

Conversational implicatures

Readings: C&C 1.1.1

1. A note on the semantics/pragmatics interface

- *Literal/semantic meaning*: context-independent; computed from meanings of individual expressions + rules of composition; concerns truth-conditions
- *Strengthened/pragmatic meaning*: context-dependent; literal meaning + inferences that arise from uttering the sentence in the given context; concerns levels of meaning beyond truth-conditions
- Big question: which phenomena belong in semantics and which in pragmatics?

2. Gricean pragmatics

- Implicatures are inferences that arise from an utterance via reasoning about the speaker's motives and beliefs on the assumption that the speaker is cooperative:
 - (1) Inspector: Have you noticed anything unusual in the office yesterday afternoon?
Witness: I left the office at noon yesterday.
- Paul Grice put forward a general *cooperative principle* and suggested that implicatures are computed based on the assumption that speakers obey this 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.” (Grice, 1975)
- Grice also spelt out some concrete rules that cooperative speakers have to obey. These rules are called *conversational maxims*:
 1. *Quantity*:
 - (a) “Make your contribution as informative as is required (for the current purposes of the exchange).”
 - (b) “Do not make your contribution more informative than is required.”
 2. *Quality* “Try to make your contribution one that is true:”
 - (a) “Do not say what you believe to be false.”
 - (b) “Do not say that for which you lack adequate evidence.”
 3. *Relation* “Be relevant.”
 4. *Manner* “Be perspicuous:”
 - (a) “Avoid obscurity of expression.”
 - (b) “Avoid ambiguity.”
 - (c) “Be brief (avoid unnecessary prolixity).”
 - (d) “Be orderly.”

- Relation explains why in (1) the implicature arises that that the witness has not noticed anything unusual:
 - (i) The literal meaning of the witness' utterance isn't relevant in that it doesn't answer the inspector's question. So, the witness appears to be violating the **maxim of Relation**.
 - (ii) To uphold the assumption that the witness is nevertheless obeying the **Cooperative Principle**, the inspector must find a reason why the witness said that she left at noon.
 - (iii) A plausible reason: leaving the office at noon makes it impossible to witness anything in the office in the afternoon, meaning that the witness has nothing to tell the inspector.
 - (iv) The witness hasn't done anything to prevent the inspector from arriving at the conclusion in (iii).
 - (v) Therefore, the witness has implicated that he has nothing to tell the inspector.
- The above computation involves a maxim violation: the speaker is violating Relation in a deliberate and obvious way (in Grice's terms: she is *flouting* the maxim). The implicature arises from reconciling this violation with the assumption that the speaker obeys the Cooperative Principle.
- But implicatures can also be generated simply from obeying the maxims:
 - (2) [A and B are planning an itinerary for a roadtrip. They want to visit their friend Jack.]
A: Where does Jack live?
B: He lives somewhere in Southern California.
→ B doesn't know where exactly in southern California Jack lives.

In-class Exercise 1

- Using Gricean reasoning like in the examples above, say how we arrive at the implicatures below.
 - (3) Alex solved some of the exercises.
→ Alex didn't solve all exercises.
 - (4) [From a recommendation letter written for a student who is applying for a job]
"Dear Sir or Madam, Mr. X's command of English is excellent, and his attendance at tutorials has been regular. Sincerely, etc."
→ Mr. X was not a good student.

3. Properties of implicatures

3.1. Cancelability

- Implicatures can be canceled:

- (5) a. Witness: I left the office at noon yesterday, but I still noticed something: this morning when I came in, the window was open.
b. Alex solved some of the exercises. In fact, she solved all of them.

- By contrast, ordinary entailments and presuppositions cannot be cancelled:

- (6) a. #Alice has a cute dog, but/in fact she doesn't have a dog. *entailment*
b. #Alice fed her dog, but/in fact she doesn't have a dog. *presupposition*

3.2. Reinforceability

- Implicatures can be reinforced without sounding redundant:

- (7) a. Witness: I left the office at noon yesterday, and I didn't notice anything.
b. Alex solved some of the exercises, but not all of them.

- By contrast, reinforcing ordinary entailments and presuppositions produces redundant statements:

- (8) a. #Alice has a cute dog, and she has a dog. *entailment*
b. #Alice fed her dog, and she has a dog. *presupposition*

3.3. Context dependence

- With entailments and presuppositions, whether they arise does *not* depend on the context in which a sentence is uttered. No matter in which context (9a) or (9b) are uttered, they will always give rise to the inference that Alice has a dog.

- (9) a. Alice has a cute dog.
b. Alice fed her dog.

- By contrast, implicatures are *context-dependent*. An utterance made in a certain context may give rise to an implicature, but there are other contexts in which the same utterance doesn't give rise to this implicature.

- (10) [A wants to interview people who live in Southern California.]
A: Where does Jack live?
B: He lives somewhere in Southern California.
↯ B doesn't know where exactly in southern California Jack lives.

Summary of inference types

	Context-dependent?	Cancelable?	Reinforceable w/o redundancy?
ordinary entailments	no	no	no
presuppositions	no	no	no
implicatures	yes	yes	yes

4. Diagnosing inferences

- You can use the different properties of implicatures, presuppositions and ordinary entailments to find out to which of these categories a given inference belongs.

In-class Exercise 2

- Determine whether the inference in each of the examples below is an ordinary entailment, a presupposition, or an implicature.
 - If it's a presupposition, say what triggers it.
- (II)
- Charly is in Edinburgh.
→ Charly is in Scotland.
 - Mimi called again.
→ Mimi has called before.
 - Melissa has fallen asleep.
→ Melissa is asleep.
 - A: Are you coming to the party tonight?
B: I have to finish my homework.
→ B is not coming to the party.

What you need to know

Key notions: literal (semantic) meaning, strengthened (pragmatic) meaning, implicature, Cooperative Principle, conversational maxims, flouting a maxim, cancellability, reinforceability, context-dependence

Skills:

- Derive implicatures via Gricean reasoning, by appealing to the conversational maxims and the Cooperative Principle.
- Determine whether an inference is an ordinary entailments, a presuppositions, or an implicatures.