

What is a conversational implicature?

Introduction to Pragmatics

November 24, 2010

Definition. Grice (1975), pp. 30-31 (emphasis and formatting added):

I am now in a position to characterize the notion of conversational implicature. A man who, by (in, when) saying (or making as if to say) that p has implicated that q , may be said to have *con conversationally implicated* that q , provided that:

1. He is presumed to be observing the conversational maxims, or at least the Cooperative Principle;
2. He is aware that, or thinks that, q is required in order to make his saying or making as if to say p (or doing so in *those* terms) consistent with this presumption;
3. The speaker thinks (and would expect the hearer to work out, or grasp intuitively, that the supposition mentioned in (2) is required.

So a conversational implicature from p to q is an implicature from p to q that satisfies conditions 1-3.

Example.

- p = B saying to A about C: “he hasn’t been to prison yet”
- q = “C is potentially dishonest”

Does p conversationally implicate q ? Three conditions to check:

1. B has apparently violated the maxim ‘Be relevant’ and so may be regarded as having flouted one of the maxims conjoining perspicuity, yet I have no reason to suppose that he is opting out from the operation of the Cooperative Principle;
2. Given the circumstances, I can regard his irrelevance as only apparent if, and only if, I suppose him to think that C is potentially dishonest;
3. B knows that I am capable of working out step (2).

So, yes.