

Lecture 2: A theory of implicature

H. P. Grice (1957), 'Logic and Conversation' in Peter Cole and Jerry L. Morgan (eds.) *Syntax and Semantics*, Vol. 3, Speech Acts, New York: Academic Press.

Meaning more than we say

The Gricean theory of meaning understands sentence meaning in terms of speaker meaning, and speaker meaning in terms of communicative intention. The general idea is that what I *communicatively intend* you to believe when I assert P is *what P means_{nm}* on an occasion.

Yet often we have communicative intentions that do not give us what the sentences we utter mean. Here's Grice's own example:

Suppose that A and B are talking about a mutual friend, C, who is now working in a bank. A asks B how C is getting on in his job, and B replies, *Oh quite well, I think; he likes his colleagues, and he hasn't been to prison yet*. At this point, A might well inquire what B was implying, what he was suggesting, or even what he meant by saying that C had not yet been to prison. The answer might be any one of such things as that C is the sort of person likely to yield to the temptation provided by his occupation, that C's colleagues are really very unpleasant and treacherous people, and so forth.

Another example: "My head literally exploded." It is obvious that this sentence, even considered as a token utterance, means that someone's head exploded. Yet that's not what someone using it means! Another example: "She is English; she is, therefore, brave." Strictly, this sentence means that she is brave for *some* reason, but what someone means by it is that *her being English* is why.

An acceptable theory of sentence meaning should also distinguish between what we mean to *say* and what we mean to *imply* (or 'implicate').

The cooperative principle

How does an audience become aware of implicature? All they get is an utterance of which they (probably) know the conventional meaning. But in many cases this doesn't help you get the implicature. You could give extra-linguistic clues, of course (raised eyebrows, a wink). But according to Grice we mainly communicate implicature by violating the ordinary norms of conversation.

To offer this explanation of how we communicate implicatures, one should also offer a picture of these ordinary norms of conversation. Do we have those? We can identify a general Cooperative Principle: *make your conversational contribution such as is required by the accepted purpose or direction of the exchange in which you are engaged*.

I. Quantity

1. Be informative...
2. ...but not more than required

II. Quality

1. Do not say things you believe to be false
2. Do not say things for which you lack evidence

III. Relation ('be relevant')

IV. Manner

1. Avoid obscurity
2. Avoid ambiguity
3. Be brief
4. Be orderly

This framework is interesting in its own right and has sparked a vast literature in linguistics and speech act theory. But what matters for a theory of implicature is simply that there *are* ordinary norms of conversations that can be violated (ignored, flouted, fail to fulfil it). It is in this way that conversational implicature arises:

If speaker S says that p, then S conversationally implicates that q if:

1. S is presumed to be observing the CP
2. To make S's saying that p consistent with (1), one must assume S believes that q
3. S thinks (and expects the hearer to think that S thinks) that the hearer is competent to figure out that (2)

Example:

A: "How is Tom getting on in his job?"

B: "Oh, very well, I think; he likes his colleagues, and he hasn't been to prison yet."

Implicatum: Tom is the sort of person likely to yield to the temptation provided by his occupation

Maxim: Relevance appears to be infringed. But one must assume that it is not being infringed, so the odd second conjunct must be somehow relevant. The implicatum proposed explains how it is relevant

Particularised vs generalised conversational implicatures

For some types of sentences, an implicature has become almost a cliché. We can speak of a 'generalised conversational implicature'. These are sentences that normally (i.e. in the absence of special circumstances) carry an implicature. A hearer using a sentence of such types on an occasion can exploit an audience's awareness of this general usage of the sentence, making it quite obvious to hear what the speaker means with her utterance. Following the characterisation of the sentence meaning of utterance types, we can say for generalised conversational implicature that:

(timelessly) the sentence "x' implies that q' is equivalent (roughly) to a statement or disjunction of statements about what people, vaguely construed, imply conversationally by uttering tokens of 'x' on particular occasions.

Such generalised conversational implicatures do perhaps not require a hearer to work out the presence of the implicature, as long as they are aware of the normal use of the sentence. However, it is still the case that to make S's saying that p consistent with S's observing CP, we must assume that *S implicates more than what the sentence S uses means*.

Conventional implicature

It is possible for a normal implicature to become more than a cliché. An implicature is *conventional* if and only if the implicature can no longer be separated from the conventional meaning of the sentence. This inseparability can be detected through the following test. Sometimes we are able to *cancel* an implicature by adding a clarification to the sentence (see Grice 1961).

- i. "Tim's handwriting is exceptional." (Particular conversational implicature)
"Tim's handwriting is exceptional, though I'm not implying that he's not a good student as well." (Cancelled)
- ii. "My head literally exploded." (Generalised conversational implicature)
"My head literally exploded, though of course I mean that figuratively." (Cancelled)
- iii. "She is English; she is, therefore, brave." (Conventional implicature)
"She is English; she is, therefore, brave—though I don't mean she's brave because she's English." (??)

This allows us to construct a clear theory of implicature:

- I. If and only if an utterance means more than what is said with the utterance, an additional meaning is implied or implicated: the sentence has an implicature
 - A. This implicature is conversational if and only if understanding what the utterance means requires a hearer to assume that the speaker implicates more than what the sentence the speaker uses means
 1. This conversational implicature is generalised if and only if the implicature has become part of its normal usage, i.e. it has become cliché
 - B. The implicature in (I) is conventional if and only if one cannot cancel out the implicature by adding a clarification of the sentence's meaning