

Semantics 1

Gerhard Jäger
UTübingen

July 12, 2012

1 Conversational Implicatures

Paul Grice (1968, 1975)

- Communication is cooperative interaction
- conversational contributions are formulated and understood under the premise that they are intended as being cooperative
- **Cooperation Principle: Be cooperative!**
“Make your contribution such as it is required, at the stage at which it occurs, by the accepted purpose or direction of the talk exchange in which you are engaged.”

Spelling out the four conversational maxims

Maxim of Quality: Do not say what you believe to be false or for which you lack sufficient evidence.

Maxim of Quantity:

- (i) Make your contribution as informative as is required (for the current purposes of the exchange).
- (ii) Do not make your contribution more informative than is required.

Maxim of Relation: Be relevant.

Maxim of Manner: Be Clear.

- Avoid obscurity of expression.
- Avoid ambiguity.
- Be brief (avoid unnecessary prolixity).
- Be orderly.

Conversational Implicature:

Inference that is based on the assumption that everybody knows and tries to follow these maxims.

Status of the conversational maxims:

- We take it for granted that our conversational partner follows the maxims.
- Whenever they are obviously violated, we invoke an inference mechanism that re-interprets the conversational contribution in such a way that the cooperation principle is respected.
- Inferences that are drawn in this way are called **implicatures**; the corresponding verb is **to implicate**.

Examples

- (1) A: Where is Bill?
B: There is a yellow VW in front of Ann's house.

B's answer seems to violate Relation and Quantity. If we assume that Bill owns a yellow VW, the answer can be re-interpreted as being relevant. B's contribution then implicates that Bill is probably visiting Ann, but that B has no further evidence for this fact except the fact that a car that might be Bill's is parked in front of Ann's house.

- (2) A: (to a passerby): I am out of gas.
B: There is a gas station around the corner.

B implicates that the gas station is probably open, that he believes A to be able to walk there, etc.

In these examples the maxims were fulfilled if certain additional contextual assumptions are made. In the following example, one of the maxims is deliberately violated.

- (3) A: Are we going to buy some sweets for the kids?
B: Okay, but no I-C-E! (pronouncing each letter separately)

B violates Modality. If it is granted that he is cooperative, there must be superordinate reasons for this, for instance the fact that the kids are listening and would demand ice cream if they hear the word.

The Maxim of Quality

- (4) John has two doctoral degrees.
The speaker believes this, and she has adequate evidence for it.

This explains **Moore's paradox**:

- (5) *The cat is on the mat, but I don't believe it.

The Maxim of Quantity

- (6) Nigel has fourteen children.

Implicature: Nigel has **exactly** fourteen children.

- (7) The flag is white.
The flag is everywhere white.

- (8) A: How did it go in court for Harry?
B: He was fined.
He wasn't sentenced to jail.

Relevance

(9) Pass me the salt, please.

I want the salt now.

(10) A: Do you know the time?

B: The postman just arrived.

B does not know the precise time, but both know that the postman always arrives at approximately the same time, and that one can therefore guess the approximate time from B's answer.

Modality

(11) Alfred entered the store and bought a bottle of whisky.

*Alfred **first** entered the store and **then** bought a bottle of whisky.*

(Additionally we can infer that he bought the whisky in the mentioned store, but this inference is based on Relation.)

What exactly are “implicatures”?

Grice: distinction between “conversational” and “conventional” implicatures. Conventional implicatures are non-truth conditional, but nonetheless conventionalized aspects of meaning. Conversational implicatures are based on the conversational maxims. We will focus solely on conversational implicatures here.

How are **conversational implicatures** defined?

- Grice:

If S says that p , then S conversationally implicates q iff

1. It is assumed that S follows the conversational maxims, or at least the Cooperation Principle.
2. To maintain this assumption, one has to suppose that S assumes q to be the case.

3. S believes that both S and the hearer H mutually know that H is able to draw the inference in 2.

General pattern for the computation of (conversational) implicatures:

- S said that p .
- There is no evidence that S violates the maxims or even the Cooperation Principle.
- When respecting the maxims and the Cooperation Principle, S can only say p if she assumes q to be true.
- S must believe that these facts are mutual knowledge between S and H.
- There is no reason to assume that S would not intend H to believe q .
- S intends H to believe, and therefore implicates by expressing p that q is the case.

Conversational implicatures are **defeasible**. They are based on background assumptions that are usually, but not always true, and that can be suspended explicitly. In particular, quantity implicatures only arise if it is assumed that S is, for the purposes of the particular conversational situation, is omniscient. This can be explicitly denied.

(12) Peter has fourteen children.
Peter has exactly fourteen children.

(13) Peter has fourteen children, perhaps even more.
S does not know exactly how many children Peter has, but she knows that he has at least fourteen children.

Ordinary entailments cannot be suspended:

Peter has fourteen children. \vdash Peter has thirteen children.

(14) ??Peter has fourteen children, and perhaps he has at most thirteen children.

Quantity implicatures also disappear if the alternative utterances, that are invoked when computing them, are not relevant. E.g., if there is a tax break for parents of at least three children, then the answer in the following dialogue does not implicate that the client has exactly three children:

- (15) a. Tax advisor: Do you have three children?
b. Client: yes.

Tests for implicatures

- defeasability
- cancelable
- predictable from semantic content
- non-conventional

Generalized quantity implicatures

A linguistic *scale* is a set of mutually contrastive expressions of the same grammatical category that are linearly ordered according to *informativity* or *semantic strength*.

- (16) $\langle e_1, e_2, e_3, \dots, e_n \rangle$

Unless $A(e_i)$ is a negative context, it holds for $n < m$: $A(e_n)$ entails $A(e_m)$.

Examples

- (17) a. All boys went to the party.
b. Some boys went to the party.

Scale:

$\langle \text{all, some} \rangle$

- (18) a. Peter has a new bicycle or a new car.
b. Peter has a new bicycle and a new car.

Scale

$\langle \text{and, or} \rangle$

Scalar implicatures Let $\langle e_1, e_2, e_3, \dots, e_n \rangle$ be a linguistic scale. If S claims that $A(e_m)$, $n < m$ holds, and $A(\cdot)$ is not a negative context, then S implicates with her claim that $\neg A(e_n)$.

Examples for scales:

- (19) a. $\langle \text{all, most, many, some, a few} \rangle$
b. $\langle n, \dots, 5, 4, 3, 2, 1 \rangle$
c. $\langle \text{excellent, good} \rangle$
d. $\langle \text{hot, warm} \rangle$
e. $\langle \text{always, often, sometimes} \rangle$
f. $\langle \text{to manage, to try, to intend} \rangle$
g. $\langle \text{necessary, possible} \rangle$
h. $\langle \text{must, should, can} \rangle$
i. $\langle \text{certainly, probably, possibly} \rangle$
j. $\langle \text{cold, cool} \rangle$
k. $\langle \text{to love, to like} \rangle$
l. $\langle \text{nobody, not everybody} \rangle$