# GRICE'S MAXIMS APPLIED TO LOCALIZATION

**Cristian LAKÓ**[1]

*Abstract*

The paper looks at how Grice's cooperative principle and maxims apply in website localization, starting with the content of the webpages and how they are retrieved by search engines based on the relevancy of keywords contained.

***Keywords: Gricean maxims, Cooperative principle, localization, website localization***

Search engines[2]are the medium through which potential buyers on the one hand, and companies, on the other, are communicating. Over the years, Google has improved this communication medium, so that it offers the optimal communication outcome between the two sides. Thus, whenever a user looks for a certain product or service, Google displays results from pages created by various companies. Listed webpages contain the keywords entered by the search engine user. For optimal results, Google filters and orders the results based on some parameters. Some of these parameters, of a linguistic nature, are in accordance with Paul Grice's theory. Google has even offered several guides [2][3] on how companies should create their content so that potential buyers' expectations are met on the webpages of the companies, via the Google search engine.

Grice states (1975) that during a communication process, those involved have certain expectations, which he calls **conversational maxims**. Also, any type of communication is based on mutual collaboration, which he calls the **Cooperative Principle**. The cooperative principle refers to making "your conversational contribution what is required, at the stage at which it occurs, by the accepted purpose or direction of the talk exchange in which you are engaged." (45)

The Gricean maxims derived from the above statement are as follows (1975:45-46):

The maxim of quantity:

- Make your contribution as informative as is required.
- Do not make your contribution more informative than is required.

The maxim of quality:

- Do not say what you believe to be false.
- Do not say that for which you lack adequate evidence.

**The maxim of relevance:** Be relevant.

The maxim of Manner:

- Avoid obscurity of expression.
- Avoid ambiguity.
- Be brief.

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[1] Assistant Prof. PhD. UMFST Tg. Mureș

[2]I will refer especially to Google as it is used by the majority of the total Internet users (65.2% in December 2012 according to comScore cited by searchengineland.com [1]



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- Be orderly.

If we assess both Gricean maxims and Google's Webmaster Guidelines [2] there are many similarities. Thus, the **maxim of quantity** translates in Google terms into writing content of at least 300 words. This number is mentioned by certain SEO (search engine optimization) plug-in (software component), for instance the WordPress compatible Yoast plug-in. However, at least in the English speaking online world, this number has increased to over 1000 words, while some SEO companies claim that the most appropriate length is 2000 words. These figures are based on SERPs (search engine results pages) that position webpages that contain articles of a certain length on the top positions. Ultimately, Google's response to lengthier articles is based on tracking web-users' behavior. Consequently, for instance the time spent on a page can be a matter of quantity (and quality) of information found on the page as related to what the user looked for on the webpage and where in the SERP a result leading to a webpage is located.

**Case study:** The purpose of this case study is to compare and determine the correlation between text length and positioning of webpages in SERPs. Therefore, I analyzed the top ten positions for the keyword *green tea benefits* for Romanian, British English, American English, German and French, on each of the corresponding localized version of Google.

| | **Language** | **Search engine** | **Keyword** | **Min. length** | **Max. length** | **Avg. length*** |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| 1. | Romanian | Google.ro | beneficii ceai verde | 246 | 2318 | 993 |
| 2. | British English | Google.co.uk | green tea benefits | 339 | 3193 | 1065 |
| 3. | American English | Google.com | green tea benefits | 162 | 3193 | 1034 |
| 4. | German | Google.de | grüner tee nutzen | 315 | 6365 | 1740 |
| 5. | French | Google.fr | thé vert bienfaits | 194 | 5514 | 990 |

*Table 1: Analysis of article length in SERPs*

* Calculation based on the top ten results in the search engine results page

The table above illustrates that the average length, is around 1000 words. For German the average is significantly higher. For Romanian, British and American English, the length ofthe articles on the first position is around 2000 words. Google.fr and Google.de display on the top position articles of 309 and 6365 words, respectively[3]. At the same time, the top ten results include articles of fewer than 200 words (American English and French). Comparing the three numeric columns French shows the highest contrast as compared to the average article length. These discrepancies are determined by

[3]The results corroborate, to some extent, Hall's Low context versus High Context cultures theory (1976: 105- 116)



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how the publisher decides to publish their content, either divided up in several smaller parts, or displayed in a compact manner.

Other publishers display on the same webpage several related articles written at various times yet grouped under the same topic. Regarding British and American English, the results of the case study demonstrate that Google displays results based on user location. However, 7 out of 10 results are similar, yet positioned differently. Thus, Google displays the information in a localized manner.

In summary, the case study demonstrates that currently the average article length is 1000 words. By extending the range of the websites analyzed for a certain industry, more relevant data can be obtained. Similarly, a case study to determine the current most efficient article length could be based on analyzing the articles displayed on the first place for several top internet industries. The trend is to provide users with lengthier and more elaborate articles.

The purpose of this paper does not include discussing all the aspects regarding webpage ranking in SERPs as it is a complex issue requiring separate consideration. Also, the content creator can use tools such as Google Analytics to verify if the content created was of interest or not to web-readers, and offer sufficient useful information, but not overwhelming them with excessive data. Extra information should be always provided on request, that is, in terms of websites, allowing users to click on links, thus complying with the maxim of quantity.

Considering this maxim from the perspective of localization, I have stated above that the length of the text can be specific to various target audiences but tends to be dictated by the search engine operating on a certain national market and on the maturity of the Internet in terms of content in that particular language. Therefore, if the source language is a major language, like English, it is convenient to maintain the same length of texts. On the other hand, if the direction of localization is from a minor to a major language/culture, for instance Romanian to English, if the Romanian text is only 500 words long, the translator into Englishshould be required to extend the translation to a 1000 words long text (.com domains as compared to .ro domains are highly competitive and keyword research and content optimization needs to be more precise). Doubling the length of TT implies from the part of the translator creative writing and copywriting skills.

Also, it is important to mention that whereas search engines crawl and examines the entire page, the web-user will not read the full text but only scan it. According to Nielsen reports [4] only 20% of the content is read on a page. For instance, out of 300 words, only 60 will actually reach the user. Apparently, it is a waste of resources, but increasing content both for the search engine and the users means higher conversion potential. More important in this case is the maxim of manner as will be shown below.

The device on which content is accessed is also important, as the screen size varies. Internet research companies [4] [5] state that 80% of the time on a page is dedicated to content above the fold, whereas only 20% of the time is spent for content under the



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fold[4].So, articles should not be longer than what the fold allows. While this is doable on desktop screens, mobile screens will involve scrolling. Anyway, the essence of the articles should be positioned above the fold and on the left side of the screen.

**The maxim of quality** in website content terms means not deceiving users, making webpages primarily for them and not for search engines, avoiding pages with irrelevant keywords, adding sufficient value to webpages, avoiding making claims not supported with evidence, avoiding false claims and so on. In Google terms:

- "Create a useful, information-rich site, and write pages that clearly and accurately describe your content.
- Think about the words users would type to find your pages, and make sure that your site actually includes those words within it." [2]

Any website should present honest data about its services or products. Referring to content marketing and localization a website should add new information or a different perspective or add value on a certain topic and stand out from the competition in a certain field while transferring meaning of the source content into the target language – culture pair. Not onlycan this maxim be applied to localization consistently, but through the localization process of some multinational websites the local business community can benefit from the value of leading practices from the markets of their origin. For instance, in the online area, Google itself, while currently not performing so well in terms of search engine in Romania as it does for the .com domains, it certainly influences in a positive manner the practices of the Romanian market.

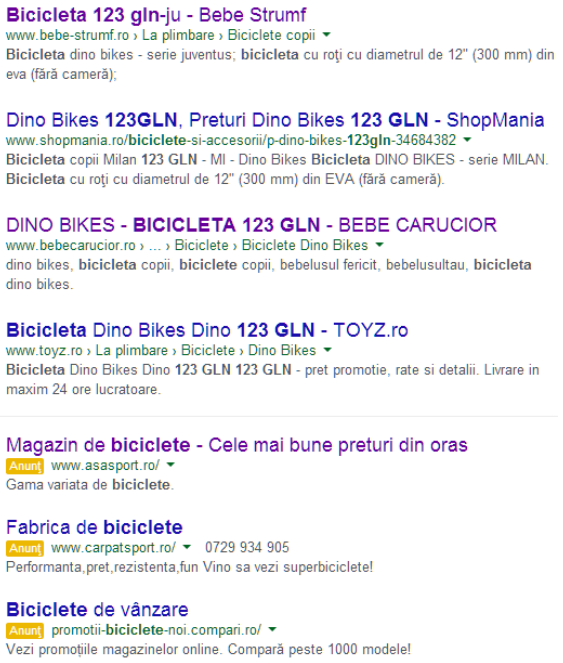
**The maxim of relevance.** While this is very much dealt with already at search engine level, there may be cases when through spamming and other malicious strategies, users might access certain sites that are irrelevant to their search. Content scraping (taken from other websites) is a technique often used but currently penalized by search engines. The usage of such techniques depends on the maturity of the market in which the search engine operates. For instance, the Romanian Internet content is still at an incipient level, and in numerous fields of activity there is a content deficiency. As a result, many "black hat SEO" tactics can be employed to achieve high ranking in SERPs.

Relevance issues can at times arise from language specific issues such as homonymy and polysemy. In the case of homonyms, for some languages, such as English, there is a further differentiation between homophones and homographs. With the latest searching technology by voice input, both can cause problems. If we look for an image and type in the search engine under the images tab "bat" Google will not know if we refer to the animal or the object. The result will be displayed based on the users' tracking history, and as most of users had previously looked for the animal, the great majority of images will display images of these animals. The user can obtain more specific results if longer 2 or 3-word-longexpressions are provided.

[4]Term taken from the printed media referring toinformation found above the line fold resulted from folding a newspaper. Online, it refers to what is visible without scrolling the page.



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In terms of localization, websites must create relevant information content, which is based, however, on the users' queries in the search engines. Irrelevant advertising is still abundant in the Romanian online media. This is due either to absence of knowledge or to misleading users on purpose. For instance, looking for a specific bicycle for kids, using the keyword *bicicleta - 123 GLN* the SERP displays both organic results (results based on the free submission and listing of websites) and paid results ("sponsored").

*Figure 9: Irrelevant sponsored results*

Whereas the webpages I was directed to when clicking on the results from the organic results displayed the bicycle I was looking for, the paid results took me to webpages that contained absolutely no information on children bicycles. Also, the description of the sponsored results did not contain my keyword. Furthermore, it was unexpected to notice that compari.ro showed up in both the organic and paid lists, yet only the organic result was appropriate formy search. This example is relevant for the process of localization in terms of the keywords a translator is supposed to use to get content to be displayed in SERPs.

**The maxim of Manner** and its four requirements (avoid obscurity of expression, avoid ambiguity, be brief, be orderly) is a matter of selling principles, making the potential buyer understand what the website has to offer in a manner which makes it clear that content is built for the target audience. These principles can be applied directly to the localized text but also to the process of internationalization (Lako:2015).

For instance, when applied to the localization process, the localizer or translator needs to know that some languages/cultures do not follow Nielsen's F-pattern (2006) but a reversed F- pattern. Languages such as Arabic and Hebrew are read from right to left, while Chinese isread from top to bottom but starting with the right-hand column. Manner can also be reflected in the style of the text as discourse.

These maxims need to be followed exactly in content marketing, if a website is to be successful with its content marketing campaign. However, they are often faulted in online advertising that is closer to traditional advertising such as banner or video advertising.



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