

Grice: “Logic and Conversation”

Saying vs. Implicating

What is *said* (in Grice’s favored sense) is “closely related to the conventional meaning of the sentence uttered” (p. 173). It is limited to (strictly speaking) what is meant conventionally by the sentence, and does not include whatever **else** the speaker may have been trying to convey.

More or less: what is *said* (in the favored sense) is the **proposition** expressed by the sentence uttered (given the conventional meanings of the words in it). *Saying* is a **semantic** notion.

It contrasts with what the speaker may be *implying, suggesting, hinting at, conveying, indicating*, etc. All of these go beyond what is *said* (in the favored sense). *Implicating* is (for the most part) a **pragmatic** notion.

All of these cases (that go beyond *saying*) Grice lumps under the heading of **implicature** (verb ‘implicate’; that which is implicated is the *implicatum*). Grice is proposing a theory of implicature.

Philosophical background

Criticism of the Causal Theory of Perception (CTP)

The CTP attempts to analyze, e.g., *seeing something red* in causal terms. Perhaps: *something red is **causally responsible** (in the appropriate way) for its appearing or seeming to me that there is something red before me.*

During the 1950s, a popular argument against the CTP ran like this: if one sees something red, one does not normally say “That **appears** (looks, seems) red.” One simply says “That’s red.” One normally reserves “That **appears** (looks, seems) red” for occasions on which there is some doubt in one’s mind about whether it **is** red. So it is part of the **meaning** of “That **appears** (looks, seems) red” that there is some doubt in the speaker’s mind about whether it **is** red. And, therefore, in normal cases, when one sees something red (and it would be inappropriate to suggest that there is any doubt about whether the thing seen actually is red), it is simply **false** that anything appears (looks, seems) red to one. Therefore *seeing red* cannot be analyzed in terms of being **caused** to be in a state in which something (looks, seems, appears) red.

Grice's Defense of the CTP

In 1961, Grice published an article defending the CTP. His response was to distinguish between what is meant (strictly speaking)—what is *said*, in his favored sense—and what is (in some appropriate sense) *implied*. (Grice later replaced 'implied' with the technical term 'implicated'.)

Grice argued that one who says "That appears red" may normally be taken to *implicate* that it is not really red, but he does not *say* that it is not really red, he does not *mean* that it is not really red. Most importantly, it can be **true** both that he **sees** something red and that something **appears** to him to be red.

The basic move: if "That appears red" **means** (among other things) that it isn't really red, then it would be contradictory to say "That appears red, and it is red." But it is not contradictory to say this. In Gricean terms, the implication that the thing isn't really red can be explicitly **cancelled**.

Other ways of canceling the implicature:

"That appears red, and I have no doubt that it is red."

"That appears red, and I don't mean to imply that it isn't red."

And if an *implicatum* of saying that *p* can be cancelled, then that *implicatum* isn't part of the meaning or part of what is said by one who says that *p*. It is *implicated*, but not said (or meant, or entailed).

Conventional vs. Conversational Implicatures

Back to "Logic and Conversation." Some implicatures are due to the conventional meaning of the words used, and do not depend on any special features of the conversation. E.g.

"He's an Englishman, so he's brave."

It is *implicated*, but *not said*, that (his) bravery is a consequence of (his) being English.

"She is poor, but she is honest."

It is *implicated*, but *not said*, that (her) poverty clashes with (her) honesty.

These are cases of **conventional** implicature. The implicatum (in these cases) is conveyed by the conventional meaning of words like 'but', 'so', etc. So the conventional implicatures of an expression are part of its **semantics**.

Conversational implicatures, on the other hand, depend on features of the conversational situation or context and not just on the conventional meanings of the words used. (We will return to the question of the distinction later.) The notion of a conversational implicature is thus a **pragmatic** notion. It is defined in terms of the Cooperative Principle.

The Cooperative Principle (CP)

“Make your conversational contribution such as is required ... by the accepted purpose or direction of the talk exchange in which you are engaged” (p. 173). It consists of four **categories** of maxims and submaxims:

1. Quantity

- a) Be informative.
- b) Do not be more informative than is required.

2. Quality

- 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.
- b) Avoid ambiguity.
- c) Be brief.
- d) Be orderly.

The CP and Conversational Implicature

The notion of conversational implicature can be defined in terms of the maxims constituting the CP. First, some terminology. There are various ways in which a maxim may go **unfulfilled** (or be infringed).

Infringing maxims

1. One may **violate** a maxim (i.e., “quietly and unostentatiously” fail to fulfill it).
2. One may **opt out** of the maxim or the entire CP.
3. One may be faced with a **clash** of maxims.

4. One may **flout** a maxim (i.e., “*blatantly* fail to fulfill it.”)

When one flouts a maxim in order to convey (implicate) something one has not said, one is said to **exploit** the maxim. It is typical or characteristic for the flouting of a maxim to set up a conversational implicature.

Conversational implicature defined (p. 176)

In saying that p , a speaker S conversationally implicates that q if:

1. S is presumed to be observing the CP,
2. in order to make S 's saying that p consistent with (1), one must suppose that S believes that q ,
3. S thinks (and expects the hearer to think that S thinks) that the hearer is competent to figure out that (2).

That the hearer should have to **work out** the presence of the implicature is crucial to its being conversational. If no **argument** is required, the implicature will be conventional, not conversational.

Examples

Group A: in which no maxim is violated

The New Colleague (172, 176)

A: “How is your new colleague getting on in his job?”

B: “Oh, very well, I think; he likes his colleagues, and he hasn't been to prison yet.”

Implicatum: the new colleague is potentially dishonest.

Maxim: relevance *appears* to be infringed. But one must assume that it is not being infringed, so the odd second conjunct must be somehow relevant. The implicatum proposed explains how it is relevant.

The Gas Station (177)

A: “I am out of petrol.”

B: “There is a garage round the corner.”

Implicatum: that the garage is open and sells petrol.

Maxim: none is infringed. The hearer appeals to *relevance* in concluding that the speaker thinks the garage is open and sells petrol.

The Girlfriend (177)

A: “Smith doesn’t seem to have a girlfriend these days.”

B: “He has been paying a lot of visits to New York lately.”

Implicatum: that Smith has, or may have, a girlfriend in New York.

Maxim: none is infringed. *Relevance* is appealed to.

Group B: in which there is a clash of maxims

The French Friend (177)

A: “Where does *C* live?”

B: “Somewhere in the south of France.”

Implicatum: that *B* does not know which town *C* lives in.

Maxim: The first maxim of *quantity* (“be informative”) is being infringed. This is presumably because to be more informative might clash with the second maxim of *quality* (“have adequate evidence”). (*A* reasons: “*B* is being as informative as he can be; therefore, he must not know which town *C* lives in.”)

Group C: in which a maxim is exploited

Exploitation: a procedure for getting in a conversational implicature in which a maxim is flouted at the level of what is *said*, but not at the level of what is *implicated*.

The Letter of Recommendation (177)

[For a candidate for a job teaching philosophy]

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

Implicatum: that Mr. *X* is no good at philosophy.

Maxim: The first maxim of *quantity* (“be informative”) is being exploited. Why does the author refuse to say more when he obviously knows more? He must want to convey something he feels uncomfortable putting into writing. What he *says* flouts the maxim, but what he *implicates* is informative indeed.

The Unfaithful Wife (178)

[The speaker is referring to a certain man's wife, presumably on an occasion on which the man, but not the wife, is in the presence of the speaker.]

“She is probably deceiving him this evening.”

Implicatum: that his wife is given to deceiving him, or is the sort of person who might do so.

Maxim: The second maxim of *quality* (“have adequate evidence”) is being exploited. (The speaker has obviously not got sufficient evidence for what he has said — he must therefore be trying to convey a related proposition for which he does have adequate evidence.)

The Gaffe at the Tea Party (178)

A: “Mrs. X is an old bag.”

B: “The weather has been quite delightful this summer, hasn't it?”

Implicatum: that A has committed an unpardonable breach of etiquette.

Maxim: the maxim of *relevance* is here actually (not just apparently) flouted. (B could have made a relevant comment, but chose not to. By changing the subject, he implicates that A's remarks were inappropriate in the context.)

The Music Review (179)

“Miss X produced a series of sounds that corresponded closely with the score of ‘Home sweet home’.”

Implicatum: that Miss X's performance suffered from a hideous defect.

Maxim: The third maxim of *manner* (“be brief”) is being exploited. (Why does the reviewer avoid the simple word ‘sang’ in favor of the long rigmarole he actually uses? He must have intended to convey that there was a significant difference between Miss X's performance and what is usually called ‘singing’.)

Cancelability and Detachability

These two notions are crucial for distinguishing between conventional and conversational implicatures. Grice says little about them in this essay (they were developed in detail in the earlier paper, CTP).

Cancelability

An implicature that p is **cancelable** if it is permissible to conjoin (to the sentence that allegedly implicates that p) “but not p ” or “I do not mean to imply that p .”

Example: if I say “Either p or q ” I conversationally implicate that I don’t know which of the two is true, just that at least one is. But I can explicitly **cancel** this by adding “but I don’t mean to imply that I don’t know which is true.”

Suppose I say to the children “The treasure is hidden either in the garden or in the attic.” I can always add: “Of course, I know exactly where it is, but I’m not going to give you any more information.” So the implicature is cancelable.

On the other hand, consider our earlier example: “She is poor, but she is honest.” The speaker has implicated that there is a clash or contrast between (her) poverty and (her) honesty. But this implicature **cannot** be cancelled. For I cannot coherently say: “She is poor, but she is honest, and I don’t mean to imply that there is a clash or contrast between (her) poverty and (her) honesty.”

The reason is that the implicature here is **conventional**, not conversational. The implicature is carried by the **very words the speaker uses**. In a conversational case, the implicature is carried not by the words, but by the speaker’s **saying** them (or the manner in which he says them).

Detachability

An implicature that p is **detachable** if it is possible to find another way of saying the same thing that does not carry the implicature.

Example: “This morning I had a cup of coffee and drove to the office” might be thought to implicate that I had the coffee first and drove next (‘and’ = ‘and then’). But the implicature is detachable. For I can say: “I had a cup of coffee this morning; also, I drove to the office this morning.” [Note that this is also cancelable: I can say “This morning I had a cup of coffee and drove to the office, although not in that order.”]

If I say “I tried to do x ” I implicate that there was, or might have been, or been thought to be, failure to do x . This cannot (easily) be detached. For all of the following paraphrases have the same implicature: “I attempted to do x ,” “I endeavored to do x ,” “I set myself to do x .” (Grice calls this “having a high degree of nondetachability.”)

But it appears that this implicature can be cancelled. For I can coherently say “I tried to do x , and of course there was never any doubt that I’d succeed.”

Features of Conversational Implicatures

1. All conversational implicatures are cancelable. (Grice does not say so in this article, but does in the sequel in his book, *Studies in the Ways of Words*.)

[To test this claim: consider each of the examples we’ve looked and try canceling the implicature.]

2. A generalized conversational implicature that is carried by a familiar locution (a certain sequence of words, rather than the manner in which something is said) has a high degree of nondetachability. This has the consequence that it will often be very difficult to distinguish generalized conversational implicatures from conventional ones.
3. “Conversational implicatures are not part of the meaning of the expressions ... to which they attach”—at least, at the start. But what starts out as conversational implicature may become conventionalized.

Example: sportscasters tend to say of a player who is playing poorly, “He’s struggling out there.” But ‘struggling’ doesn’t **mean** ‘performing badly’ (it means *making a significant effort, perhaps in a difficult situation*). When this was first said, it was probably best understood as a conversational implicature, exploiting the first maxim of *quantity* (“be informative”): why does the sportscaster mention only the effort (“ x is struggling”) and not the outcome? Because he thinks the outcome has been poor, but he’d rather not say so. By commenting on the effort, rather than the outcome, he implicates that the outcome has been poor.

But this sequence of words has become so common that it now **conventionally** means that the player is playing poorly; in this context, ‘struggling’ has just come to **mean** ‘playing poorly’.

To test whether this locution has made the transition from conversational to conventional implicature, try the cancelability test. (The results are not likely to be clear-cut.)

4. In any given case, what is *said* may be true while what is *implicated* may be false. Hence, the implicature is **not** carried by what is said, but only by the **saying** of it, or by a certain **way** of putting it.

5. Typically there will be different possible explanations that will preserve the supposition that the CP is being observed. In these cases, the conversational implicatum will be the **disjunction** of such explanations. This explains why it is often indeterminate just what a speaker is implicating by what he says.

Conversational Implicatures: Additional Examples

Grice's examples of implicatures all concern what he calls "information-exchanges"—cases in which one says that *p* (thereby conveying a piece of information) and implicates that *q* (thereby conveying another piece of information).

That is, the illocutionary act involved in saying that *p* is just "making a statement," and if the speaker had said that *q* (instead of just implicating that *q*), the illocutionary act that *would have been involved* is also just making a statement.

But often, either what is said or what is implicated is a speech act of another kind. We will consider some examples of those.

The Passenger

"The light is green."

Implicatum: that it's time for the driver to step on the gas.

Maxim: none is infringed. *Relevance* is being appealed to. The color of the light is of interest only insofar as it is a signal that it is permissible to drive away. The speaker believes that the driver will be able to draw this conclusion.

The Hungry Teenager



The hungry teenager (Peter Fox) has implicated (in frame 1) that there is only one powdered doughnut in the box.

Maxim: *Relevance* is being exploited. It is relevant to ask about the last doughnut only if you **know** which one is the last, i.e., when there are no others and only one remains. (Note: Peter is making a request, not a statement, but he still implicates that there is only one doughnut remaining.)

The Introduction

[Stephen is the host at a dinner party; he is standing next to a woman, Barbara, whom he is introducing to a guest.]

“This is Barbara, my first wife.”

What is stated: Stephen at some point married Barbara, and never married anyone else before marrying Barbara.

What is implicated: Stephen is either no longer married to Barbara, or, if he is still married to her, he expects to marry someone else subsequently.

Maxims: Stephen is exploiting two maxims:

(1b) The second maxim of *quantity* (“don’t be over informative”). The information conveyed is that he was not married to anyone before he was married to Barbara. Surely that information is not needed.

(3) *Relevance*: That Stephen has never been married before is irrelevant to the identification of this woman; what is relevant is that she is his current (or former) wife, and that her name is ‘Barbara’.

The audience is supposed to reason: Stephen mentions that Barbara is his first wife, which seems irrelevant and over-informative. But he mentions it, so it must be relevant. How? Since Barbara is at the party, she must be his current wife (how many men invite their ex-wives to their parties?). Since he says she’s his first wife, he obviously hasn’t been married before. So there is no ‘second wife’ at present—Barbara is the only woman he has ever (so far, at least) been married to. Stephen must expect, then, that there will be a time when it is important to distinguish between his first wife and other wives. But **this** is his first wife. So any other wives there might be will be future wives. Therefore, Stephen expects to be married again. So he expects either to outlive or be divorced from Barbara. This, then, is what he is implicating.

The Grouchy Professor

Wife: “How did your students do on their exam today?”

Professor: “Some of them passed.”

Implicatum: some of the students failed the exam.

No maxims are infringed, but three are appealed to: quantity (1a), quality (2a), and relevance (3). The wife is expected to reason as follows: “My husband is being less informative (1a) than he might be expected to be. Why did he not tell me that all of his students passed? Is it that he doesn’t have all of the results yet? No; if that had been the case, he would have mentioned it (3). So he does have all the results, and if all the students had passed, he would have told me so. But he didn’t, because to do so would have been untrue (2a). Therefore, he means to have me conclude that not all of the students passed the exam.”

The Invitation

A: “Would you like to go to the movies with me on Saturday night?”

We will consider a range of possible responses, with different implicatures.

Blunt

B: “No.”

The invitation is explicitly refused. But there is an implicature.

Implicatum: such invitations will be unwelcome in the future. (*B* has made no excuses; her reason for refusing must be that she would not wish to accompany *A* even if she could.)

Maxim: here *B* seems to be violating a maxim that Grice mentions in passing (p. 174) but doesn’t include in his official list: “be polite.”

Indirect

B: “I’m afraid I have a test on Monday.”

There are two implicata: (1) that the offer is declined; (2) that *B* may be willing to consider future offers.

Regretful

B: “I’d love to, but I have to study.”

There are two implicata: (1) that the offer is declined; (2) that *B* is regretful about declining, and would gladly consider future offers.

Impolite

B: “I never want to go out with you again. Please don’t call me any more.”

This is utterly implicature-free. Such a response is hardly ever heard in polite society.

The Dinner

[Host to guest.]

“There’s more beef on the sideboard if you want some.”

Implicatum: that it is permissible for the guest to help himself to more beef.

This case is tricky. It appears that the host has merely *implicated* an offer of more beef, without actually making the offer. But one might argue that the host has done more than just make a statement about the presence of beef, but has made a **performative** utterance — he has performed the illocutionary act of *offering*.

Maxim: none is infringed. *Relevance* is appealed to.

Note that the ‘if’ is not truth-functional. (If the guest replies “What about if I don’t want any?” he has misunderstood or is joking.) Rather, the function of the ‘if’-clause seems to be to perform the act of offering. The cancelability test will help to make the point.

Is the implicature **cancelable**? Again, this is tricky. Consider two versions:

1. “There’s more beef on the sideboard, but you are not permitted to take any.”
2. * “There’s more beef on the sideboard if you want some, but you are not permitted to take any.”

(1) makes a certain kind of (sadistic) sense. The host is warning the guest not to be misled by the presence of more beef; perhaps it is being saved for the staff, or more guests are expected later.

But (2) is incoherent. This tends to show (as surmised above) that the 'if'-clause is conveying the offer, which is being explicitly withdrawn in the 'but'-clause. Hence we have a contradiction, not a cancelled implicature.

A Pseudo-implicature

Not every case in which a speaker says that p in order to get his audience to believe that q is a case of implicating that q . For example:

“I'll bid \$5, that's all it's worth.”

[Cary Grant at an auction in the movie “North By Northwest.” His life is in danger, so he is trying to get himself arrested. He thinks he will be arrested if the authorities believe he is crazy. The bidding is already into the hundreds of dollars, and he begins to make illegal bids so as to be disruptive and to be thought crazy.]

Is he implicating that he is crazy? That's what he's trying to get his audience to believe. But he's not implicating that, since he's not trying to get them to believe **that he believes** that he's crazy or that he **intends to get them to believe** that he's crazy. He's not implicating that he's crazy—he's just pretending to be crazy.