Conversational Implicatures: 
The Basics
Adrian Brasoveanu
abrsvn @ gmail . com
Rutgers University, Fall 2006

The idea (Levinson)

• “We interpret this sketch instantly and effortlessly as a gathering of people before a structure, probably a gateway: the people are listening to a single declaiming figure in the center. [. . . ] But all this is a miracle, for there is little detailed information in the lines or shading (such as there is). Every line is a mere suggestion [. . . ]. So here is the miracle: from a merest, sketchiest squiggle of lines, you and I converge to find adumbration of a coherent scene [. . . ].
• "The problem of utterance interpretation is not dissimilar to this visual miracle. An utterance is not, as it were, a veridical model or “snapshot” of the scene it describes [. . . ]. Rather, an utterance is just as sketchy as the Rembrandt drawing."

Cooperation Principles/Maxims
• They fill in the 'sketch'
• they are not etiquette prescriptions (e.g. 'speak clearly and be courteous at all times')
• They reveal what the listener can assume about the speaker's intentions. Only by making those assumptions can talk be understood that would otherwise be unintelligible

The Cooperative Principle 
('Super-maxim')
• Make your contribution as is required, when it is required, by the conversation in which you are engaged.

Quality
• Contribute only what you know to be true. Do not say false things. Do not say things for which you lack evidence.

Quantity
• Make your contribution as informative as is required. Do not say more than is required

Relation (Relevance)
• Make your contribution relevant.

Manner
• avoid obscurity
• avoid ambiguity
• be brief
• be orderly
Gricean Maxims (Summary)

The Cooperative Principle: make your contribution as is required, when it is required, by the conversation in which you are engaged.

- **Quality**: contribute only what you know to be true. Do not say false things. Do not say things for which you lack evidence.
- **Quantity**: Make your contribution as informative as is required. Do not say more than is required.
- **Relation (Relevance)**: Make your contribution relevant.
- **Manner**: avoid obscurity, avoid ambiguity, be brief, be orderly

Using the maxims

- Grice says that people, if they are cooperating at all, do usually follow the maxims **even if they appear not to**! (i.e. even when they flout the maxim)
- The appearance of non-adherence to maxims can arise from looking too narrowly at what is said, and not what might be conveyed

Using the maxims (ctd)

- The maxims can be taken as extra premises about the speaker's behavior which are available to the hearer when calculating what the speaker intended to convey.
- the assumption that the speaker is following some or all maxims, i.e. the assumption of the maxims as additional premises, allows the hearer to draw extra inferences: these are conversational implicatures.

Maxims: Obeyed and Flouted

- “Do you like Jill’s new car?”
  - Maxims Obeyed:
    - “I’d drive across the country in it.”
  - Maxims Flouted:
    - “The windshield is very clear.”
  - Maxims Ignored:
    - “Pickles give me gas.”

Using the maxims (ctd)

Example: Relevance

- John: Where's the roast beef?
  - Mary: The dog looks happy.
  - Mary means something like "In answer to your question, the dinner has been eaten by the dog"
  - she doesn't say that - we work it out on the basis that what she says is relevant to what she's been asked.

Example: Quantity

- John: Where did you go yesterday?
  - Mary: NB train station.
- John automatically assumes that Mary went to no less and no more than the NB train station (e.g. to meet someone).
- If John later discovers that Mary then took the train and went to NY to spend the day shopping, he will feel... surprised.

Example: Relevance (ctd.)

- John: Is the chicken good?
  - Mary: I once tried one of their entrees. Now I always go for the salad.
- John: What do you think of the prof?
  - Mary: Nice weather for the time of year.
  - M implicates perhaps that the professor, or a potential snitch, is within earshot.

Example: Relevance (ctd.)
Example: Quantity (ctd.)

- John: Bill has a small birth-mark on his left cheek.
- This implicates that the speaker (John) believes that: (A) Bill has a birth-mark and (B) John has evidence for this belief.

- Tautologies and truisms do not carry any information literally.
- "Boys will be boys".
- Assuming that the speaker is being cooperative, the point may be to indicate that hearer should not expect some particular boy to behave otherwise.

- "For every crime there's a criminal".
- The speaker may indicate e.g. (A) that some particular event should be classified as a crime, and/or (B) that a hunt for a criminal will now begin.

Example: Manner

- John: Let's get the kids something.
  Mary: OK, but not I-C-E C-R-E-A-M.
- Mary is going out of their way to be a bit obscure, spelling out the words rather than simply saying them.
- Mary flouts Manner so flagrantly that John can infer that there must be a special reason for her being so uncooperative (e.g. Mary does not want the kids to complain that they're being denied a treat).

- John: The professor came in and the student left.
- Indicates that student left after (or, as a result of) the professor coming.

- John: Did you get my assignment?
  Mary: I received two pages clipped together and covered with rows of black squiggles.
- M indicates, perhaps, that the assignment departed from what was expected.
- How is this example a consequence of (flouting) the Manner maxim?

Example: Quality

- John: I might win the lottery.
  Mary: Yes, and pigs might fly.
- The hearer assumes that the speaker is not knowingly telling a lie or fantasizing.
- Mary is flouting the maxim of quality, so there must be something else going on…
- …the implicature: John's chances of winning the lottery are about the same as pigs flying.

- Flouting the maxim of quality is the driving force in irony.
- Think of ironic comments you've heard/said recently; how do they achieve their ends and how is that related to expectations of 'truth'?

- John: I'm gonna flunk this course.
  Mary: Sure, just like you flunk every course you take.
- Suppose J has passed every course so far, and M knows this. M is flouting Quality: by forcing J to think about other courses taken, M conveys that J should be more optimistic.
Two Standard Tests for Conversational Implicature

A conversationally implicates B if:

- **Cancelability**: "A and not B" is consistent and felicitous.
- **Reinforcibility**: "A. Indeed B" is felicitous.

Scalar Implicatures

- The numeric determiners . . . four, three, two, one form a scale (with the more informative items to the left)
- "I have two sisters".
- since four is more informative than two on this scale, it follows that: "I don't have four sisters".
- Apply the **Cancelability** test to check that this is an implicature.

**Scalar Implicatures (ctd.)**

- A: "How many children do you have?"
  B: "I have two children."

A understands that B has only two kids.

Scalar Implicatures (ctd.)

- This is not an Entailment
- "I have two children" does not entail "I have only two children."

**Scalar Implicatures (ctd.)**

- The implication is due to obeying the maxim
- The hearer assumes that the maxim was obeyed, i.e. the hearer assumes that the speaker gave all the information.
- i.e. we are talking about the maxim of ... ?

- The hearer concludes that any claim giving more information is false, i.e. the implicature is to negate more informative claims

**Scalar Implicatures (ctd.)**

- The adjectives OK, interesting, exciting, orgasmic could form a scale.
- Consider the implicatures of "The lecture was interesting."
- and, or
- necessarily, possibly
- always, often, occasionally
- will, must, should, may
- freezing, cold, cool, cool-ish

**Scalar Implicatures (ctd.)**

The and>>or scale:

- "David has a dog or a cat."
- Implicature: David does not have a dog and a cat.
- Again: This is not an entailment!
- Situation: if one needs a license for a dog or a cat, one also needs a license for a dog and a cat.

**Scalar Implicatures (ctd.)**

- Again, the hearer assumes that the Maxim of Quantity was obeyed, i.e. the hearer assumes that the speaker gave all the information.
- The hearer concludes that any claim giving more information is false, i.e. the implicature is to negate more informative claims.
Entailment vs. Implicature

- **Entailment**: A logical conclusion; based only on the *literal* meaning of the sentence.
- **Implicature**: A conclusion based on the rules of conversation.

How an Implicature arises

- The maxim is *flouted*: the hearer recognizes that and comes up with an explanation for the speaker’s behavior.
- The maxim is *obeyed*: for Quantity, the hearer concludes that any claim that is more informative is false.

More cases

- Imagine that Mr. X is applying for a philosophy position and his teacher is writing him the following letter of recommendation:
  - Mr. X’s command of English is excellent and his attendance at tutorials has been regular.
  - What does the recommendation implicate?

More cases (ctd.)

- … it implicates that: Mr. X isn’t a brilliant philosopher.

More cases (ctd.)

- A: What time is it?
  - B: Some of the guests are already leaving.
  - Implicature that…

More cases (ctd.)

- … It must be late.

More cases (ctd.)

- A: Where is John?
  - B: Some of the guests are already leaving.
  - Implicature that…

More cases (ctd.)

- … Perhaps John has already left.
  - Implicature that…

More cases (ctd.)

- A: I am out of petrol.
  - B: There is a garage around the corner.
  - Implicature that…
  - What maxims are needed to infer the implicature?
More cases (ctd.)

• Miss X produced a series of sounds that corresponded closely to the Britney Spears song "Oops!...I Did It Again".

More cases (ctd.)

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

More cases (ctd.)

• When Harry met Sally (1989) – discussion about implicatures:
  Jess: If she's so great why aren't YOU taking her out?
  Harry: I told you, we're just friends.
  Jess: So you're saying she's not that attractive.
  Harry: No, I told you, she IS attractive.
  Jess: But you also said she has a good personality.

More cases (ctd.)

Harry: She HAS a good personality.
Jess: When someone's not that attractive they're ALWAYS described as having a good personality.
Harry: Look if you were to 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 happen to mention that she has a good personality, she could be either.

More cases (ctd.)

• Setting up implicatures for certain expressions - Herman Finkers (a Dutch comedian):
  • When a baby isn’t cute, I wouldn’t lie about it. Of course I know that one cannot say: “That is one ugly baby”. One cannot and should not do that. What I always say when a child is not that cute is: “That is a sweet baby”. For example, my neighbors just had an extremely sweet child. I told them in all honesty: “This is the sweetest child I have ever seen”.

References


Some of the sources for the slides

• Notes by Christopher Potts: http://homepage.mac.com/cgpotts/nyi04-pragmatics/
• Notes by Charles Antaki: http://www.staff.lboro.ac.uk/%7Essca1/ft lectures.htm
• Notes by David Beaver: http://www.stanford.edu/class/linguist230a/grice.pdf