Introduction to Pragmatics

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Tuesdays 2:30--4:00pm @ 2321.HS 3H

INSTRUCTOR
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Meaning

• Meaning is a very rich concept.
• There is “semantic” and “pragmatic” meaning.
• Pragmatics = Meaning – Semantics
• **conversational implicature** = what is meant – what is said
• Perhaps more precisely: Conversational implicature is meaning that can be derived from what is said plus some background assumptions about rational communication.
• Often what is meant is stronger or fairly detached from what is literally said.
Conversational implicature

• Examples of conversational implicature:

(1) There are three books on the table.
   \(\leadsto\) There are at most three books on the table.

(2) You can have chicken or beef.
   \(\leadsto\) You can’t have both.

(3) Some of the students passed.
   \(\leadsto\) Not all of the students passed.

• Recall: “\(\leadsto\)” is read “conversationally implicates”.
Properties

- Property #1: Implicatures can be **blocked** (or canceled) by embedding the sentence under an operator.
- For example: Negating a sentence can block its implicatures.

(4) The gas station around the corner is open.  
    \(\neg\) You can fill your gas tank there.

(5) The gas station around the corner is not open.  
    \(\forall\) You can fill your gas tank there.
Properties cont’d

- **Property #2**: Implicatures are **not lexically triggered**.
- That is: Implicatures cannot be blamed on the meaning of particular words that occur in the sentence.
- Implicatures are “non-detachable”: producing a synonymous utterance does not remove the implicature.

(6) *On the road…*

A: I am out of gas.  
   \[\sim \] I need to fill my tank.

B: My tank is empty.  
   \[\sim \] I need to fill my tank.
Properties cont’d

• Property #3: Implicatures are **defeasible**: they can be denied by the speaker without a contradiction.

• Implicatures are also **reinforceable**: they can be spelled out by the speaker without a sense of redundancy.

(7) Little Joan likes some of her presents.  
   \[\sim \text{Joan doesn’t like all of her presents.}\]

(8) Little Joan likes some of her presents and in fact she likes all of them.  
   \[\text{(implicature defeated)}\]

(9) Little Joan likes some of her presents but she doesn’t like all of them.  
   \[\text{(implicature reinforced)}\]
Properties cont’d

• A practical guide to applying the Defeasibility / Reinforceability Tests:

  (i)  $A$ implies $B$. But is $B$ an implicature of $A$?
  (ii) Try to defeat $B$, i.e. try to say $A$ and/but not $B$.
      If that works, then $B$ is defeasible.
  (iii) Try to reinforce $B$, i.e. try to say $A$ and/but (in fact) $B$.
      If that works, then $B$ is reinforceable.
  (iv) If $B$ follows from $A$ and is both defeasible and reinforceable, then $B$ is most likely an implicature of $A$. 
The two tests

• Why is defeasibility /reinforceability such a big deal?
• Because those tests fail with entailment:

(10) Mario bought a red Ferrari.  
     ⊨ Mario bought a Ferrari.

(11) # Mario bought a red Ferrari but he didn’t buy a Ferrari.  
     (entailment defeated ⇒ contradiction!)

(12) # Mario bought a red Ferrari and he bought a Ferrari.  
     (entailment reinforced ⇒ redundancy!)
Explanation?

- What exactly is an implicature?
  - How do implicatures arise?
  - Can we offer a theoretical explanation that predicts their properties?

- The standard view: Implicatures arise through reasoning about the intentions of the discourse participants.

- First proposed by **H.P. Grice** (1913-1988)

- [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=we6uSVf4qss](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=we6uSVf4qss) (13:34)
The structure of discourse

- Human communication is built around rational behavior.
  - Verbal exchanges are not successions of disconnected remarks.
  - Speakers’ actions constitute a cooperative effort toward a common goal.

- The 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 1975)
The Cooperative Principle

• The Cooperative Principle can be broken up in several **maxims** (conversational rules that interlocuters follow).

• Grice formulated four such maxims:
  o Maxim of Quantity (how much you say)
  o Maxim of Quality (how good your information is)
  o Maxim of Manner (how you say things)
  o Maxim of Relevance/Relation (how relevant your information is)
Maxim of Quantity

**Maxim of Quantity**: Make your contribution as informative as needed for the purposes of the conversation.

(13)  

*A and B are planning an itinerary for a holiday in France. They want to visit their mutual friend Jacques there.*

A: Where does Jacques live?
B: Somewhere in Southern France.

$\sim$ B doesn’t know in which town in Southern France Jacques lives.

**Explanation:**
- B does not provide enough information about Jacques’ place of residence.
- Given Quantity, A concludes that B doesn’t know where exactly Jacques lives.
Maxim of Quality

• **Maxim of Quality:** Do not say something that is false.

(14)  

David: The Earth is flat.

$\sim$ David’s knowledge of the world is quite limited.

$\sim$ David is joking.

$\sim$ David believes in conspiracy theories.

• **Explanation:**
  
  o David didn’t literally say “I’m dumb”/“Just kidding”/“I’m crazy”.
  
  o However, given Quality, the hearer can conclude that David is vastly misinformed/joking/crazy.
Maxim of Manner

- **Maxim of Manner:** Be perspicuous and use appropriate language.

(15) a. Nena sang “99 Luftballons.”

   b. Nena produced a series of sounds that corresponded closely with the tune of “99 Luftballons.”

   $\sim Nena$ is a terrible singer.

- **Explanation:**
  
  o The speaker of (15b) didn’t directly say Nena can’t sing.
  
  o However, given Manner, the way (15b) is expressed implicates that Nena can’t sing.
Maxim of Relation

- **Maxim of Relation**: Make your contribution relevant to the topic of conversation.

  (16) A: Are you coming to the party?

  B: I have to submit my Pragmatics assignment later today.

  $\sim B$ is not going to the party.

- **Explanation**:
  - B’s utterance does not directly address A’s question.
  - Given Relation, A can assume that B will be busy working on her assignment and will not be going to the party.
The four maxims...

- This is *not* an exhaustive list. Other maxims can be freely added.
- Some researchers have tried to simplify the list and have proposed two or even one maxim.
- The Maxim of Relation:
  - It is fairly general.
  - It can potentially explain all cases of implicatures.
  - So maybe it is some sort of a super maxim.
- Gricean maxims in comedy series:

  https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vEM8gZCWQ2w (4:42)
Calculating implicatures

- Definition: $p$ **conversationally implicates** $q$ iff
  (i) the speaker said $p$, which implies but does not entail $q$;
  (ii) the speaker is presumed to be obeying the four maxims / the Cooperative Principle; and
  (iii) $p$ plus the Cooperative Principle entail $q$.

- Example:

(17) David is quite well. He likes his colleagues and *he hasn’t been to prison.*

$\sim$ David is likely to get in trouble with the law.
Calculating implicatures cont’d

(i) The speaker said that David hasn’t been to prison. This suggests but does not entail that David is a dishonest person.

(ii) The speaker is presumed to be obeying the Gricean maxims, including the maxim of Relation. It requires that what is said be relevant to the topic of the conversation, which is discussing how David is doing lately.

(iii) This entails that everything the speaker says is relevant. Hence, David must be a potentially dishonest person.

- The lexical + reasoning components could explain the three properties of implicature:
  - can be blocked: different sentences mean different things
  - not lexically triggered: because they involve reasoning
  - defeasible: a particular reasoning pattern can be denied
Opting out of the maxims

• Speakers can explicitly opt out / reject the application of a maxim.

  o Opting out of Quantity:
    (18) My lips are sealed; I cannot say more.

  o Opting out of Quality:
    (19) I’m not sure, but I think …

  o Opting out of Manner:
    (20) I don’t know how to say this more simply: …

  o Opting out of Relevance:
    (21) I don’t know if this answers your question, but …
Flouting maxims

- Implicatures often arise when a maxim is violated “on purpose”.
- This type of blatant violation is called **flouting** a maxim.
- Flouting a maxim occurs when a maxim is ostentatiously violated for an obvious conversational effect.
- This method is often exploited by the speaker who hopes that the hearer will recognize the original intention and generate the desired implicature.
- Flouting a maxim is a rhetorical device that can lead to sarcasm, irony, etc.
Flouting maxims cont’d

(22) Taken from a recommendation letter written for a student who is applying for a job:

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

⇒ Mr. X was not a good student.

(23) This auditorium is filled with students who are eager to learn everything about pragmatics.

⇒ No implicature when said at the start of the semester.

⇒ Sarcasm when said at the end of the semester.

(24) A girl is a girl, bro. / He’ll either call you or he won’t.

⇒ Don’t worry.
For next time

• Homework assignment #1 is due today. The assignment results will soon be posted on Dropbox.

• For next time: please read “Scalar implicature”.