

# Lecture 4: Conversational Implicature

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## 1 A dialogue from *When Harry Met Sally*

**Jess:** If she's so great why aren't you taking her out?

**Harry:** How many times do I have to tell you, we're just friends.

**Jess:** So you're saying she's not that attractive.

**Harry:** No, I told you she *is* attractive.

**Jess:** Yeah but you also said she has a good personality.

**Harry:** She *has* a good personality.

(Jess stops walking, turns to Harry, raises her arms in the air)

**Harry:** What?

**Jess:** When someone is not that attractive, they're always described as having a good personality.

**Harry:** Look, if you would ask me, "What does she look like?" and I said, "She has a good personality." That means she's not attractive. But just because I happened to mention that she has a good personality, she could be either. She could be attractive with a good personality, or not attractive with a good personality.

**Jess:** So which one is she?

**Harry:** Attractive.

**Jess:** But not beautiful, right?

(Harry walks away.)

## 2 Conversational implicature

Harry's claim is that (2) implies (3) only when (2) is a response to the question in (1).

- (1) What does she look like?
- (2) She has a good personality.
- (3) She is not attractive.

How does this implication arise in the context of that question?

When someone says (2), even in the context of (1), (3) is not part of *what is said*. In other words, (2) does not *entail* or *logically imply* (3). Rather, the implication comes about through reasoning about the speaker's motivations. This is therefore a *conversational implicature*.

An example from Grice (1975):

- (4) A: How is C getting on in his job?  
B: Oh, quite well, I think; he likes his colleagues, and he hasn't been to prison yet.

What is B suggesting? Distinct from what B is *saying*. This content is (con conversationally) *implicated*.

Grice distinguishes two kinds of implicature:

- *Conventional implicatures*. When the meaning of the words determines what is implicated.
  - (5) He is an Englishman; he is, therefore, brave.What is implicated: "it follows from his being an Englishman that he is brave" (p. 25). Implicatures of this type are conventionally associated with the word *therefore*. (Maybe these are really just presuppositions.)
- *Conversational implicatures*: These are "essentially connected with certain general features of discourse," namely the Cooperative Principle.

**The Cooperative Principle:** "Make your conversational contribution such as is required, at the stage at which it occurs, by the accepted purpose or direction of the talk exchange in which you are engaged" (p. 26).

### 1. Maxim of Quantity

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

**2. Maxim of Quality:** Try to make your contribution one that is true.

1. Do not say what you believe to be false.
2. Do not say that for which you lack adequate evidence.

**3. Maxim of Relation:** Be relevant.

**4. Maxim of Manner:** Be perspicuous.

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

But these maxims, and the Cooperative Principle, are not always followed. The maxims can be violated in various ways (p. 30):

**1. Quietly and unostentatiously violating a maxim.**

**2. Opting out.** He may say, indicate, or allow it to become plain that he is unwilling to cooperate in the way the maxim requires.

**3. Being faced with a clash:** Being unable to fulfill one maxim without violating another.

**4. Flouting a maxim:** Blatantly failing to fulfill it. “This situation is one that characteristically gives rise to a conversational implicature; and when a conversational implicature is generated in this way, I say that a maxim is being *exploited*.”

**Conversational implicature.** 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.

### 3 Implicatures in which no maxim is violated

**Relevance**

- (6) A: Where’s Bill?  
B: There’s a yellow VW outside Sue’s house. (Levinson 1983 ex. (18))

*Appears* to violate Quantity and Relevance (if you consider the utterance only at a superficial level, the level of ‘what is said’). But with additional assumptions, the information becomes relevant; if the yellow VW is Bill’s, and it is outside Sue’s house because Bill drove to Sue’s house in order to visit her, then Bill is in Sue’s house.

Examples (1) and (2) from Grice (1975, p. 32):

- (7) A: I am out of petrol.  
B: There is a garage round the corner.

*Gloss:* B would be infringing the maxim “Be relevant” unless he thinks, or thinks it is possible, that the garage is open, and has petrol to sell; so he implicates that the garage is, or at least may be open, etc.

- (8) A: Smith doesn’t seem to have a girlfriend these days.  
B: He has been paying a lot of visits to New York lately.

*B implicates that Smith is, or may have, a girlfriend in New York. (A gloss is unnecessary in view of that given for the previous example.)*

*In both examples, the speaker implicates that which he must be assumed to believe in order to preserve the assumption that he is observing the maxim of Relation.*

### Manner

- (9) Alfred went to the store and bought some whiskey.  
Implicates that he went to the store first.

Hence oddity of:

- (10) a. The lone ranger jumped on his horse and rode into the sunset.  
b. #The lone ranger rode into the sunset and jumped on his horse.

This is not due to *and*:

- (11) a. The capital of France is Paris and the capital of England is London.  
b. The capital of England is London and the capital of France is Paris.

### Quality

- (12) John has two Ph.D.s.

Implicates: Speaker believes he has, and has adequate evidence that he has.

Explains 'Moore's paradox':

- (13) #John has two Ph.D.s but I don't believe he has.

According to Levinson (1983), "this sentence is pragmatically anomalous because it contradicts the standard Quality implicature that one believes what one asserts."

But aren't implicatures defeasible? Maybe not quality implicatures. Indeed, Grice says that Quality is more important than other maxims (p. 27):

It is obvious that the observance of some of these maxims is a matter of less urgency than is the observance of others; a man who has expressed himself with undue prolixity would, in general, be open to milder comment than would a man who has said something he believes to be false.

### Quantity

- (14) Nigel has fourteen children.

Implicates: John has *only* fourteen children.

- (15) A: How did Harry fare in court the other day?  
B: Oh, he got a fine.

B is misleading A if Harry got a life sentence, too.

Levinson (1983, p. 106): "All of these examples involve the first sub-maxim of Quantity, which appears to be the important one, in which the provision of full information is enjoined. The effect of the maxim is to add to most utterances a pragmatic inference to the effect that the statement presented is the strongest, or most informative, that can be made in the situation; in many cases the implicatures can be glossed by adding *only* to the propositional content of the sentence."

## 4 Quietly and unostentatiously violating a maxim

Grice says that in the case that one quietly and unostentatiously violates a maxim, "one is liable to mislead".

**Quiet violation of Quality:** Saying something you know to be false. The hearer would believe you.

**Quiet violation of Quantity:** Failing to mention all of the relevant information. The hearer would assume that there is nothing more to know (e.g. *Oh, he got a fine* when in fact he also got a life sentence)

**Quiet violation of Relevance:** Saying something that is irrelevant. The hearer would assume that it is relevant.

Example from a hearing investigating fraud by Goldman Sachs:

- (16) Senator Carl Levin: And when you heard that your employees, in these e-mails, when looking at these deals said, God, what a shitty deal, God what a piece of crap – when you hear your own employees or read about those in the e-mails, do you feel anything?

Goldman Sachs CFO David Vinar: I think that's very unfortunate to have on e-mail.

**Quiet violation of Manner:** Using too many words or repeating information. The hearer might assume that there is more being communicated than there actually is.

## 5 Opting out of the Cooperative principle

**Opting out of Quantity:**

- (17) My lips are sealed; I cannot say more. (Grice 1975)

**Opting out of Quality:**

- (18) I'm not sure, but I think ...

**Opting out of Manner:**

- (19) I don't know how to say this more simply: ...

**Opting out of Relevance:**

- (20) I don't know if this answers your question, but: ...

Such *hedges* are ways of marking that you are opting out of the CP.

## 6 Maxim violations due to a clash

**Clash between Quantity and Quality** Grice's example (3):

- (21) A: Where does C live?  
B: Somewhere in the south of France

Violation of Quantity (B's answer is less informative than required) in order to preserve Quality ("Don't say what you lack evidence for"). Implicature: B does not know where C lives.

## 7 Implicatures in which a maxim is flouted

### 7.1 Quantity

#### 7.1.1 Quantity 1: Say as much as is required

Example: A is writing a testimonial about a pupil who is a candidate for a philosophy job, and his letter reads:

Dear Sir,  
  
Mr. X's command of English is excellent, and his attendance at tutorials has been regular.  
  
Yours,  
etc.

*Gloss: A cannot be opting out, since if he wished to be uncooperative, why write at all? He cannot be unable, through ignorance, to say more, since the man is his pupil; moreover, he knows that more information than this is wanted. He must, therefore, be wishing to impart information that he is reluctant to write down. This supposition is tenable only if he thinks Mr. X is no good at philosophy. This, then, is what he is implicating.* (Grice 1975, p. 33)

Tautologies:

- (22) War is war.  
 $\forall x[W(x) \rightarrow W(x)]$
- (23) Either John will come or he won't.  
 $p \vee \neg p$
- (24) If he does it, he does it.  
 $p \rightarrow p$

These are uninformative. What do they convey? Something like 'don't worry'.

#### 7.1.2 Quantity 2: Say no more than is required

A wants to know whether  $p$ , and B volunteers not only the information that  $p$ , but information to the effect that it is certain that  $p$ , and that the evidence for its being the case that  $p$  is so-and-so and such-and-such.

B's volubility [talkativeness] may be undesigned [not on purpose], and if it is so regarded by A it may raise in A's mind a doubt as to whether B is as certain as he says he is ("Methinks the lady doth protest too much").<sup>1</sup> But if it is thought of as designed, it would be an oblique [indirect] way of conveying that it is to some degree controversial whether or not  $p$ .

### 7.2 Quality

#### 7.2.1 Quality 1: Do not say what you believe to be false

*Irony:*

- (25) X is a fine friend. (Grice 1975)
- (26) A: What if the USSR blockades the Gulf and all the oil?  
B: Oh come now, Britain rules the seas! (Levinson ex. (33))

*Metaphor:*

- (27) You are the cream in my coffee. (Grice 1975)
- (28) Queen Victoria was made of iron. (Levinson ex. (34))

*Meiosis/understatement:*

- (29) [Of a man known to have broken up all the furniture]  
He was a little intoxicated. (Grice 1975)

*Hyperbole/overstatement:*

- (30) Every nice girl loves a sailor. (Grice 1975)

#### 7.2.2 Quality 2: Do not say that for which you lack evidence

- (31) [Of X's wife, with a suitable gesture or tone of voice:]  
She is probably deceiving him this evening.

### 7.3 Relation

- (32) A: Mrs. X is an old bag.  
B: The weather has been delightful this summer, hasn't it?

Violation of Relation. Implicates "that A's remark should not be discussed" (p. 35).

<sup>1</sup>From Shakespeare's *Hamlet* ("The lady doth protest too much, methinks").

## 7.4 Manner

*Obscurity.* “Suppose that A and B are having a conversation in the presence of a third party, for example, a child, then A might be deliberately obscure, though not too obscure, in the hope that B would understand and the third party not. Furthermore, if A expects B to see that A is being deliberately obscure, it seems reasonable to suppose that, in making his conversational contribution in this way, A is implicating that the contents of his communication should not be imparted to the third party.” (pp. 36-37)

- (33) A: Let’s get the kids something.  
B: Okay, but I veto I-C-E C-R-E-A-M-S.

*Failure to be brief*

- (34) a. Miss X sang “Home Sweet Home.”  
b. Miss X produced a series of sounds that corresponded closely with the score of “Home Sweet Home”

“The most obvious supposition is that Miss X’s performance suffered from some hideous defect” (p. 37).

## 8 Conclusion

Do the divergences between formal and natural languages seem smaller now?

At least one example: order of conjuncts.

## 9 Seinfeld car reservation scene

A. Can I help you? Name please?

J. Uh, Seinfeld, uh I made a reservation for a midsize, and SHE’s a small! I’m kidding around, of course, um...

A. Yes. OK, let’s see here...

J. [to E] 66 years old...

E. Yeah, well, he’s in perfect health. He works out. He’s vibrant. You’d really like him.

J. Why do people always say that. I hate everybody. Why would I like him?

E. So what do you think, could you go out with a 66 year old woman?

J. Well, I’ll tell ya. She would have to be really vibrant... So vibrant she’d be spinning.

A. Well, I’m sorry, we have no midsize available at the moment.

J. I don’t understand, I made a reservation. Do you have my reservation?

A. Yes, we do. Unfortunately, we ran out of cars.

J. But the reservation keeps the car here. That’s why you have the reservation.

A. Yes, I know why we have reservations.

J. I don’t think you do. If you did, I’d have a car. See, you know how to take the reservation. You just don’t know how to hold the reservation. And that’s really the most important part of the reservation: the holding. Anybody can just take ‘em.

A. Let me, uh, speak with my supervisor.

J. Alright. Here we go... the supervisor. You know what she’s saying over there?

E. What?

J. Hey, Marge, see those two people over there? They think I’m talking to you, so you pretend like you’re talking to me. OK, now you start talking.

E. Oh! You mean like this, so it looks like I’m saying something, but I’m not really saying anything at all.

J. OK, now you say something else, and they won’t yell at me, ‘cause they thought I was checking with you.

E. Oh great, I think, I think that’s enough, I’ll see you later.

A. I’m sorry, my supervisor says there’s nothing we can do.

J. Yeah, it looked like you were in a real conversation over there.

A. But we do have a compact, if you would like that.

J. Fine.

A. Alright. Well, we have a blue Ford Escort for you Mr. Seinfeld. Would you like insurance?

J. Yeah, you’d better give me the insurance because I am gonna beat the hell out of this thing.

A. Please fill this out.

## References

Grice, P. (1975). Logic and conversation. In *Studies in the Ways of Words*, chapter 2, pages 22–40. Harvard University Press, Cambridge, MA.

Levinson, S. C. (1983). *Pragmatics*. Cambridge University Press, Cambridge.