1 The Gricean Program

A semantic theory is a theory of the conventional meaning of atomic expressions, and of how they combine into meaningful complex expressions.

The Gricean program: leave our semantic theory simple in many ways, and explain many of the complexities of language use by adverting to general principles about rationality.

An attractive idea and live research program.

2 Implicature

‘Implicature’ is a term of art Grice invents:

(1) Implicature: What a speaker communicates in a given speech situation over and above what she said.

N.B.: We’ve defined ‘implicature’ in terms of ‘what a speaker communicates’ and ‘what she says.’

Easy to get an intuition about the gap between these:

(2)  a. How is C doing in his job?
    b. Quite well, I think; he likes his colleagues, and he hasn’t been to prison yet.

What is communicated here? What is said?

In general:

(3) What is communicated by utterance S of a sentence P: What information a cooperative interlocutor can gather from S.

(4) What is said in an utterance S of P: The conventional meaning of P, plus disambiguation of words, pronouns, etc.

What tests distinguish what is said from what is communicated? (What tests does Grice use?)

3 Conventional Implicature

Sometimes this gap is due to the conventional meaning of what is said:

(5) He is an Englishman, and therefore brave.
Despite Grice’s brief remarks, serious study of conventional implicatures wasn’t really taken up until the last two decades.

Call these *conventional implicatures*. More on these below.

4 Conversational Implicatures

(6) **Conversational Implicatures**: Those implicatures that arise due to general reasoning connected with the aims of discourse.

Looks intuitive; how to spell it out?

[Conversations are] characteristically, to some degree at least, cooperative efforts; and each participant recognizes in them, to some extent, a common purpose or set of purposes, or at least a mutually accepted direction. (Grice 26)

Is this true?

Central Gricean principle ‘which participants will be expected (ceteris paribus) to observe’:

(7) **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.

Grice calls these rules *maxims*. The names are tongue-in-cheek references to Kant. A question to think about: what is the status of these rules?

More specifically:

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

- **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.

- **Relation**
  1. Be relevant.

- **Manner**: Be perspicuous
  1. Avoid obscurity of expression.
  2. Avoid ambiguity.
  3. Be brief (avoid unnecessary prolixity).
  4. Be orderly.
‘... and one might need others’: any obvious omissions?

Grice claims that each of these maxims has corollaries in other kinds of transactions.

The idea: these are (conversation specific instances of) general constraints on rational cooperative behavior:

Anyone who cares about the goals that are central to conversation/communication (such as giving and receiving information, influencing and being influenced by others) must be expected to have an interest given suitable circumstances, in participation in talk exchanges that will be profitable only on the assumption that they are conducted in general accordance with the Cooperative Principle and the maxims. Whether any such conclusion can be reached I am uncertain. (Grice 30)

There are various ways to violate maxims. Of most interest: flouting a maxim.

One flouts a maxim when one blatantly fails to fulfill the maxim, but would have been able to do so without violating another maxim or ‘opting out’.

When a speaker flouts a maxim he exploits it; this is where conversational implicatures arise.

(8) **S conversationally implicates q by saying p provided that**

1. he is presumed to be observing the conversational maxims
2. the supposition that is aware that q is required in order to make his saying p consistent with this presumption
3. the speaker thinks (and would expect the hearer to think that the speaker thinks) that it is within the competence of the hearer to work out that this supposition is required.

5 Examples

In each case: what is the conversational implicature, and how is it derived?

Three strategies:

(I) **no maxim is even apparently violated:**

(9) a. How is C doing in his job?
   b. Quite well, I think; he likes his colleagues, and he hasn’t been to prison yet.

(10) a. I’m out of gas.
    b. There’s a garage around the corner.
(II) a maxim is violated, which can be explained by supposing a clash with another maxim:

(11)  
   a. Smith doesn’t seem to have a girlfriend these days.  
   b. He’s been paying a lot of visits to New York lately.

(12)  
   a. Where does C live?  
   b. Somewhere in the South of France.

(III) a maxim is exploited/flouted.

Flouting quantity:

(13)  [In a letter of rec]: Mr. x’s command of English is excellent and his attendance has been regular. Yours, S.

(14) War is war.

Flouting quality:

(15)  [Ironically:] X is a fine friend.

(16)  [Metaphorically]: You are the cream in my coffee.

Flouting relation:

(17)  
   a. X is an old bag!  
   b. The weather has been delightful this summer!

Flouting Manner:

(18) Intentional ambiguity. Peccavi, poetry.

(19) Deliberate obscurity:
   a. X sang ‘Home sweet home.’  
   b. X produced a series of sounds that corresponded closely with the score of ‘Home sweet home.’

6 Some Important Classes of Implicature

Scalar Implicatures:

(20) John had some of the cookies.

(21) The coffee is warm.

(22) John has three children.

Ignorance Implicatures:

(23) Either John or Sue was at the party.
7 Generalized Conversational Implicatures

Particular conversational implicatures may get rigidified into quite general patterns of use. This is supposed to fall short of conventional meaning, though.

Is generalized conversational implicature simply the case where we go through similar reasoning so often that we no longer need to rehearse it?

8 Characteristics of Conversational Implicatures

In general, conversational implicatures (both generalized and particular) will have these features:

- **Cancellable**, since maxims can be opted out of.
- **Separable** from the particular form of language used (non-detachable).
- **Non-conventional**, though perhaps it can be conventionalized in given cases.

Truth of what is said and what is implicated can come apart.

May have disjunctive or indeterminate form.

9 Evaluation

The Gricean program has remarkable promise: explaining communication through the interaction of a relatively simple semantics and general principles about reasoning.

What Grice says may seem obvious. It may also seem wishy-washy.

It is not obvious, and any wishy-washiness needs to be expunged.

Grice formulated the foundations for a theory of human communication. In the fifty years since then, researchers have been precisifying and testing his theory.

The result? **A lot of uncertainty.** The success of the whole program is very much up in the air.

An antidote to the apparent obviousness and banality of the theory: an APPARENT COUNTEREXAMPLE.

(24) S: John had some cookies.

CI: John didn’t have all the cookies.

Derivation: If S had known ‘John had all the cookies’, then by quantity, she would have said this. So she must not know this, since this is a strictly
stronger sentence. We may assume that she knows how many cookies John had. So she knows that John didn’t have all the cookies.

But what about this line of reasoning?

If S had known ‘John had some but not all the cookies’, then by quantity, she would have said this, since this is a strictly stronger sentence. So she must not know this. We may assume that she knows how many cookies John had. So she knows that John didn’t have some but not all the cookies.

Problem: these two conclusions, plus the original utterance, lead to contradiction!!

Whether this problem can be solved is an open question.

My point: nothing about the Gricean program should be taken to be obvious, or taken for granted. Grice laid out a research program for understanding communication. Its success depends on whether it can be spelled out in detail.

10 Conventional Implicatures

Back to conventional implicatures.

(25) **Conventional implicature**: an implicature that’s not conversational, i.e. that’s due to conventional features of language, rather than general reasoning about language use.

As we saw, Grice introduced this idea, but it didn’t get much airtime for another forty years or so.

Many important philosophical phenomena connected to language, e.g. slurs, pejoratives, honorifics and issues of politeness in language use, etc. have been proposed to be connected to conventional implicature.

As we saw above, conversational implicatures were **cancellable**, **non-separable**, and **non-conventional**: we expect conventional implicatures to be **non-cancellable**, **separable**, and **conventional**.

11 Examples

In each case: what is intuitively the main content, and what is the secondary, ‘conventional implicature’ content?

**Connectives**: ‘but’, ‘therefore’.

**Appositives**:

(26) John, the tallest guy in our class, got in trouble with the teacher.

**Non-restrictive relatives**:
Donald Trump, who is probably going to win the presidency, is in Arizona today.

Expressives:

(28) The cur won’t stop barking.

(29) The damn dog won’t stop barking.

Slurs:

(30) That’s what I’d expect from a Kraut like John.

12 Tests for Multi-Dimensional Treatment of Conventional Meaning

The core of Potts’ analysis: (at least) two propositions are expressed, one as main content, one as secondary content.

How do we know conventional implicatures exist?

Because conventional implicatures are non-cancellable, they are harder to test for than conversational implicatures.

I.e., cancellability is a standard test for conversational implicatures; doesn’t work for conventional.

How do we distinguish conventional implicature from main content?

Standard tests:

(31) ‘Hey wait a minute—’ or ‘What do you mean—’.

(32) Truth-value judgments.

(33) Hosting different speech acts.

What do these tests show?

Potts also argues that conventional implicatures have puzzling projection behavior, and that morphosyntax is able to ‘see’ conventional implicatures.

Take away on conventional implicature:

• a commitment to the existence of conventional implicatures is a much less specific commitment than one to the existence of conversational implicatures.

• it seems fairly clear that utterance events can have many dimensions in some sense.

• it is not yet clear how this works.

He says a lot more than this, but this is the core important to us, and the bit that is least controversial.

Claim: this test targets not-at-issue content, but not at-issue content. Is this a good test? Is this claim true?

‘Where is John, the tallest guy in our class?’

The last two tests show that there are sometimes more than one proposition put in play by a speech act. They suggest some ranking between them in terms of relevance to main point of discourse.