CONVERSATIONAL POSTULATES REVISITED

J. L. MORGAN

University of Illinois

Examining Gordon & Lakoff's influential article (1971) on conversational postulates, this paper shows that the term POSTULATE is misleading; that G&L's concept of conversational implicature as a case of entailment is mistaken; and that their view of the interaction of conversational implicature and syntactic rules is based on an incorrect analysis. It is suggested that some of the problems in their paper stem from a pernicious ambiguity of the phrase 'can convey'.

In this brief note I want to examine closely the picture of conversational implicature presented in Gordon & Lakoff's paper 'Conversational postulates' (1971). It is not that textual criticism strikes me as a thing worth doing in itself. Rather, I think that their paper has been influential, and is likely to be an important work in the long run; it is therefore important to point out some areas where their paper is potentially—and no doubt unintentionally—misleading. If my interpretation of G&L's intentions is wrong, then perhaps this paper will serve as a point of departure for a clarification of what they do mean.

G&L's paper is inspired in obvious and acknowledged ways by Grice's pioneering work on conversational implicature (1968). They state (p. 63) that their purpose is twofold:

> first, to outline a way in which conversational principles can begin to be formalized and incorporated into the theory of generative semantics; and, second, to show that there are rules of grammar, rules governing the distribution of morphemes, that depend on such principles.

In particular, they examine and attempt to formalize a number of conversational principles that they call 'conversational postulates.' Their intention is that conversational implicature be treated as a case of entailment; i.e., the conversational implicatures of a sentence are to be derived as entailments of the logical structure of a sentence, together with a representation of context and a set of conversational postulates.

The points to which I will address myself are these: the status of G&L's 'conversational postulates' in a theory of pragmatics; the role of entailment and speaker's intentions in their approach; and the interactions of conversational implicature with syntactic rules.

1. First, a minor point: the choice of the term 'conversational postulate' is unfortunate. My copy of *Webster's new collegiate dictionary* defines 'postulate' as follows: '1. A proposition which is taken for granted or put forth as axiomatic; an underlying hypothesis. 2. An essential prerequisite.' Dagobert Runes' *Dictionary of philosophy* states that a postulate is 'An indemonstrable practical or moral hypothesis, such as the reality of God, freedom, or immortality, belief in which is necessary for the performance of our moral duty.' One can see that the use of the word 'postulate' in the term 'meaning postulate' is in the spirit of definitions like these. A meaning postulate states some semantic property of a word, say, which is basic and arbitrary—which does not follow as a consequence of anything else we

know about that word, or about the language of which it is a part. Thus a meaning-postulate treatment of the word 'kill' which stated that if it were true that 'X killed Y', then 'Y died' would also be true, would not be a consequence of any other fact about 'kill' or about English, but a basic and axiomatic fact about 'kill.'

But surely G&L do not intend their 'conversational postulates' in this same strict sense. It is intuitively clear that each of their postulates ought to be not axiomatic, but derivable as a consequence of a general theory of language use like that advanced by Grice; we should consider inadequate any general theory that did not have these 'postulates' as consequences. Indeed, G&L themselves observe (p. 66) that their postulates 10a–10c are not axiomatic, but 'predicted' by their postulate 4i. Then it seems that such postulates are merely the result of chains of inference from general conversational principles,[1] rather than axioms or postulates in the usual sense—and, as such, are not really an addition to the repertoire of concepts of the theory of conversation, but shorthand for consequences of existing notions.

2. I have a more serious argument with what I take to be the spirit of G&L's approach: namely, with their apparent position that the set of principles which speakers use in making conversational implicatures, and hearers use in understanding them, is a deductive system, in which the conversational implicatures of a sentence are a special kind of entailment—'entailment in context'—deducible by the application of principles of reasoning (including things like 'conversational postulates') to a set of logical structures which include the 'literal meaning' of the sentence, together with logical structures characterizing context of utterance. G&L make clear in several passages that their intention is to treat conversational implicature as a special kind of entailment; thus, on the first page of their paper, they speak of cases 'in which saying one thing entails the communication of another'. They 'characterize the notion "conversational implication in a class of contexts CON_i"' as follows (p. 64):

> L conversationally implies P in CON_i IFF $\text{CON}_i \cup \text{CP} \cup \{\text{L}\} \vdash \text{P}$ ('In context CON_i, given conversational postulates CP, L entails P.')

I will attack this position on several grounds. First, G&L speak repeatedly of the implicatures which sentences convey in context. It makes sense to speak of USES of a sentence as having contexts and implicatures; but it is not clear that it makes sense to speak of SENTENCES as having contexts or implicatures, except possibly in the sense that we can speak of the implicatures of a sentence as the class of things a sentence can be USED to convey. This minor point leads to a larger confusion, between the term 'conveys' (or 'does convey') and the term 'can convey'. It is important that these two expressions not be used interchangeably—or, if they are used interchangeably, it is important to make clear which sense is intended.

To lay the groundwork for a close examination of what G&L mean by 'can convey' and 'conveys', it is useful to consider what one might reasonably mean in using these expressions. When I say that a certain sentence CAN CONVEY a certain

[1] I use the word 'inference' here in the psychological sense. I specifically want to avoid claiming that these are chains of entailments, for reasons that will become obvious.

implicature in a certain context or class of contexts, I mean that it is not unreasonable to use that sentence in that context with the intention that the implicature be understood by the hearer;[2] i.e., there is a good chance the hearer will recognize the speaker's intention that the hearer should understand the implicature. It is of course possible to use any sentence whatever with the intention of conveying any implicature imaginable. In principle, nothing prevents me from using 1 with the intention of conveying 2 by implicature:

(1) My Uncle Ermont is a great farmer.
(2) The Cubs will win tomorrow, six to five.

But in most actual contexts it is very unlikely that I would use 1 to convey 2, because it is very unlikely that my hearer would be able to recognize that my intention in saying 1 was to convey 2. In most contexts, then, it would be unreasonable for me to use 1 to convey 2. I think that is what is usually meant when we say that sentence so-and-so cannot be used in a certain context to convey such-and-such an implicature. On the other hand, consider the sort of context in which 3 might be used with the intention of conveying something like 4:

(3) Can you open the door?
(4) Open the door.

This is much more common than the sort of context where 1 might reasonably be expected successfully to convey 2. But one cannot always be sure of success, either from the speaker's standpoint or from the hearer's, since at least some contexts are ambiguous, in any useful sense of context;[3] i.e., the hearer is equally justified in concluding either that a certain implicature was intended, or that it was not intended. I do not mean by this any special sort of performance error on the hearer's part that might ensue from failure to observe some aspect of context, or failure to apply some principle of reasoning—a special kind of dullness—but rather cases where the idealized, perfectly rational human cannot deduce whether a certain implicature was intended, but is equally justified in concluding either that it was or that it was not.

For example, consider a context where I am in a very hot clinic, with both arms in casts. During the doctor's examination he asks me 3. It seems to me that I would be equally justified in concluding either that 4 was intended or that it was not—either that the doctor was interested only in the extent of my disability, or that he was interested in my doing something to lessen the heat. The speaker cannot be completely sure that his intention or lack of intention to convey 4 will be recognized, and the hearer cannot be completely sure that his conclusion about the speaker's intention is correct. So while it is correct to say that one CAN CONVEY 4 by saying 3 in some contexts—there is a good chance that one's intention to convey 4 by saying 3 will be recognized—it does not follow that one DOES CONVEY 4 in saying 3. For to say this would be to say that the implicature is automatic: that one

[2] Here I consciously choose 'not unreasonable to use' over 'reasonable to use': the latter has a tendency to imply 'not reasonable not to use', which I want to avoid.

[3] By this phrase I mean to exclude in particular a notion of context where speaker's intentions are considered part of context. Later on I will give reasons for not considering this notion of context useful.

cannot use 3 in a given context without conveying 4. At least this is so for any interpretation of 'conveys' (or 'does convey') that I can think of, a matter itself that needs exploring. In saying 'X conveys Y', one might conceivably mean any of three things: first, that the speaker in using X intends that the hearer understand Y; second, that from the speaker's use of X, the hearer concludes that the speaker intended him to understand Y; third, both of these: that the implicature was both intended by the speaker and recognized by the hearer. So in saying 'Sentence X conveys implicature Y in context Z', one might be saying that, from the fact that a speaker uses X in context Z, it necessarily follows that he intends the hearer to understand the implicature; or one might be saying that, from the speaker's use of the sentence in that context, it necessarily follows that the hearer will recognize the implicature; or one might be saying that both intention and recognition are necessary consequences of the speaker's use of the sentence in that context. To hold any of these positions seems to me to misconstrue the nature of conversational implicature. The very property of implicature that makes it so useful as a conversational ploy is that it is not entailed, but merely suggested or hinted at. That is not to say that reasoning powers are not involved in recognizing implicatures. But in most real cases, the conclusion is not forced on one; some educated guesses are usually necessary, perhaps based on probabilistic estimates. To overlook this point seems to me to misunderstand entirely the nature of implicature. And it appears from the final paragraph of Grice's paper that he did not intend conversational implicature as entailment:

> Since to calculate a conversational implicature is to calculate what has to be supposed in order to preserve the supposition that the Coöperative Principle is being observed, and since there may be various possible specific explanations, a list of which may be open, the conversational implicatum in such cases will be a disjunction of such specific explanations; and if the list of these is open, the implicatum will have just the kind of indeterminacy that many actual implicata do in fact seem to possess.

It remains to be seen which of the senses of 'can convey' and 'conveys' G&L have in mind when they use these phrases. They are not at any great pains to keep them separate. For example, they seem to use them interchangeably in the following passage (p. 65, emphasis supplied):

> Each of these sentences [in their example 2] CAN CONVEY a request to take out the garbage. Compare 2 with 3, where we have similar sentences which DO NOT CONVEY such a request ... How can we account for the fact that the sentences of 2 CONVEY a request ... but those of 3 DO NOT?

Likewise, their postulate 4 ('One can convey a request by (i) asserting a speaker-based sincerity condition or (ii) questioning a hearer-based sincerity condition' can be interpreted in two ways. This is because English has a pernicious ambiguity in the use of 'can'. In some uses, it is an implicative verb—i.e., the most common usage of a sentence like 5 is probably one in which it is taken to mean 6 or 7:

(5) One can open this door by turning the knob.
(6) If one turns the knob, one will succeed in opening this door.
(7) Turning the knob always works as a way of opening this door.

Here 'can convey' is equivalent to the second or third senses of 'conveys' discussed earlier. On the other hand, a person using 5 might mean something like 8 or 9:

(8) If one turns the knob, one might succeed in opening this door.
(9) Turning the knob sometimes works as a way of opening this door.

Here 'can convey' is probably equivalent to 'can convey' sketched earlier. Which of these two senses do G&L have in mind? It appears that, in their postulate 4, G&L intend 'can convey' in one of my senses of 'conveys'. This can be seen in two ways; first, from their use of the arrow in the formalization of their postulate 4 (p. 65):

(10) a. SAY(a,b,WANT(a,Q))* → REQUEST(a,b,Q)
b. ASK(a,b,CAN(b,Q))* → REQUEST(a,b,Q)
c. ASK(a,b,WILLING(b,Q))* → REQUEST(a,b,Q)
d. ASK(a,b,Q)* → REQUEST(a,b,Q)
where Q is of the form FUT(DO(b,R)) [b will do act R].

Given standard usage of the arrow, these conditions seem to say in 10a, e.g., that to say to *b* that one wants *Q* to happen is to request that *b* do *Q*. But perhaps G&L do not intend the arrow in the usual sense. Nonetheless, their intention is made clear again by their use of the asterisk condition on these statements. The asterisk condition is as follows (p. 65):

> Strictly speaking, [10] (without asterisks) is inadequate in an important way. Sentences like *Can you take out the garbage?* are ambiguous in context: it can either be a real question, a request for information about your ability to take out the garbage, or it can convey a request to do so. However, it can only convey a request if it is assumed by the hearer that the speaker does not intend to convey the question. In this case, the conversationally implied meaning (the request) can be conveyed only if the literal meaning (the question) is not intended to be conveyed and if the hearer assumes that it isn't. We will indicate this notationally by putting an asterisk after the illocutionary content.

The second-to-last sentence makes it quite clear that (at least in this passage) it is my third sense of 'conveys' that G&L intend by their use of 'can convey' and 'conveys'—namely that sense of 'conveys' wherein the implicature is both intended by the speaker and understood by the hearer to be intended. But the claim made throughout the paper that 'conveys' in this sense is an entailment of logical structure, context, and conversational principles is surely untenable; as I pointed out earlier, one cannot be 100% sure about a speaker's intentions, nor can the speaker be entirely certain that the hearer will correctly infer what the speaker's intentions are. So these matters are clearly not entailed in anything like the same way that 12 is entailed by 11a–b:

(11) a. All men are mortal.
b. Socrates is a man.
(12) Socrates is mortal.

—unless, of course, one includes as part of context the speaker's intention, or lack of it, to convey a given implicature. But the purpose of the linguist's enterprise is to discover the system of principles used by hearers to arrive at conclusions about a speaker's intentions—or, looked at from the other end, about whether a given sentence is likely to be successful as a way of having a hearer recognize one's intentions. If we say that these conclusions—that the speaker does or does not

intend such-and-such—are used as PREMISES in deciding whether the conclusion holds or not, the enterprise is short-circuited, and disappears in a puff of smoke.

Moreover, suppose that G&L are correct in saying—by way of 10b, for instance—that 14 is a conversational implicature of 13:

(13) Can you open the door?

(14) I request that you open the door.

Then it is a mistake to hold that, in saying 13 with the intention of conveying 14, one does not intend to convey the literal meaning of 13. Surely, if 14 is a conversational implicature of 13 in a given use, it is by virtue of understanding the literal meaning of 13 that one makes the inference, on the basis of rules of conversation, that the speaker intends to convey 14. It is generally true (except in cases of sarcasm, metaphor, and related phenomena) that when a conversational implicature is intended, the literal meaning is intended as well. To say otherwise would be to take the position that, in saying 15 with the intention of conveying 16, one does not commit oneself to the truth of 15 in the same way one would if one asserted 15 without intending 16—saying, in other words, that lies in the pursuit of conversational implicature are not lies. This position, it seems to me, is clearly mistaken.

(15) It's hot in here.

(16) I'd like you to open the window.

On the other hand, if it can be shown that G&L are correct—that when we mean 13 to convey 14, we do not also mean to convey a request for information—then it would appear that 13 is truly ambiguous between two senses, and therefore that 14 is not a conversational implicature of 13, but a second literal meaning of the surface form 13, as has been suggested by Sadock 1975.[4]

3. Finally, I turn to G&L's discussion of the interaction of conversational implicature and syntactic rules. A representative case of the sort of interaction which G&L discuss is in 17–18. G&L (p. 72) assume the latter to be related to the former by the application of an optional transformation that deletes *you* + TENSE (I will refer to this rule as YTD):

(17) Why do you paint your house purple?

(18) Why paint your house purple?

(19) You ought not to paint your house purple.

G&L (p. 70) observe that 17 might be used merely as a request for information, or it might be used to convey 19. They say that 18, on the other hand, unambiguously conveys 19.[5] From this they conclude that the application of YTD is dependent on the presence of conversational implicature. The form of G&L's analysis is roughly this: given a pair of sentences *A* and *B*, where the derivations of *A* and *B* differ only in that YTD applies in *B* but not in *A*, then the derivation of *B* is well-formed

[4] It could also be, as Searle 1975 seems to suggest, that this is a case of conventional implicature. But the details of Searle's suggestion are vague, and it is equally unclear how to fit such a treatment of the duality of 13 into linguistic theory; such conventional implicatures would seem to be neither fish (logical structure) nor fowl (conversational implicature).

[5] It may well be that G&L's observations are incorrect. In this passage I assume the correctness of their observations, as I am interested more in the general nature of their analysis than in detailed analyses of particular data.

just in case sentence *A* (without YTD) 'conveys' a certain implicature. The transderivational nature of the condition on the application of YTD is important; whether the rule applies in the derivation of one sentence depends upon whether a second, related sentence 'conveys' the implicature in question. Thus whether or not 18 (where YTD applies) is well-formed depends on whether 17 'conveys' the implicature that the hearer should not paint his house purple. G&L (p. 72) say that in some 'class of contexts' this implicature 'can be conveyed' by 17, and therefore in such contexts the derivation of 18 is well-formed. But throughout this passage there are several uses of 'conveys' and 'can convey', apparently interchangeable, with no direct elucidation of what G&L mean by these terms; so we must examine each possible interpretation to find which makes the most sense in this context. It will become apparent that none of them makes much sense.

The first possibility is that, in using 'conveys' and 'can convey', G&L have in mind my sense of 'can convey': that it is not unreasonable to use the sentence in question with the intention that the hearer understand the implicature. Then their condition on the applicability of YTD would say that YTD can apply in the derivation of 18 just in case 17 can reasonably be used in the same context to implicate 19. But this is clearly false; it predicts that YTD can apply in 18 regardless of whether the speaker in using 18 intends the hearer to understand 19. From the fact that it is reasonable in a given context to use 17 to implicate 19, it does not follow that in that context one must intend to implicate 19.

Nor does their condition make sense when 'conveys' is interpreted in my first sense of the word: that the speaker in using the sentence intends that the hearer should understand the implicature. Under this interpretation, G&L's condition on YTD would say that the derivation of 18 is well-formed just in the case that, if the speaker were to say 17 in the same context, he would intend that the hearer understand the implicature 19. I see no way to make any sense of such a hypothetical condition.

Neither does 'conveys' in my second sense make their condition coherent. In this sense, 'conveys' means that the hearer concludes that the implicature was intended. Thus G&L's conditions would be that the derivation of 18 is well-formed just in the case that, if the speaker were to use 17 in the same context, the hearer would conclude that the implicature was intended by the speaker. But it is impossible to give an answer to the hypothetical question involved in this condition, since, as G&L observe, 17 is ambiguous even in context.

Finally, given that G&L's condition makes no sense in my first and second senses of 'conveys', it should be easy to see that my third sense of 'conveys' is no help, since it is merely the conjunction of the first and second senses.

The problem lies, I think, in the transderivational nature of the condition. The applicability of YTD in 18 is not dependent on any property of 17, but on 18 itself—in particular, on what the speaker intends to do with 18 in a given usage. Given the correctness of G&L's observations about possible usages of 17–18, the best we can say is that 18 is well-formed just in case the speaker intends by using it to have the hearer understand 19. But note that this has nothing directly to do with conversational implicature; 18 does not merely implicate 19. The fact that YTD has applied in the derivation of 18 has the effect of unambiguously signaling

that something like 19 is intended. If, in a given context, the hearer does not conclude from 17 that 19 was intended, then the worst we can say is that he is dull. But if, from the speaker's use of 18, the hearer fails to understand that something like 19 is intended, we will accuse him of not understanding English. Just as a lexical item is a conventional device for signaling that a certain meaning is intended, so in this case it appears that a rule, YTD, functions as a conventional signaling device. Then the applicability of YTD (and thereby the well-formedness of 18) must be stated not relative to a set of contexts and conversational postulates, but relative to a certain intention. In this case, we would say that there is a pragmatic condition on YTD, such that using 18 without the intention of conveying 19 is a violation of the condition. The thought of trying to incorporate such a condition into any known theory of syntax gives one indigestion; but it may be that some cases can only be treated in this way.

Summing up my main points: first, G&L's use of the term 'conversational postulates' is unfortunate, in that it implies that the principles so named are axiomatic, which is probably not true. Second, their apparent view of conversational implicature as a special kind of entailment is not only unfaithful to Grice's characterization, but is empirically unjustified. It may be that, in this regard, some confusion concerning the terms 'conveys' and 'can convey' makes G&L appear to hold a view which they do not. At any rate, the confusion needs some tidying up. Third, their proposed cases of syntactic rules conditioned by conversational implicatures are mis-analysed. Where they propose transderivational conditions on syntactic rules, we find that what are really at work are non-transderivational conditions dealing with speaker's intentions. Insofar as G&L's observations about the relevant data are correct, it appears that there are syntactic rules that function as conventional devices for signaling intentions.

REFERENCES

COLE, PETER, and JERRY MORGAN (eds.) 1975. Syntax and semantics, 3: Speech acts. New York: Academic Press.

GORDON, D., and G. LAKOFF. 1971. Conversational postulates. Papers from the 7th regional meeting, Chicago Linguistic Society, 63–84. [Reprinted in Cole & Morgan, pp. 83–106.]

GRICE, H. P. 1968. Logic and conversation. MS. [Published in Cole & Morgan, pp. 41–58].

SADOCK, J. 1975. Toward a linguistic theory of speech acts. New York: Academic Press.

SEARLE, J. 1975. Indirect speech acts. In Cole & Morgan, pp. 59–82.

[Received 7 October 1975.]