

Gricean Implicature

Grice invokes the concept of implicature in order to explain how information other than that literally contained in the sentence or that which must follow from the sentence (what is entailed) is conveyed. Because of the potential ambiguity between what is an implicature, what is entailed, and what is pragmatically hypothesized (since all are meanings not explicitly stated), Grice carefully lays out the structure which yields an implicature, rather than an entailment or a pragmatic guess. This structure is comprised of his Cooperative Principle and his four maxims of conversation.

The Cooperative Principle is the idea that (generally) all speakers and listeners have a common belief about the point of conversation, in other words that a conversation takes place with a common goal in mind. This goal is typically the exchange of information, but to broaden the scope of this goal we might say that the information need not be the meaning of the sentence (I think this is a potential criticism of Grice's CP and a potential response he might make). To clarify: it is obvious that a conversation such as the following involves the exchange of information: {Speaker 1: "Hello, what time is it, please?", Speaker 2: "It's ten past two in the afternoon.", Speaker 1: "Thank you, and what day is it?", Speaker 2: "It's Wednesday, the 27th."}. It seems uncontroversial that, if Speaker 1 wants to know the time and date, and Speaker 2 has this information, then the above conversation is about Speaker 1 telling Speaker 2 he'd like to know the time and date, and Speaker 2 telling Speaker 1 the time and date in response. The main topic seems to be the time and date. Not every word in the sentence has to do with the main topic, though – Speaker 1 says "hello", "please", and "thank you" to Speaker 2. However, even though those words don't obviously seem to be conveying information about the main topic, I think it's fairly easy to judge what the main topic is and that the goal of the conversation is to exchange information (in particular, to exchange information in a polite way).

It might seem less obvious, or more arguable, whether a conversation such as the following is also designed to exchange information: {Speaker 1: "Hello, how are you?", Speaker 2: "Good, thank you – and yourself?", Speaker 1: "Quite well, thanks. What have you thought of this lovely weather?", Speaker 2: "Very nice, it's been lovely recently.", Speaker 1: "Well, this is my stop. Have a nice day.", Speaker 2: "You, too, good-bye."}. Maybe this sort of conversation really intends to convey information regarding its "main topics" - the nice weather, the state of the two speakers -, but then again, it's quite easy to imagine a scenario when that either isn't the information meant to be conveyed, or the speakers are lying. For example, say neither Speaker 1 nor Speaker 2 is in fact doing well – maybe a relative has died, or a job has been lost, etc. And presumably they both know everything being said about the weather already. We can even go further and say that (in the US) each knows that the other will claim to be doing well, and will claim to like nice weather, because it's easy to imagine how awkwardness and a sense of social violation would result from a different answer.

Then, the information intended by the above conversation isn't something like "I'm doing well and I like nice weather, and you?", but something more like, "While we're on the train together I'm going to be polite and express a solicitous interest in you rather than ignoring you." The other speaker probably assumes, soon after the conversation is initiated, the form of conversation he is about to engage in.

We could choose to frame this differently – we might say, in the above conversations, that the goal is foremost to conform to social standards, which vary according to scenario, rather than to say that the goal is to convey information of a kind which varies according to scenario and can be dictated by social standards. The former framing might seem more obvious with “prescriptive” conversations (for example, the second conversation), and the latter with “informative” conversations (for example, the first conversation), but it seems to me that they can both amount to the same thing. At any rate, both are equally good examples of speakers following Grice's Cooperative Principle, since in both cases the speakers share a common goal.

A possible criticism here is what is meant by “common goal”. For example, if I have a debate, I and my opponent have common goals in that we both want to decisively resolve the issue at hand – but we have opposing goals in that we each have different ideas in mind for the resolution. If I have a nasty fight, the common goal might be to hurt the other person's feelings, but that seems more like an antagonistic goal than a joint one. But debates and nasty arguments are not outlying, rare uses of language; they're fairly common, though almost certainly less common than overtly polite conversation. And we have rules other than the Cooperative Principle which govern conversation, or else the Cooperative Principle covers even fights: for example, in a fight, even if we both are saying nasty things to hurt each other, some things are “fair” while others seem “below the belt”. It doesn't seem immediately clear how this sort of rule relates to the Cooperative Principle or the to the maxims – but if there are other rules, do we never use them to create implicature? Do we ever use them to create some other kind of meaning? What kind? Grice acknowledges the existence of other maxims such as “be polite” and says that they may well generate other kinds of nonconventional implicature.

However, he seems to regard the other maxims, such as the “aesthetic” and “social”, as less closely tied than the conversational maxims to the conveyance of information, which, though he acknowledges is not the only use of language, he does say that the exchange of information is a large or even primary part of “the particular purposes that talk (and so, talk exchange) [are] adapted to serve and [are] primarily employed to serve”. He says that this scheme would, ideally, be “generalized to allow for such general purposes as influencing or directing the actions of others.” However, I think that the “aesthetic” maxims are designed with the intent of conveying information, specifically, of conveying emotional information, or even causing someone to feel a certain way. Besides that, although talk may or may not originally have evolved to convey literal information, now, in today's complex society, talk is certainly used for smoothing the workings of the giant, complex machines (social, political, institutional machines) we have invented in order to delegate labour and functions. Now one of the main adaptations of talk and talk exchange seems to me to be the support of these machines – definition of the purpose of talk as a way to enable people to work together to create a larger organism (metaphorically) seems to me to include the specific kind of information exchange Grice focuses on as well as the more abstract kind of social-adherence information exchange I mentioned earlier. If we define the purpose of talk in this way, we don't need to “generalize to influencing or directing the actions of others” starting from “the main purpose of talk is to exchange information”. As I mentioned obliquely earlier, we can either change the definition of “information”, or we can change the definition of the purpose of talk in order to alleviate this hitch. (At any rate, I'd like more proof or reasoning for why Grice thinks the exchange of information is so integral to the purpose of talk and what exactly he thinks falls under that heading.)

Grice clarifies his Cooperative Principle by delineating maxims which speakers (generally) follow in conversation. The maxims are Quality (don't lie or present something for which you have no evidence as if it were substantiated), Quantity (say enough to be useful but don't include extra information), Relation (be relevant), and Manner (don't be obscure, try to be concise and clear). The style in which he lays them out makes them seem as if they were rules or guidelines speakers should obey for good conversation, but what he really means them to be

seems to be a set of rules or guidelines which speakers and listeners assume to exist. It is by relying on the existence (for all speakers) of these maxims that speakers and listeners are able to create implicature. To be clear, this is different than saying that speakers/ listeners believe that everyone follows these maxims all the time; an analogous example is that, although I know that people can and do sometimes lie, I assume that a speaker is telling the truth, by default. Similarly, assuming that everyone adheres to these maxims and that everyone assumes that everyone adheres to these maxims allows us to implicitly use the maxims and the assumptions regarding the maxims as another structure or system from which to derive (or leverage) meaning. It's not entirely different from the way that, by assuming everyone knows and everyone knows that everyone knows a certain word, we can count on the contents of the word to transfer meaning.

The derivation or leveraging of meaning based on the assumptions regarding the maxims is what Grice calls implicature. His analysis of (conversational) implicature is that, when someone implicates *q* by saying *p*: he is presumed (by the listener) to obey the Cooperative Principle; his stating *q* is uncooperative (openly flouts or flagrantly disregards one of the maxims); and he assumes that the listener has the ability to reconcile that *p* is only cooperative when *q* is taken as meant along with it. In other words, as a listener, you expect the statement your conversant makes to fulfill the maxims/ the Cooperative Principle. When it obviously doesn't, you look for a meaning you can derive from the sentence but that isn't included in the literal meaning of the sentence that will "repair" the original statement's flouting of some maxim. (Grice also has "conventional implicature" and "scalar implicature", but I'm not going into that here.)

A final criticism I bring up is again related to assumptions that Grice makes which I don't think can necessarily be taken for granted: he says that, in some cases of implicature (case 2a, when the maxim of relevance is flouted), "the most obviously related proposition is the contradictory of the one he purports to be putting forward" (where the statement is *q* and the implicature is not-*q*). How do people decide that the negation is the "most obviously related proposition"? That doesn't seem to me to be something that should obviously follow from any of the previous points in the paper – there is no theoretical or experimental justification mentioned. I think the tone/ the prosodic information is key to making not-*q* the "most obvious" interpretation to draw from "*q*". In other words, Grice has all of the work of interpretation being done by the maxims and the speaker's/ listener's assumptions about the maxims, but I think the tone plays an important contributing role. This would be easy to check: the reaction rate and mental energy expended of listeners upon hearing *q* in identical contexts, but with and without "typical" or "appropriate" tone could be compared. However, tone doesn't need to replace all notion of the maxims – perhaps it cues the listener in to the flouting of the maxim.

MIT OpenCourseWare
<http://ocw.mit.edu>

24.251 Introduction to Philosophy of Language
Fall 2011

For information about citing these materials or our Terms of Use, visit: <http://ocw.mit.edu/terms>.