

Conversational Implicature Theory: An Exploration of its Types, Characteristics and Benefits

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ABSTRACT

Numerous theories have been successful in accounting for aspects of language. One of them is conversational Implicature Theory of Paul Grice, which has been employed in the literature on Pragmatics and Discourse Analysis. This paper, therefore, aims to discuss the theory, highlighting its tenets, classifications, characteristics as well as the benefits of the theory. Speakers of languages should be able to draw inferences about what is meant but not actually said. Such information conveyed in this way is what Grice and many other scholars regarded as conversational implicature. To explore the workings of the implicature theory, the paper further illuminates some key elements of Conversational Implicature, particularly, Paul Grice's model of cooperative principles. Furthermore, the investigation comes up with some critique of the theory anchoring the views of some prominent scholars. Finally, the paper reports some scholarly tips as to how the theory could be improved.

Keywords: Conversational Implicature, Gricean Maxims, Flouting Implicature, Manner Implicature, Particularized Implicature, Quantity Implicature.

Introduction

Human beings are social creatures who always interact with others. Language has become the primary mechanism of communication and interaction. Additionally, language can also be used as a means of expressing thoughts, feelings and information. Therefore, communication works well when the people involved in a discourse understand such messages put across by the speakers.

If using language amounted to nothing more than putting one's thoughts into words, then understanding an utterance would be merely a matter of decoding the words uttered. No one seriously believes that, and yet even today philosophers often postulate that every sentence expresses a proposition and that every utterance is the assertion of that proposition. This, perhaps, is the major concern of Pragmatics. To delimit and characterise the area covered by it as a discipline, Akmajian et al. assert "we will take the term Pragmatics to cover the study of language use, and in particular the study of linguistic communication, in relation to language structure and context of utterance"(2010:361). There are various phenomena that such a simplistic view fails to consider. However, with the work and influence of Austin and Grice, most of these phenomena are now quite similar and fairly well understood. However, there are two such phenomena which, though pervasive, have received little notice.

Consider the following example, in which a woman says (1) to her husband:

(1) She has taken enough from you.

The meanings of the words *she* and *you* do not by themselves determine who they are being used to refer to, say a certain female employee and the speaker's husband, who is also the employee's boss. Moreover, because the word *taken* is ambiguous (ambiguity is semantic over determination), one of this word's linguistic meanings must be selected. Depending on which one is operative, *taken* could be used to mean 'appropriated', 'received', 'tolerated', or 'suffered'. Supposed it is being used to mean 'suffered'. Then (1) would be used to say that the employee in question has suffered enough from the speaker's husband. Perhaps the wife is not only asserting that proposition but also urging her husband to stop doing what he has been doing to the employee or to warn him about her possibly retaliating. Or maybe his wife does not really mean what she is saying but is being odiously ironic, urging her husband to mistreat the employee still more. But leave aside possible indirect or figurative uses of (1). Just notice that nothing in the sentence indicates what it is that the employee is being said to have suffered enough of or with respect to what it is enough; nor does anything in the sentence indicate that the utterance is intended to apply only to the time since the husband developed a personal interest in the employee.

Confusion in terms inspires confusion in concept. When a relevant distinction is not clearly marked or not marked at all, it is apt to be blurred or even missed altogether in our thinking. This is true in any area of inquiry, pragmatics in particular. No one disputes that there are various ways in which what is communicated in an utterance can go beyond sentence

meaning. The problem is to catalog the ways. It is generally recognized that linguistic meaning under determines speaker meaning because of the need for disambiguation and reference assignment and because people can speak figuratively or indirectly. The situation may be described in Gricean terms: the distinction between what is said and what is implicated.

There are so many literature on the theory of implicature which have complicated the theory since 1978. However, two aspects of Grice's works are particularly relevant to literary interpretation: his theory of non-natural meaning, and his theory of conversational implicature. Though this study is particular to conversational implicature, references will be made to the former.

Conversational Implicature

H.P. Grice in 1975 suggested in what has been generally tagged the cooperative principles, that in all communication, there is the general agreement of cooperation between a speaker and a hearer. It is this general agreement of cooperation that determines how conversation may proceed.

Grice has argued that the meaning of a word (or non-natural sign) in general is a derivative function of what speakers mean by that word in individual instances of uttering it. That is, the universal 'type' meaning, or set of such meanings, for a given word is an abstraction from the 'token' meanings that speakers mean for the word in specific instances of use. In other words, to Paul Grice, father of conversational implicatures in the 1970s, what is meant in conversation often goes beyond what is said or written, and this additional non-literal meaning is not inferable but also predictable.

Among other things, this account opposes the formalist orthodoxy in semantic theory, according to which the universal conventional meaning (or set of meanings) of a word predetermines what that word might mean in any given instance of use. The convention theory discourages inquiry into what a particular speaker might mean by a word in a particular utterance; to understand the utterance it is enough to know what the word 'mean' tout court. But Grice holds that what a word 'means' derives from what speakers mean by uttering it; and he further holds that 'what a particular speaker or writer means by a sign on a particular occasion ... may well diverge from the standard meaning of the sign' (Grice 1957: 381).

Obviously therefore we can, given an utterance often derive a number of inferences from it; but not all these inferences may have been communicative in Grice's sense, that is, intended to be recognized as being intended. The kind of inferences that are called implicatures are always of this special intended kind.

Grice's second theory in the second lecture, (Grice, 1975a, 1975b) in which he develops the concept of implicature is essentially a theory about how people use language. Grice's suggestion is that there is a set of over-arching assumptions guiding the conduct of conversation. These arise it seems, from basic rational considerations and may be formulated as guidelines for the effective and efficient use of language in conversation to further cooperative ends (op cit). he proposes, as pointed out in O'Grady et al.,(2011), that participants in conversation understood the following general 'cooperative principle' to be in force:

"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." This superordinate principle comprises the following subordinate rules or 'maxims.

i. Maxims of Quantity

1. Make your contribution as informative as is required (for the current purposes of the exchange). [Note: This is the strongest-statement-possible principle first proposed in Grice (1961), and cited above]
2. Do not make your contribution more informative than is required.

ii. Maxims of Quality: Supermaxim; try to make your contribution one that is true.

1. Do not say what you believed to be false.
2. Do not say that for which you lack adequate evidence.

iii. Maxim of Relation: Be relevant.

iv. Maxims of Manner: Supermaxim: be perspicuous

1. Avoid obscurity/of expression
2. Avoid ambiguity
3. Be brief (avoid unnecessary prolixity)
4. Be orderly

Because conversation is a cooperative and social enterprise, children are instilled with these imperatives as part of the process of socialization and language acquisition. Grice would argue further that observing the CP and maxims is “reasonable (rational)” behavior, because it tends to benefit the speaker’s interest. In any case, the ability to realize these imperatives is an important part of a speaker’s communicative competence (Bates 1976). The result is that a violation of any of these maxims will be linguistically aberrant, or “marked,” and literally “remarkable.” (Once the violation is detected, that is; some violations are surreptitious). Faced with a speaker’s violation of a maxim, a competent hearer will draw one of several possible conclusions, depending on the case. This is to say, before two people are engaged in a conversation, they know the maxims. Each of these maxims constitutes a convention that is normally obeyed, though not a rule. In an exchange of conversation, one expects for example that the people one is talking to or with are telling the truth. Otherwise, conversation will not follow the patterns they do if every statement made was assumed to be false.

However, strangely as it may seem, it is the flouting of these conventions which Grice suggests is the basis for the flexibility of the message which can be conveyed by the means of a single sentence. These conventions or norms are different from linguistic rules since they are in any case often broken. It is in fact the case that these implicatures derive their existence from flouting of the maxims. Flouting of the maxims here refers to the deliberate breaking of a conversational maxim while still being cooperative. For example, in the following exchange, B flouts the maxim of manner thereby implying that an open discussion of the ice cream is not desired:

a) Let’s get the kids something.

b) Okay, but I veto I-C-E-C-R-E-A-M-E-S

Certainly, context here plays a fundamental role for the implicature to arise. The context here is that the children are present at the time of interaction between speakers A and B.

It is worthy of note that there are various implicature that could arise as a result of the form, manner and context of conversation. This will be explained briefly below to further illuminate the concept of conversational implicatures.

Types of Conversational Implicatures

(1) Flouting Implicature

A flouting implicature is a conversational implicature based on an addressee's assumption that the speaker is deliberately breaking (flouting) a conversational maxim while still being cooperative.

The term flouting implicature is a coinage. The concept of an implicature derived from the flouting of a maxim is an important one in the literature of conversational implicature, but there is not a specific name for it. It would commonly be more appropriate to speak of an implicature derived from the speaker's flouting of a conversational maxim.

Example (English)

In the preceding exchange, B flouts the maxim of manner, thereby implying that an open discussion of the ice cream is not desired.

a) Where is Dr. Yahaya?

b) There's a red Mercedes Benz car parked in the School of Undergraduate Studies garage.

Here, B's contribution taken literally fails to answer A's question and thus seems to violate at least the maxims of quantity and relevance. We might therefore expect B's utterance to be interpreted as a non-cooperative response, a brushing aside of A's concern with a change of topic. Yet despite this apparent failure of cooperation, we try to interpret B's utterance as nevertheless cooperative at some deeper (non-superficial) level. We do this by asking ourselves what possible connection there could be between the location of Dr. Yahaya and the location of a red Mercedes Benz car, and thus arrive at the suggest in (which B effectively conveys) that, Dr Yahaya has a red Mercedes Benz car, he may be at his office in the School of Undergraduate Studies.

In cases of this sort, inferences arise to preserve the assumption of cooperation. It is this kind of inference that Grice calls an implicature, or more properly a "conversational implicature".

(2) Manner Implicature

A manner implicature is a conversational implicature based on an addressee's assumption that the speaker is either observing or flouting the conversational maxim of manner.

If the speaker is assumed to be observing the maxim, then the addressee makes a standard implicature. If the speaker is assumed to be flouting the maxim, then the addressee makes a more nonstandard type of implicature.

Example (English)

The manner implicature

X: “Miss Singer sang badly” is derived from the sentence.

Y: “Miss Singer produced a series of sounds corresponding closely to the score of an aria from Rigoletto.”

By the flagrant avoiding of the simple X in favour of the prolix and subsequent violation of the sub-maxim “be brief”, the reviewer implicates that there was in fact some considerable difference between Miss Singer’s performance and those to which the term ‘singing’ is usually applied.

(3) Particularised Implicature

A particularized implicature is a conversational implicature that is derivable only in a specific context.

Example (English)

A: What on earth has happened to the roasted beef?

B: The dog is looking very happy.

In the above exchange, A will likely derive the implicature “the dog ate the roasted beef” from B’s statement. This is due to A’s belief that B is observing the conversational maxim of relation or relevance in the specific context of A’s question.

(4) Quantity Implicature

A quantity implicature is a conversational implicature based on an addressee’s assumption as to whether the speaker is observing or flouting the conversational maxim of quantity.

If the speaker is assumed to be observing the maxim, then the addressee makes a standard implicature. If the speaker is assumed to be flouting the maxim, then the addressee makes a more non-standard type of implicature.

Example (English)

The utterance ‘Nigel has 14 children’ commonly implicates ‘Nigel has only 14 children’, even though it would be compatible with Nigel’s having 20 children.

The utterance ‘War is war’ is itself uninformative; however, depending on its context, it will implicate item such as the following:

‘All war is undifferentiated (and thus uniformly unjust)’

‘This is the way war is, stop complaining’.

Furthermore, there are some kinds of quantity implicature such as Clausal and Scalar implicatures. Works on these kinds of implicatures could be traced to the contributions of Horn (1976) and Gazdar (1979).

(5) Standard Implicature

A standard implicature is a conversational implicature based on an addressee’s assumption that the speaker is being cooperative by directly observing the conversational maxims.

Example (English)

In the following exchange, A assumes that B is being cooperative, truthful, adequately informative, relevant, and clear. Thus, A can infer that B thinks A can get fuel at the garage.

A: I’ve just run out of petrol.

B: Oh; there’s a garage just around the corner.

(6) Generalized Implicatures

A generalized implicature is a conversational implicature that is inferable without reference to a special context.

Example (English)

Expressions with the form an X usually imply that X is not closely related to the speaker or subject, as in the following expression:

‘John walked into a house yesterday and saw a tortoise’.

This expression implies that the house is not John’s house.

(7) Quality Implicatures

A quality implicature is a conversational implicature based on the addressee’s assumption as to whether or not the speaker is observing or flouting the conversational maxim of quality.

If the speaker is assumed to be observing the maxim, then the addressee makes a standard implicature. If the speaker is assumed to be flouting the maxim, then the addressee makes a more nonstandard type of implicature.

Example (English)

The sentence John has two Ph.D’s implicates both the following:

‘I believe John has two Ph.D.’s.’

‘I have adequate evidence that John has two Ph.D.’s.’

It may also cause an implicature derived from the addressee’s belief that the speaker is flouting the maxim quality.

In the following exchange, the obvious falsehood of B’s utterance implicates that B is saying A is wildly incorrect:

A: Tehran’s in Turkey, isn’t it, teacher?

B: And London’s in Armenia, I supposed.

(8) Relevance Implicatures

A relevance implicature is a conversational implicature based on an addressee’s assumption as to whether a speaker is observing or flouting the conversational maxim of relation or relevance.

If the speaker is assumed to be observing the maxim, then the addressee makes a standard implicature. If the speaker is assumed to be flouting the maxim, then the addressee makes a more non-standard type of implicature.

Example (English)

In the following exchange, the implicature that A draws as to the time of the from B’s presumably relevant response is a relevant implicature:

A: Can you tell me the time?

B: Well, the milkman has come.

Just as we have stipulated earlier on, context of conversation plays an important role in the derivation of implicatures. For instance, saying B to someone in Nigeria may not derive an implicature because we do not have in our social reality ‘milkmen’ but when the same statement is uttered in Britain, an implicature will be derived because there milkman exist. Therefore, the hearer could calculate the time that the milkman usually brings milk to appropriate the time.

In the following exchange, the implicature A draws (that A’s remark was not welcome to B) from B’s response is a relevance implicature:

A: Mrs. X is an old bag.

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

Characteristics of Implicatures

(1) Cancellability: That is, the speaker can go on to say something that cancels the apparent implication. You can't do that with semantic implication. For example, to say that someone has 'stopped' doing something is to imply, through the semantics of the verb, that he once did it; and that implication is not cancelable. You can't say:

* John has stopped smoking, though he never did smoke.

But for an example like:

'Audu is either in Minna or Kaduna', you can say:

'Audu is either in Minna or Kaduna; I know which, but I won't tell you'.

Here, we see clearly that the implicature in A has been cancelled in B (that is, the uncertainty implied in cancelled).

An inference is also said to be cancelable or defeasible if it is possible to cancel it by adding some additional premises to the original ones as illustrated in the example above. Thus while inductive argument are defeasible, deductive or logical inferences are not. For example:

a) If Socrates is a man, he is mortal.

b) Socrates is a man.

c) Therefore, Socrates is mortal.

Because (a) and (b) are true, the inference (c) is also true. It is therefore not an implicature as the inference is not defeasible. The same is not however true of inductive arguments as their inferences do not follow logically or deductively from the premises. For instance let us consider the following inductive argument.

a) I have dug up 1001 carrots.

b) Everyone of the 1001 carrots is orange.

c) Therefore, all carrots are orange.

The addition of another premise to the above argument invalidates the conclusion and defeats the argument.

a) I have dug up 1001 carrots

- b) Every one of the 1001 carrots is orange
- c) The 1002 carrot is green
- d) Invalid: therefore all carrots are orange.

It is thus evident that implicatures are defeasible as they appear to be quiet unlike logical inferences (Levinson, 1983: 116).

(2) Non-Detachability: An implicature is said to be non detachable if it is inseparably attached to the meaning of an utterance and does not derive meaning from its form. The implicature is attached to the semantic content of what is said, not to the linguistic form, and therefore, implicatures cannot be detached from a utterance simply by changing the words of the utterance for synonyms. If we take an implicature like the ironic interpretation of:

John is a genius

John is an idiot (the ironic interpretation)

In a context in which it is mutually known that the first utterance is definitely not true, the ironic reading will be shared by all the different ways of expressing the opposition that gives rise to it.

(3) Calculability: This is another characteristic used in distinguishing conversational implicature from other kinds of implication. Implicatures are calculable or computable when they are heavily content dependent and context non deterministic (Lyons, 1995: 288) for metaphorical utterance like ‘John is a tiger’.

Levinson (1983) argues that it should be possible to construct an argument showing how from the literal meaning of the sense of the utterance on one hand, and the cooperative principle and the maxims on the other hand, it follows that an addressee would make the inference in question to preserve the assumption of cooperation.

(4) Non-Conventionality: Implicatures are not part of the conventional meaning of linguistic expression. More so, since we need to know the literal meaning of the sense of the utterance before we can calculate its implicatures in a context, the implicatures cannot be part of that meaning. Additionally, it is possible for an utterance to be true while its implicature is false, and vice versa.

For example:

‘Habiba hit Salamatu’ would implicate

‘Habiba didn’t kill Salamatu by hitting her’.

If Habiba had killed Salamatu, the speaker will be withholding information in a non-cooperative way. It is however possible for a speaker to say ‘Habiba hit Salamatu’. attempting to mislead, in a situation where the utterance is true while the implicature is false.

(5) Indeterminacy: It is possible in some cases for an expression with a single meaning to give rise to different implicatures on diverse occasions. It may be difficult to determine on any one occasion the set of associated implicatures. E.g.

‘John is a madrine’

This could implicate; John is cold, or efficient, a workaholic, non-creative, or puffs and blows or any or all of these. It is possible in some instances for implicatures to be indeterminable in dissonance with the stable determinate sense often assumed in semantic theories.

Benefits of the C.I. Theory

- (1) Conversational implicature theory offers some significant functional explanations of linguistic facts.
- (2) CI theory provides some explicit account of how it is possible to mean (in some general sense) more than what is actually said (i.e. more than what is literally expressed by the conventional sense of the linguistic expressions uttered).
- (3) It offers a way out for it allows one to claim that natural language expressions do tend to have simple, stable and unitary senses (in many cases anyway) but that this stable semantic core often has an unstable, context-specific pragmatic overlay-namely a set of implicatures.
- (4) Implicature put interesting constraints on what can be a possible lexical item in natural languages.

Grice’s analysis of verbal meaning in terms of the speaker’s intentions has become increasingly elaborate, as he and others have revised it (Strawson, 1964, Schiffer 1972). This elaboration has become one ground of objection (Black 1973, MacKay 1972). Ziff (1967) has published an influential critique of the theory, which Patton and Stampe (1969) subject to a detailed rebuttal. Searle (1969: 42-50) incorporates Grice’s analysis into his own speech-act model, but only after radical revision to suppress the unconventional aspect.

Weakness of the C.I Theory

Grice theory of conventional implicature has been variously attacked, defended, and revised by others. Keenan (1974), citing anthropological data, claims that Grice's conversational maxims are parochial, not universal; P. Brown and Levinson (1978: 298-99) argue to the contrary. Gordon and G. Lakoff (1971) try to formalize Grice's theory so as to fit it within a generative-semantics grammar. R. Lakoff (1977) and P. Brown and Levinson (1978) would place it within a larger model of sociolinguistic "politeness".

Another objection to Grice's Cooperative Principle (CP) is on the ground that it does not stand up to the evidence of real language use. For example, it has been argued that conversational constraints such as those of the cooperative principle do not work because the majority of declarative sentences do not have an information bearing function (Larkin and O'Malley 1973).

Therefore, the Politeness Principle (PP) should not be seen as just another principle to be added to the CP, but as a necessary compliment which rescues the CP from serious trouble. An example of where the PP rescues the CP could be seen thus:

A: We'll all miss Prof. Mohammed and Prof. Sue, won't we?

B: We'll all miss Prof. Mohammed

The maxim of Quantity is not observed in the sentence when B confirms part of the statement, and politely ignores the rest. The implicature is that:

'We'll not miss Prof. Sue'

The conclusion is that B could have been more informative, but only at the cost of being more impolite to a third party: that B therefore suppressed the desired information in order to uphold the politeness principle (Leech, 1983).

It has also been argued that the maxims of CP are not universal to language because there are linguistic communities to which not all of them apply (Keenan, 1974).

Conclusion

Conclusively, one would agree based on the discussions that according to Grice, saying something entails meaning it. This is why he uses the locution 'making as if to say' to describe irony, metaphor, etc. since in these cases one does not mean what one appears to be saying. Many would describe these more straightforwardly as cases of saying one thing and meaning something else instead. That's what it is to speak nonliterally at least if one does so

intentionally. One can also unintentionally say something other than what one means, owing to a slip of the tongue, a misused of a word, or otherwise misspeaking (Harnish, 1976, P. 328). Finally, one can say something without meaning anything at all, as in cases of translating, reciting, ore rehearsing in which one utters a sentence with full understanding (one isn't just practicing one's pronunciation) and yet is not using it to communicate. To reckon with these various ways of saying something without meaning it, Grice could have invoked Austin's distinction between locutionary and illocutionary act (specifically the 'rhetic' act) as using certain 'vocables with a certain more-or-less definite sense and reference'. That sounds a lot like Grice's notion of saying, except that for Grice, saying something entails meaning it: the verb "say", as Grice uses it, does not mark a level distinct from that marked by such illocutionary verbs as state, tell, ask etc., but rather functions as a generic illocutionary verb. It describes any illocutionary act whose content is made explicit. Since virtually all of Grice's examples involve indicative utterances, in practice he uses say to mean 'explicitly state'.

Indeed, the original version of his distinction (in Grice, 1961) was between stating and implying. Clearly Grice opted for the word say in order to broaden the scope of his distinction beyond statements.

Considering that he describes nonliteral utterances like irony and metaphor not as saying but as making as if to say, it is puzzling that Grice should have assimilated these to implicature. Intuitively, one thinks of implicating as stating or meaning one thing (i.e. saying something in Grice's favoured sense) and meaning something else in addition, not as meaning something else instead. Having denied that irony and metaphor are cases of saying in his sense, he did not need to describe their nonliteral contents as implicatures. Since implicature is a kind of indirect speech act whereas irony and metaphor are species of nonliteral but direct speech act (Bach and Harnish, 1979, Ch. 4), the latter should not be classified as implicature. Unfortunately, this is done by both Grice and many of his critics.

Finally, to improve on Grice's CI theory, Kent Bach's view (Bach & Harnish, 1979), was suggested which proposes two ways to improve on Grice's taxonomic scheme while retaining the criterion of close syntactic correlation. Grice's distinction between 'saying' (in his favoured sense) and merely making 'as if to say' with the distinction (in indicative cases) between explicitly stating and saying in Austin's locutionary sense and we distinguish

nonliterality (including sentence nonliterality) from implicature. In this way we have a notion of what is said that applied uniformly to three situations:

- 1) Where the speaker means what he says and something else as well (implicature and indirect speech acts generally).
- 2) Where the speaker (intentionally) says one thing and means something else instead (nonliteral utterance), and
- 3) Where the speaker says something and doesn't mean anything.

What is said, being closely tied to the (or a) meaning of the uttered sentence provides (allowing for indexicality and ambiguity) the hearer with the linguistic basis for inferring what, if anything, the speaker means in addition or instead. Also, it allows for the case in which the speaker does not say what he intends to say, as in the misuse of a word or a slip of the tongue. For this reason, the speaker is not the final authority on what he said.

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