

# Conversational Implicature

(话 里 有 话)

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School of International Studies

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# Outline of Today's lecture

- **Implicature** ['implikətʃə(r)]: its definition and features
  - H. P. Grice, an Oxford philosopher, proposed a theory of conversational implicature
- **Grice's Co-operative Principle**
  - Maxim of quality (质的准则)
  - Maxim of quantity (量的准则)
  - Maxim of relation (关系准则)
  - Maxim of manner (方式准则)
- **Non-observance of the Gricean maxims**
- **Types of implicature**
  - Generalized vs. particularized implicatures
  - Conversational vs. conventional implicatures

# 1. Background

- Pragmatics is the study of **language use, the most common form of which is perhaps daily conversation**. As far as verbal communication (言语交际) is concerned, three facts are worth noting:
  - *Human beings are social animals, so they are always 'sensitive' to what is said to each other.*
  - *They do not always blurt out what they intend to say, but can manage to understand the intended message in most cases.*
  - *Conversational partners would attempt to make sense of everything that is heard (though they sometimes may fail to do so).*
- 脸盲症 怎么治疗？



# Commercials on TV

- *Does this one make sense to you?*
  - ❑ 人生就像一场旅行，不必在意目的地，在乎的是沿途的风景以及看风景的心情。让心灵去旅行！
  - ❑ Life is like a journey. The final destination is not important while the scenery along the road and the mood of enjoying the scenery are of true value. Let our souls have a fresh travel.

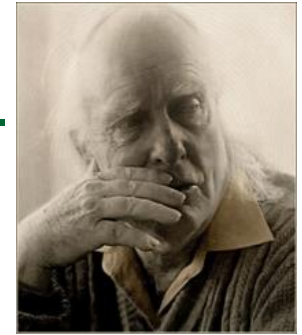


Smoking can make one feel great like walking on air.

# 1. Background

- As you can see, everyday language tends to be ambiguous, obscure, verbose (啰嗦) or off-topic(离题).

**The Oxford philosopher Herbert Paul Grice** proposed a theory which attempts to account for **how people use and understand language.**



(1913-1988)

- Grice's **theory of conversational implicature**, possibly the most classic theory of language use, was set out in his lectures on '**Logic and Conversation**'.
  - 1967 William James Lectures at Harvard University entitled "Logic and Conversation" (introducing the notion of *conversational implicature*), some of which were published in 1975.
  - **What Grice aims for: An outline of a systematic theory of language use, which can account for the way people read between the lines** when understanding everyday language.

## 2. Implicature

- Grice suggests that meaning could be divided into “**what is literally said by a sentence**” (literal meaning which may be dealt with in truth-conditional terms) and “**a variety of inferences that may reasonably be drawn from the speaker’s use of that sentence in a particular context**” (i.e. additional meanings that arise in context, as a result of how people infer each other’s intentions). 前者为“话里有话的第一个话”，而后者为“话里有话的第二个话”。
- Grice’s new terms: **implicate** and **implicature**. “**Implicature**” is meant to cover the family of uses of “**what is implied**”, “**what is suggested**” and “**what is meant**”.
- Recall that things logically follow from what a sentence literally ‘says’ are called entailments (蕴含). So the major distinction Grice draws is between (semantic) **entailment** and (pragmatic) **implicature**.

A: *Smith doesn’t seem to have a girlfriend these days.*

B: *He has been paying a lot of visits to New York lately.* (Grice, 1975)

(B’s sentence **entails** that Smith has frequently visited New York recently (which is just like a paraphrase), whereas It **implicates** that Smith may have a girlfriend in New York.)

### 3. General features of conversational implicature

- **Conversational implicatures** are *implications that go beyond the literal meanings of the words uttered in conversational contexts*, and are said to be (generally):
  - **Context-dependent:** different implicatures arise in different contexts, even if an identical utterance is produced:

A: *Do you think I'm a good cook.* (examples from Lecture 1)  
B: *You make good coffee.*  
(**Implicature:** You are not a good cook)

A: *It's your turn to make coffee.*  
B: *You make good coffee.*  
(**Implicature:** B is reluctant to make coffee and would like A to do it)
  - **Cancellable (or defeasible 可消除):** since a conversational implicature is not an essential part of the literal meaning of what is uttered, but is rather inferred above and beyond this, it can be explicitly cancelled.

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### 3. General features of conversational implicature

- **Non-detachable** (不可分离性): this means that you cannot get rid of the implicature by substituting a synonymous expression.

Mom: *Have you cleared the table and washed the dishes?*

Son: *I've **cleared the table**.* (Implicature: the son didn't wash the dishes)

Dad: Yeah, he's ***taken all the things off the table**.* (Implicature: the son didn't wash the dishes)

- **Calculable** (可推导性): In most cases, people can successfully interpret implicatures. So it must be possible to calculate them from a combination of **(i) what is literally said plus (ii) contextual information**.
  - But **on what basis** do we calculate (or figure out) implicatures? Grice proposes the following...



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## 4. The Co-operative Principle

- Grice (1975) claims that conversational partners normally recognize a **common purpose** or a **common direction** in their conversation, and at any point in a conversation, certain “conversational moves” are judged suitable or unsuitable for accomplishing their **common objectives** (similar to **Clark’s notion of ‘joint project’**; see also Huang & Wu 2012 *Journal of Pragmatics*).
- Thus, he proposes a most general principle called **The Co-operative Principle**:

“Make your contribution such as is required, at the stage at which it occurs, by the accepted purpose of the talk exchange in which you are engaged”.

This very general principle is elaborated by a set of **maxims** which **characterize conversation as a co-operative activity**.

## 4. The Co-operative Principle

- Grice fleshed out (详细说明) the **co-operative principle** in **four maxims of conversation**, which people should follow to further the conversation efficiently.
  - **Maxim of quantity.** (i) Make your contribution as informative as required; (ii) do not make your contribution more informative than required. 说话要适量
  - **Maxim of quality.** Try to make your contribution one that is true. (i) Do not say what you believe to be false; (ii) do not say that for which you lack adequate evidence. 说话要靠谱
  - **Maxim of relation.** Make your contribution relevant. 说话要切题
  - **Maxim of manner.** Be perspicuous (i.e. crystally clear): (i) avoid obscurity of expression; (ii) avoid ambiguity; (iii) be brief (avoid unnecessary prolixity 避免赘述); (iv) be orderly. 说话要得当

## 4. The Co-operative Principle

- In one word, Grice suggests, by presenting his **theory of language use**, that
  - (i) **conversational partners are being co-operative** (as least insofar as they are trying to make their communicative intention evident), and 交际双方处于合作状态(至少双方都在尽可能地表明自己的交际意图). 不然, 人们会说“无可奉告” “不跟你说了”
  - (ii) **they are supposed to speak informatively (*quantity*), truthfully (*quality*), relevantly (*relation*) and appropriately (*manner*)**, and 交际双方所说的话要信息量充足、真实、切题、恰当
  - (iii) **if an utterance superficially appears not to conform to (any of) the four maxims, the listener would look for a way of taking it so that it conforms in some way.** 如果一句话表面上不符合四项准则(或其中任何一个), 听话人会设法猜测其意义, 使之在一定程度上符合合作原则

(Note that speakers communicate more than what is literally said via **implicature**, whereas listeners figure out or recognize the implicatures via **inference**.) 说话人通过会话含义传递言外之意, 而听话人借助推理来识别会话含义

## 5. Hedges (模糊限制语)

- Is there any **supportive evidence** that speakers are aware of the Gricean maxims? The answer is YES!
- **Hedges** (模糊限制语, 闪避语, 谦让语): There are **cautious notes** used to indicate that speakers are aware of maxims, but fear not to adhere to them completely.
  - Examples show that speakers are aware of **the maxim of Quality**
    - a. **As far as I know**, they're married. (it may not be a fact!)
    - b. **I may be mistaken**, but I thought I saw a wedding ring on her finger.
    - c. He couldn't live without her, **I guess**.
  - Examples show that speakers are aware of **the maxim of Quantity**
    - a. So, **to cut a long story short**, we grabbed our stuff and ran.
    - b. **I won't bore you with all the details**, but it was an exciting trip.

(Examples from Yule, 1996)

## 5. Hedges (模糊限制语)

- **Examples show that speakers are aware of the maxim of relation**

*a. Oh, **by the way**, his uncle is a member of parliament. (It may not be the most important, yet it is still a piece of useful information)*

*b. **Anyway**, that's also part of the program.*

*c. **I don't know if this is important**, but some of the files are missing.*

- **Examples show that speakers are aware of the maxim of manner**

*a. **This may be a bit confused**, but I remember being in a car.*

*b. **I'm not sure if this makes sense**, but the car had no lights.*

*c. **I don't know if this is clear at all**, but I think the other car was reversing.*

(Examples from Yule, 1996)

## 6. Non-observance of maxims 违反会话准则的情况

- Before we talk about how what is said may not conform to the cooperative principle, some points need to be made about the nature of the Gricean maxims 在讨论违反合作原则的情况之前，我们需要弄清楚格莱斯会话准则的本质
  - They are not rules, unlike grammatical rules.
  - They are much more flexible, more like guidelines.
  - They can be creatively infringed/violated. 可以被创造性地违反

Note that Grice is at pains to emphasize that **the maxims are not culture-bound conventions like *table manners*: they are rationally based (i.e. based on reasons rather than emotions)**, and would hence be expected to be observable in any human society. (see Cruse, 2004)

格莱斯努力强调会话准则的非文化绑定性，他认为会话准则是基于理性的，且具有普适性，即普遍存在于人类社会里。

## 6. Non-observance of maxims

- So, **speakers MAY NOT ALWAYS obey the maxims**, for one reason or another. One way is that they may '**opt out**' (撤出) (i.e. **announcing non-observance**) of the maxim expectations by using expressions like '**No comment**' or '**my lips are sealed**' in response to a question, or other expressions. 出于种种原因，说话人并不总是遵守会话准则。他们可以用诸如“无可奉告”等表达式回答他人的询问
- **Flouting** (i.e. openly disobeying) is one of the main ways of **contravening the maxims**. 故意违反是背离会话准则的主要方法之一

- 周震南 的采访

Let's see how a young pop singer responds to the journalist's questions.



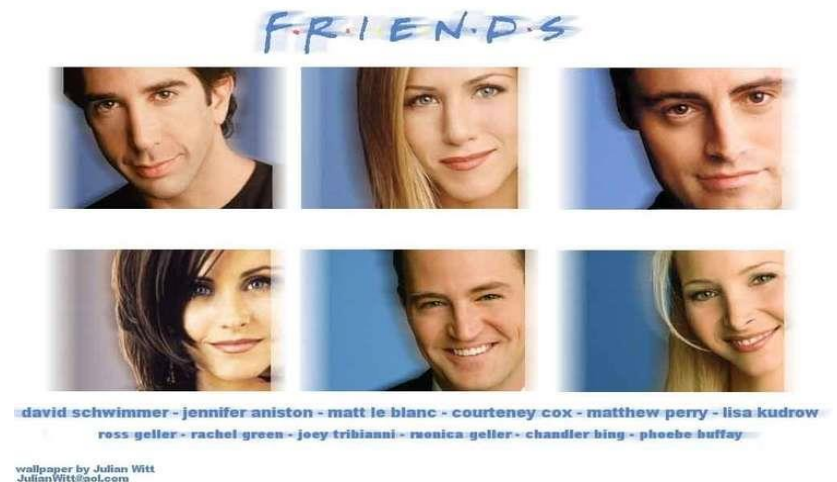
## 6. Non-observance of maxims

### ■ Flouting the maxim of quantity 违反数量准则

Chandler: *Where is the book you are reading?*

Monica: *It's in the living room where there is also light and no one will kick you in the shin (小腿).*

Chandler: *What?*





## 6. Non-observance of maxims

### ■ Flouting the maxim of quality 违反质量准则

Two travelers arrived at the hotel and were shown a rather dirty room.

“*What,*” said one, “*does this pigsty (猪圈) cost?*” Promptly the owner replied, “*For one pig, two dollars; for two pigs, three dollars.*”



## 6. Non-observance of maxims

### ■ Flouting Relation 违反关系准则

(The American ambassador Joseph Chroates was once mistaken for a doorman by a guest at an embassy function 宴会).

**Guest:** *Call me a taxi.*

**JC:** *OK, you're a taxi.*

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**Interviewer:** *Did you really pose for that calendar with nothing on?*

**Marilyn Monroe:** *I had the radio on.*

(梦露显然违反了关系准则，但我们可以说她仍然是合作的，因为她说的话并未中断交际，因其可以产生含义，间接地满足了记者的好奇心)

### ■ Flouting Manner 违反方式准则

**Miss X sang “Home Sweet Home”** vs.

**Miss X produced a series of sounds which corresponded closely with the score (乐谱) of ‘Home Sweet Home’.** [Example from Grice, 1975]

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(Note that the latter utterance is of unnecessary wordiness). 第二句话显然过于啰嗦

## 7. Two types of conversational implicature

- So, as you can see, **most of conversational implicatures are highly context-dependent**. Grice noticed this, so he called them **particularized conversational implicatures** (具化的会话含义). Most conversations take place in very specific contexts, which we make inferences relative to. They are *by far the most common type of implicatures*, and therefore *are usually just called ‘implicatures’*.
- Grice also noted that there are others that seem to be the **‘default’ interpretation** (默认解读 i.e. **interpretation that already exists**) of certain linguistic expressions. When *no special background knowledge of the utterance context* is required to make the necessary inferences, it is called a **generalized conversational implicature** (泛化的含义).
  - a. X is meeting a man/woman this evening.** [+> not X’s hubby or wife]  
Generally, the use of the form (a) would normally implicate **‘X is meeting someone other than her husband or his wife’**.

Note that Yule (1996) uses the symbol +> for an implicature, as shown in the bracket.

## 7. Two types of conversational implicature

- Some information (including intended message) can be communicated by choosing a word which expresses one value from a scale of values, i.e. **the Horn scales** (荷恩等级). E.g.

*<all, most, many, some, few> (terms of quantity from highest to lowest)*

*<always, often, sometimes> (terms of frequency from highest to lowest)*

*<must, should, may> (terms of modality 情态, from highest to lowest)*

- When producing an utterance, a speaker **selects one word from the scale** which is considered the most informative (**quantity**) and truthful (**quality**).

## 7. Two types of conversational implicature

- **Scalar implicature** (等级含义): when any form on a scale is used or asserted, **the negative of all forms higher on the scale is implicated** (Note that 'scalar implicature' is a key notion in neo-Gricean theories of implicature).

*I sometimes smoke.* ['sometimes' +> not often, +> not always]

**Assertion:** the speaker is an occasional smoker.

**Implicature:** the speaker does **not always** smoke.

*It's possible that Peter forgot to lock the door.*

**Assertion:** there is a possibility that Peter forgot to lock the door.

**Implicature:** there is **no certainty** that Peter forgot to lock the door.

['possible' +> not certain (as a higher value on the scale of likelihood)]

## 8. Conventional implicatures

- Grice also made a distinction between **Conventional implicatures** and **conversational implicatures**. *Unlike* the latter whose generation and interpretation are based on the cooperative principle of the four maxims, the former don't have to depend on special contexts for interpretation. Conventional implicatures are associated with **specific words**: the use of these words would normally **give rise to additional conveyed meanings**.

**'but'** (implicature of 'contrast' etc.)

- *Mary is a linguist, **but** she's rich.*

**Assertion (propositional meaning):** Mary is a linguist, and she is rich. (conjunction p & q)

**Implicature:** Linguists are usually not rich.

**'even'** (implicature of 'contrary to expectation')

- ***Even** Joe passed the test.*

**Assertion:** Joe passed the test. (The truth is that Joe was successful in passing the test)

**Implicature:** Joe was **the least likely person** to pass the test. And there were grounds for expecting that Joe wouldn't pass the test.

## 8. Conventional implicatures

- **'yet'**

*Hilary may yet become a writer.*

**Assertion:** Hilary is not a writer. (not p)

**Implicature:** Hilary is to become a writer later (p is to be true later)

- **'damn'**

- *Bob brought his damn dog with him.*

**Assertion:** Bob brought his dog with him.

**Implicature:** the speaker has a **negative attitude** towards Bob's dog, or towards Bob's bringing the dog with him.

- **'still'**

Winston Churchill: *When they told me that by the year 2100 women would rule the world, my reply was, 'Still?'*

**Implicature:** (Churchill believed that) Women already ruled the world at the time he spoke.

(Just like that there are words which can trigger **presupposition**, there should be words whose conventional meanings can trigger an **implicature**).

# 9. Types of implicature

(that can be characterized by the tree below)

**Implicatures** (*what is implied, suggested, meant*)

**conventional(lexical)**

(*Implicatures are associated with the conventional meanings of some specific words, e.g. 'but' , "even"*)

**conversational**

(*Implicatures arise in conversational contexts*)

**Generalized**

(*Calculation of this type of implicatures does not require special background knowledge of the utterance context, but still relies on the Co-operative Principle (e.g. being informative and truthful)*)

**Particularized**

(*The **commonest type of implicatures** pragmaticists talk about, and are **highly context-dependent***)



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# References

- Cruse, A. 2004. *Meaning in Language: An Introduction to Semantics and Pragmatics*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Grice, H.P. 1975. Logic and conversation. In P. Cole & J.L. Morgan (Eds.), *Syntax and Semantics 3: Speech Acts*. New York: Academic Press.
- Pinker, S. 2007. *The Stuff of Thought*. New York: Penguin Books.
- Thomas, J. 1995. *Meaning in Interaction: An Introduction to Pragmatics*. London: Longman.

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## Suggested Reading:

Yule, George. 1996. *Pragmatics*, Chapter 5. OUP.

Huang, Yan. 2007. *Pragmatics*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

# Homework: WTO

## ■ Watch: *English Vinglish* (《印式英语》)

It tells a story about an Indian housewife who came to the states for a wedding. Lots of bad things happened to her since she couldn't speak English properly (which she pronounced like 'Vinglish'). She tried hard to learn it and finally succeeded.



## ■ Think about:

- Most of the notions introduced today seem sophisticated and controversial. *Do you see any problem(s) with Grice's theory?*

## ■ Other questions?

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# Student presentation on 6 Nov 2023

- **Requirements:**
- Choose ***one of the topics of pragmatics*** we've discussed, and tell *a story (better with videos, pictures) and give your own analysis/comments.*
- Time limit: **5** minutes' presentation plus **3** minutes' question time

Note that those who didn't do last time will have chance to do this time.