Grice’s Theory of Conversational Implicature

Grice doesn’t define the notion of *implicature*. He assumes we already have at least a rough grip on the distinction between what a speaker *says* and what she *implies* (or, as he prefers to say, *implicates*). (See pp. 24–5.) In this paper, he gives an account of a specific kind of implicature called *conversational implicature*.

Cooperative Principle (CP). 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.

The CP gives rise to some *maxims*, which you can think of as rough rules of conduct. (As we’ll see, there are cases where one can violate them and still be following the CP.)

**Quantity:** Give the right amount of information

1. Be as informative as is required.
2. Don’t be more informative than required.

**Quality:** Try not to say what isn’t true.

1. Don’t say what you believe is false.
2. Don’t say things for which you lack adequate evidence.

**Relation:** Be relevant.

**Manner:** Be perspicuous:

1. Avoid obscurity.
2. Avoid ambiguity.
3. Be brief.
4. Be orderly.

*S* conversationally implicates that *q* in saying that *p* iff

1. *S* implicates that *q* in saying *p*.
2. *S* is presumed to be following the maxims, or at least the CP,
3. the supposition that *S* thinks that *q* is required to maintain (2)
4. *S* thinks the hearer will be able to figure out (3). (pp. 30–31)

**Examples:**

1. A: Smith doesn’t seem to have a girlfriend these days.
   B: He has been paying a lot of visits to New York lately.
2. A: When does Phil 135 meet?
   B: In the afternoon.
3. Dear hiring committee: Mr. X is a master of elementary logic and an excellent speller. Signed,
4. Sam is a fine friend.
Generalized conversational implicature

1. Cal has won some of the last six games.
2. Cal has won every game it has played.
3. Smith is teaching a child how to read.

Cancellability

1. Cal has won some of the last six games—in fact, it’s won all of them!
2. Mr. X is a great speller. What’s more, he’s a terrific philosopher.
3. Phil 135 meets in the afternoon. I know what hour, but I’m not telling.

Schema for derivation (p. 31)

1. He has said that $p$.
2. There is no reason to suppose he isn’t observing the CP.
3. He couldn’t be doing this unless he thought that $q$.
4. He knows (and knows that I know that he knows) that I can see (3).
5. He has done nothing to stop me from thinking that $q$.
6. So he intends me to think that $q$ (or is willing to allow me to think this).
7. So he has implicated that $q$.

Conventional implicature

1. He is an Englishman; he is, therefore, brave.
2. She is blond but intelligent.

Logic and conversation

1. Jack drank six beers and drove home.
   Jack drove home and drank six beers.
2. The president entered and everyone saluted.
3. If you go to class, you will do well.

“Material conditional”: “if $p$ then $q$” ($p \supset q$) is true iff $p$ is false or $q$ is true.