded, and that leads to quite a different view of language use. I take up some of the consequences of bounded rationality in language use.