

A cartoon illustration of Oscar the Grouch from Sesame Street. He is sitting in a blue metal trash can, wearing his signature blue beret and has a grumpy expression. Red checkmarks are drawn on the left and right sides of the slide, pointing towards the title.

Why *semantics* is the wastebasket

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Warming up: the implicature in (1)

Semantics is the wastebasket (in the first sense)

Grice on meaning

Semantics and pragmatics

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1.1. Semantics and pragmatics

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## 1.2. The *pragmatics* wastebasket?

Pragmatics is referred to as the *wastebasket*, in two senses:

- (i) what semantics cannot explain is left to pragmatics;
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(Yes, I do pragmatics.)

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- ▶ The obtained implicature is too weak: not-knowing, rather than knowing-that-not.
  - ▶ The account fails to tell (1) from (2):
- (2) Mr. X has excellent handwriting etc., or both that *and* he is a fantastic philosopher.      ↗ He has no philosophical qualities.

## 2.2. Improved account: *attentive pragmatics*

Intuitive solution: (Westera, 2013; & submitted)

- ▶ rationality is not only to *assert* all relevant, *true* information;
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→ This will make for a good illustration below.

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*...it is necessary to distinguish between a notion of meaning which is relativized to the users of words or expressions and one that is not so relativized;... of the two notions the unrelativized notion is posterior to, and has to be understood in terms of, the relativized notion; ...what words mean is a matter of what people mean by them.* (Grice, 1989, p. 340)

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A **speaker** means  $*_{\psi}p$  (by a sentence  $S$ ) iff she intends:

- (i) that the hearer comes to think that the speaker  $\psi$ 's  $p$ ;
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→ Which speakers? In which circumstances?

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Thus, a theory of (conversational) rationality is presupposed by any theory of sentence meaning.

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In sum, a theory of (conversational) rationality:

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Given (ii), *semantics* is the wastebasket (in the first sense):

- ▶ What pragmatics cannot explain is left to semantics.

### 3.6. What about ‘attentive’ semantics and pragmatics?

Recall, to deal with (1):

- ▶ **Richer semantic theory:** informative content plus **attentive content**, i.e., the possibilities *mentioned*.
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Attentive *pragmatics*, however, does double duty:

- ▶ it fixes what is meant by “attentive content”, i.e., what exactly is modeled by attentive semantics; and
- ▶ it simplifies the job left for semantics, by accounting for CI.

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  - ▶ iconicity (e.g., onomatopoeia);
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(Work in progress: a compositional attentive semantics.)

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*...by characterizing a philosophically important distinction between the “genuinely semantic” and “merely pragmatic” implications of a statement, Grice clarified the relationship between classical logic and the semantics of natural language. (Neale, 1992, p.1)*

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- ▶ “Conversational implicatures are **cancelable**.”
- ▶ “**Experiments** on implicatures show mixed results.”

#### 4.3. Conversational implicatures are not (really) defeasible

CI may seem defeasible in, I think, three main ways:

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*The presence of a conversational implicature must be capable of being worked out; for even if it can in fact be intuitively grasped, unless the intuition is replaceable by an argument, the implicature (if present at all) will not count as a conversational implicature; [...] (Grice, 1989, p.31)*

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(Besides, even **entailments** rely on the rationality presumption...)

## 4.4. Grice on cancellability

*Since, to assume the presence of a conversational implicature, we have to assume that at least the Cooperative Principle is being observed, and since it is possible to opt out of the observation of this principle, it follows that a conversational implicature can be cancelled in a particular case. [...]*

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*It may be explicitly canceled, by the addition of a clause that states or implies that the speaker has opted out, or it may be contextually cancelled, if the form of utterance that usually carries it is used in a context that makes it clear that the speaker IS opting out. (p.57)*

## 4.5. Cancelability does not imply weakness

So, conversational implicature is **cancelable** in two ways:

- ▶ **contextually**: what is rational is context-dependent:

(3) *[In response to an inquiry about handwriting/punctuality:]*

Mr. X has excellent handwriting and is always very punctual.

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Cancelability implies that:

- ▶ the presence of CI correlates with what is *rational* in the given context (which may be explicitly announced/changed);
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*But (3)/(4) are not the textbook examples of cancellation...*

## 4.6. Textbook examples of cancellation are misleading

More typical examples (similar to Grice's...):

- (5) He is seeing a woman. (Oh,) but I didn't mean to imply that...
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(cf. experiments)

## 4.7. Cancelability $\neq$ defeasibility

Crucially, cancelability does *not* imply:

- ▶ “A rational speaker can make a conversational implicature and then contradict it.”

(And none of the examples in the literature are of this kind.)

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More directly:

1. CI follow from rationality presumption;
2. *hence*: if CI is false, speaker must be irrational.

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Entailments enter speaker meaning only via the *Maxim of Quality*.

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(elsewhere I've argued that a *final rise* can do the same.)

## 4.9. Mixed experimental results

Consider again the role of context/intonation:

- (6) I saw some of the students. Indeed, I saw all.
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This explains the apparent weakness of CI in experiments.

# Outline

Introduction

Warming up: the implicature in (1)

Semantics is the wastebasket (in the first sense)

Grice on meaning

Semantics and pragmatics

Bringing order into the semantics wastebasket

Pragmatics is not a wastebasket (in the second sense)

Those “flimsy” conversational implicatures

Defeasibility

Cancellability

Mixed experimental results

Conclusion & outlook

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- ▶ only cancelable (but so are entailments).

Cancelability of Cls does *not* imply weakness, but:

- ▶ **systematic context-dependence**;
- ▶ the systematicity is governed by *rationality*;
- ▶ studying this is the goal of pragmatics.

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And illustrate this in a number of cases:

- ▶ exhaustivity implicatures (e.g., (1));
- ▶ intonational meaning: focus, contrastive topic, final contours;
- ▶ questions, “yes” and “no”;
- ▶ Maybe: conditionals, presuppositions.



Thank you!