

Ambiguity in Gricean Implicature

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Grice’s “Logic and Conversation” reveals the ways in which sentences can be used in particular contexts to mean, or implicate, something other than their conventional meanings. This paper explains the concept of a conversational implicature, first more generally and then more formally, through Grice’s notion of the Cooperation Principle, a set of rules that govern rational cooperative conversations. It then walks through two examples to help ground exactly how implicatures are generated out of these maxims, either by obeying them or directly violating them. In the latter half of the paper, I introduce Grice’s idea that implicatures can always be worked out and discuss how this claim interacts with ambiguity—first, by discussing Grice’s point that ambiguity is what can sometimes be what is implicated, and then by discussing the problem that still lies with respect to whether ambiguities are intentional or not. I continue by articulating why the distinction between intentional ambiguity and failed implicature is important for Grice’s theory to address, and conclude the paper by offering a revision.

Before diving into the more formal explanation of conversational implicature according to Grice, I will first offer a simpler version of what he’s getting at. Generally, a conversational implicature is made when someone says something, but implies, means or suggests something else. Take the following living room dialogue as person A and person B are about to watch TV:

A: Want to watch the tennis match?

B: Hmm... that new episode of Jeopardy looks pretty interesting.

If one hears exactly what is said by the two speakers, this exchange makes little sense. A is asking B whether they want to watch a tennis match, but B is offering their opinion of an entirely different TV program. However, there’s a more informative explanation for what’s happening here: A offers to put on the tennis match, and B, not wanting to watch tennis, offers Jeopardy as an alternative for what they would like to watch instead. To put it another way, we are generally inclined to think that A and B, in engaging in this conversation by the living room TV, are trying to do something cooperative—they are trying to decide on something to watch. If that’s the case, it would be weird for B to ignore A’s ask, while speaking favorably about Jeopardy, unless we thought what B *really* meant in saying that sentence was to refuse A’s proposal and offer Jeopardy instead. What B is communicating then, is something different from what B has literally said, and so we might think B has made a conversational implicature.

To know that B meant something other than what they said, we are relying on the fact that the first explanation, that B meant *only* what they said, would have made no sense. This assumption is the basis upon which conversational implicatures are revealed. Putting this more formally, Grice argues that there are a set of maxims, or rules, that govern rational cooperative conversation, which he calls the Cooperation Principle (45). When the things we say depart from these rules (and seemingly break them,) we might then be making conversational implicatures, or conveying something aside from what we literally said, in order for us to maintain a conversation is rational and cooperative.

To briefly summarize the Cooperation Principle (CP), his maxims fall under four categories: Quantity, Quality, Relation, and Manner (45). Under Quantity, Grice's two maxims are that one's contribution to a conversation should be as informative as required, and that it is not more informative than is required. By Quality, Grice means that one should try to contribute what is true, which means that (1) the contribution shouldn't be what one think's is false, and (2) it shouldn't be something for which one lacks adequate evidence to say. To observe the maxim of Relation is to make one's contribution relevant to the conversation. Lastly, the idea of Manner refers to the rules that govern *how* something is said, rather than *what* is said, namely that one should (1) avoid obscurity, (2) avoid ambiguity, (3) be brief, and (4) be orderly.

To give some additional context—Grice believes there are other kinds of maxims (such as those relating to politeness) that can generate conversational implicatures, but that the ones above serve to outline the conversational purpose of “maximally effective exchange of information” (47). For the purposes of what I plan to discuss, I've chosen to be brief here, but now that there is at least some picture of what the CP is, it's possible to consider a more precise definition of conversational implicature. Grice offers the definition in three parts (50). To summarize, a speaker who has said p has also conversationally implicated q in the case that:

- (i) They are observing the Cooperation Principle.
- (ii) q is necessary to make p consistent with the Cooperation Principle.
- (iii) They think (and would expect the hearer to think that the speaker thinks) that it is possible for the hearer to work out that q is necessary.

In order to ground this definition, it would help to walk through some conversational instances where implicatures are generated. This can happen for Grice in two ways: a speaker either intends to obey the maxims, or intends to blatantly violate

them, both of which can generate implicatures (49). I will discuss an example of each.

The earlier dialogue between A and B in the living room serves as an example of the kind of implicature generated by obeying maxims. When B says, “the new episode of Jeopardy looks interesting,” they seem to be uttering something irrelevant to what A had asked, which was whether or not B wanted to watch tennis. B’s statement, which I will call p , is not consistent with the Cooperation Principle—specifically, if we hear the literal meaning of p , then B has failed to make their contribution relevant, which is in conflict with the maxim of Relation. We know, however, that B intends to be relevant. B is presumably trying to engage in a cooperative conversation with A in order to decide what to watch on TV. Therefore, B is likely implicating another statement q , something along the lines of “I don’t want to watch tennis, and I would like to watch Jeopardy instead”. Since q is necessary for p to make sense with the CP, and B believes that it’s possible for A to have come to the same conclusion, B has made q a conversational implicature.

A conversational implicature can also be generated by a speaker who intentionally *flouts* a maxim of the CP. Take the following example where speaker C takes speaker D to D’s favorite restaurant:

C: What do you think of this place?

D: Absolutely hate it, of course.

Assuming that speaker D isn’t suddenly changing their opinion of their favorite restaurant, D is saying something that isn’t true, seemingly for sarcastic effect. D has violated a maxim of Quality, in contributing what they believe to be false, i.e. that they hate their favorite restaurant. Additionally, D has every intention to flout this maxim, as opposed to speaker B at the TV, who may have violated the maxim of Relation but didn’t intend to. Nevertheless, a conversational implicature has been made. D could have alternatively said, “I’m in a joking mood today, and I love this restaurant”. It’s not the same as what D did say, but it’s what must be true for D to still be having a cooperative, rational conversation. It’s also what D thinks C could have figured out as well, as the real message behind the sarcastic comment. The alternative utterance is therefore what D has conversationally implicated.

Now that there is a clearer idea of how Grice defines the idea of conversational implicature, the remainder of the paper will discuss his claim that these implicatures are necessarily retrievable (I will refer to this as the retrievability argument). Grice argues that conversational implicatures “must be capable of being worked out” (50).

In other words, when a conversational implicature is made (in accordance with his definition), it must be possible for the hearer to figure out what is implicated given the facts of what is said, and the context that surrounds it.

However, it seems that sometimes, it is hard to tell what is being implicated. Take speaker E, who is getting ready to go to a party, and speaker F, who is doing homework:

E: Want to go out with us tonight?

F: Jeez, I have a lot of work I need to do.

At this point, speaker E, who has realized that F's response did not follow the CP, tries to figure out the implicature. He might think that F has violated the maxim of Relation, and so the implicature that allows F to stay consistent with the CP is:

F1: I don't want to go out, because I have a lot of work.

However, E, who maybe doesn't know F too well, also suspects that F doesn't really care about work and is intentionally flouting the maxim of Relation by playfully pretending that work has any relevance to his decision to go out. In this case, the other implicature that allows F to stay consistent with the CP is:

F2: Of course I want to go out; I need a reason to neglect my work!

Speaker E concludes that both F1 and F2 could have been implicated. They both satisfy Grice's definition of implicature—they satisfy condition (i) in that they presume F was observing the CP, they satisfy condition (ii) because both F1 and F2 could allow speaker F to remain consistent with the CP, and it seems like they satisfy condition (iii) as well—the inferences required to conclude F1 and F2 are both reasonable for F to have expected E to make. If that's the case, and the implicature must be calculable, what was implicated: F1 or F2?

Grice's likely response is that the implicature is the logical disjunction, F1 F2. He acknowledges the fact that implicatures can be vague, noting that "since there may be various possible specific explanations, a list of which may be open, the conversational implicature in such cases will be disjunction of such specific explanations" (58). If it's not clear cut what the implicature should be, Grice is saying, then, that the implicature is just the combination of the possible options. In this way, his claim that

implicatures can always be retrieved seems to true by virtue of definition. Suppose that the implicature couldn't be retrieved, and there are several (even infinite) possibilities for what the options are—the implicature, by how he is defining it, would still be retrievable, because the disjunction of those possibilities is what the implicature, in fact, is. In this way, implicatures can never be uncertain, because any uncertainty you have about it would just be reflected in the implicature itself. The uncertainty *is* the implicature.

But what if the speaker doesn't intend to be uncertain? In other words, what about the case where the hearer thinks that the implication is some disjunction of possibilities, but the speaker does not? There seems to be a difference between an interaction where both the speaker and the hearer recognize that the implicature is ambiguous, versus an interaction where only the hearer thinks the implicature is ambiguous. Take, for example, two ways that E and F's conversation might play out. In the first case, F intends to implicate that they don't want to go out, but can't get the point across:

E: Want to go out with us tonight?

F: Jeez, I have a lot of work I need to do.

E: So then, what will it be?

In this scenario, E is confused whether F meant to flout the maxim of Relation or abide by it, and so E understood the implication to be the disjunction of two possibilities, "yes or no". Take a second case, where F actually intends to implicate the disjunction, as a way of expressing indifference, being able to be convinced one way or the other:

E: Want to go out with us tonight?

F: Jeez, I have a lot of work I need to do.

E: You can do it tomorrow! Come have fun with us.

Here, F's response successfully implicated to E that there was a degree of uncertainty, and E responds accordingly, trying to convince F. In both cases, the implication made is "yes or no", but only in the second case was that F's intention.

This example raises two concerns for Grice's theory. The first is that the theory does not have a good way of detecting when an implicature has failed, because the retrievability argument seems to imply that implicatures always succeed. As dis-

cussed earlier, if a hearer is undecided between two possibilities of what is implicated, regardless of what the speaker intended, the retrievability argument would say that the implicature is the disjunction of the two. However, in the first scenario above, it seems more accurate to say that the implicature failed rather than to say that an ambiguity was implicated, because that is more suitable to the second scenario. In the first scenario, speaker E technically retrieved the implicature “yes and no,” but the fact that E chose to ask the question again seems to indicate that they didn’t retrieve anything at all, due in part to speaker F’s bad attempt at implicature. This problem is not so consequential if Grice just believes that the same thing was implied in both cases (and that there is therefore no relevant distinction between the two above scenarios), but it seems like a better theory of implicature should be able to explain what we can intuitively see is being communicated differently in these two cases.

The second and more important problem this presents is that, for the first scenario, the way he has defined implicature and retrievability will disagree on what is being implicated. If Grice chooses to claim that something is being implicated, he has to reconcile these differences. To be more specific— according to the third condition of implicature, a speaker has implicated q in the case that the speaker thinks it is possible for the hearer to work out that q is necessary to remain in line with the CP. Accordingly, the implicature of the first scenario is what F thinks E will figure out, which is “no,” or that F cannot go out tonight because they have a lot of work. The way that Grice argues for retrievability, on the other hand, is to claim that when calculating the implicature, one might come across several possibilities, and in such a case, the implicature is the disjunction of all of them. Hearer E, who calculates the implicature, believes that either “yes” or “no” could satisfy the CP, and so the implicature, according to the hearer, is “yes or no”. What is happening here is that Grice has offered two ways of deciding what an implicature is, one of which is from the perspective of the speaker, and the other is from the perspective of the hearer. In the case of miscommunication, where the speaker’s intent is not what the hearer calculates, there are contradictory claims as to what the real implicature is. A theory that acknowledges miscommunication is able to solve this problem by saying that there is no implicature being made at all, but a theory that doesn’t is left with a contradiction.

To address this, I might propose that Grice adds a fourth condition to his definition of conversational implicature:

(iv) The hearer is able to work out that q is necessary.

What this adds is that in addition to the speaker thinking that the hearer can work it out, it should also be the case that they actually can. This definition would therefore imply that cases where the hearer cannot work out q , even if the speaker intends for them to, an implicature was not made. It resolves the two problems above. The first problem, that the retrievability argument seems to imply that implicatures always succeed, is not the case anymore, because failed implicatures are no longer implicatures. The retrievability argument still addresses ambiguities, but only those that don't conflict with what the speaker intended to implicate. The second problem doesn't exist anymore, because condition (iv) necessarily aligns what the speaker intends to implicate with the implicature the hearer is able to retrieve. If they don't align, they aren't definitionally implicatures anymore.

I have given an explanation of Grice's theory of conversational implicature, first with a more general approach, and then more formally, using his idea of the Cooperation Principle and several examples that illustrate how implicatures are generated out of it—either by obeying the maxims, or by violating them. The second half of the paper introduces his claims that implicatures can always be retrieved and assesses his treatment of ambiguous implicatures. By introducing an additional condition to his original definition of conversational implicature, I propose a way for him to clarify the kind of ambiguity that arises out of failed implicatures as opposed to intentionally vague ones.

References

- [1] Grice, Herbert P. "Logic and conversation." In *Speech acts*, pp. 41-58. Brill, 1975.