

Grice's Theory of Implicature I

Joseph Pentangelo

LING 405

17 November 2023

Gricean Implicature

Conversational Implicatures

A captain and his mate have a long-term quarrel. The mate drinks more rum than is good for him, and the captain is determined not to tolerate this behaviour any longer. When the mate is drunk again, the captain writes in the logbook: “Today, 11th October, the mate is drunk.” When the mate reads this entry during his next watch, he gets angry. Then, after a short moment of reflection, he writes in the logbook: “Today, 14th October, the captain is not drunk.”



What is the significance of what the mate wrote?

What is **sentence meaning**?

“the semantic content of the sentence” (139)

What is **utterance meaning**?

“the totality of what the speaker intends to convey by making an utterance” (139)

Conversational Implicatures

Arthur: Can you tell me where the post office is?

Bill: I'm a stranger here myself.

What does Bill's response mean here?

Arthur: I've just moved to this town, and so far I'm finding it pretty tedious; I haven't met a single person who is willing to talk about anything except next week's local election.

Bill: I'm a stranger here myself.

Same sentence meaning;
different utterance meaning.

What does Bill's response mean here?

Differences are *pragmatic*, not semantic.

Why does it mean something different in the two pairs of sentences?

Conversational Implicatures

- i. The implicature is different from the literal sentence meaning; in Grice's terms, what is implicated is different from "what is said."
- ii. Nevertheless, the speaker intends for the hearer to understand both the sentence meaning and the implicature; and for the hearer to be aware that the speaker intends this.
- iii. Conversational implicatures are context-dependent.
- iv. Conversational implicatures are often unmistakable, but they are not "inevitable," i.e. they are not logically necessary. [...] In Grice's terms we say that conversational implicatures are defeasible, meaning that they can be cancelled or blocked when additional information is added.

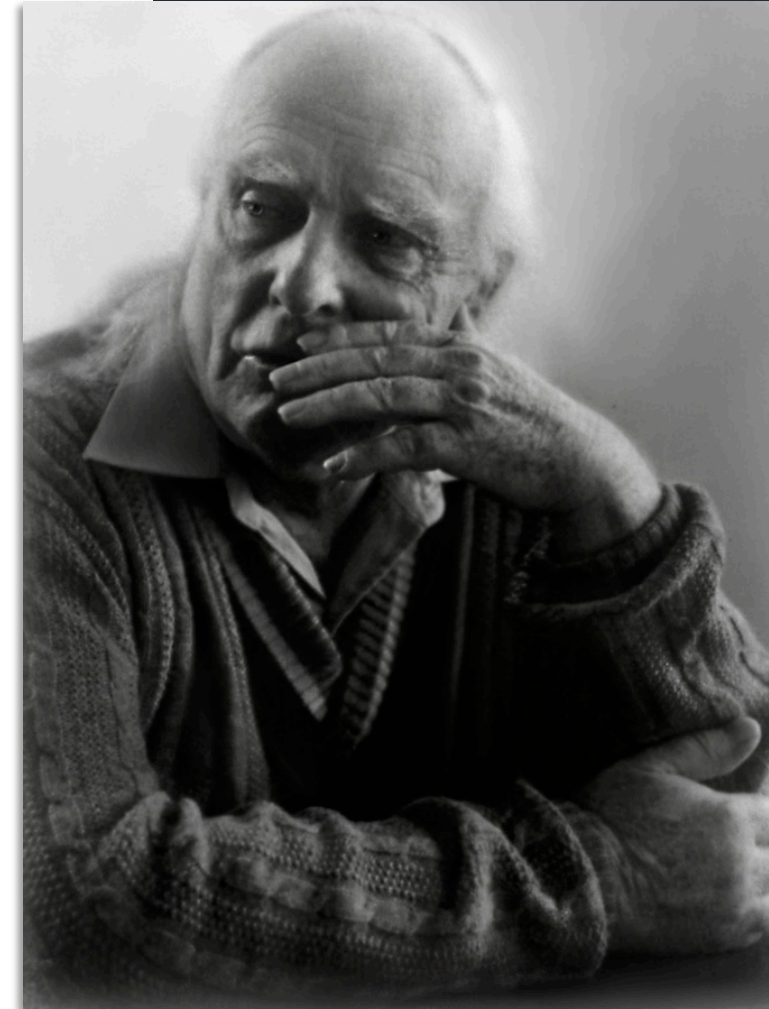
Arthur: Can you tell me where the post office is?

Bill: I'm a stranger here myself. But it happens that I have just come from the post office, so I think I can help you.

Grice's Maxims of Conversation

Grice was not only the first scholar to describe the characteristic features of implicatures, but also the first to propose a systematic explanation for how they work. Grice's lecture series at Harvard University in 1967, where he laid out his analysis of implicatures, triggered an explosion of interest in and research about this topic. It is sometimes cited as the birth date of Pragmatics as a separate field of study. (141)

- Grice pointed out that conversations are cooperative.
- He proposed that every speaker, of every language, operates with several default assumptions about how conversation works.



Paul Grice

The Cooperative Principle (Grice 1975: 45)

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 Maxims of Conversation (Grice 1975: 45–46)

QUALITY: Try to make your contribution one that is true.

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

QUANTITY:

1. Make your contribution as informative as is required (for the current purposes of the exchange).
2. Do not make your contribution more informative than is required.

RELATION (or RELEVANCE): Be relevant.

MANNER: Be perspicuous.

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

- These default assumptions include one principle – **The Cooperative Principle** – and several **Maxims of Conversation**.
- These are not “rules of good communication.”
- “A deliberate deviation from these expectations can be used to communicate extra elements of meaning.” (142)

What would it look like to **flout** these maxims?

Why might one defy these expectations?

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Arthur: Can you tell me where the post office is?

Bill: I'm a stranger here myself.

Does Bill seem to violate one of these maxims?

Yes, relation (aka relevance).

Is it *really* irrelevant?

No, it's relevant to the implicit "no" answer.

What might Arthur take this to mean?

"I can't tell you where the post office is."

“Flouting” is when a speaker violates a maxim in order to communicate a message (an “implication”) to their interlocutor. The interlocutor is meant to notice that a maxim was flouted.

MAXIMS:

QUALITY

QUANTITY

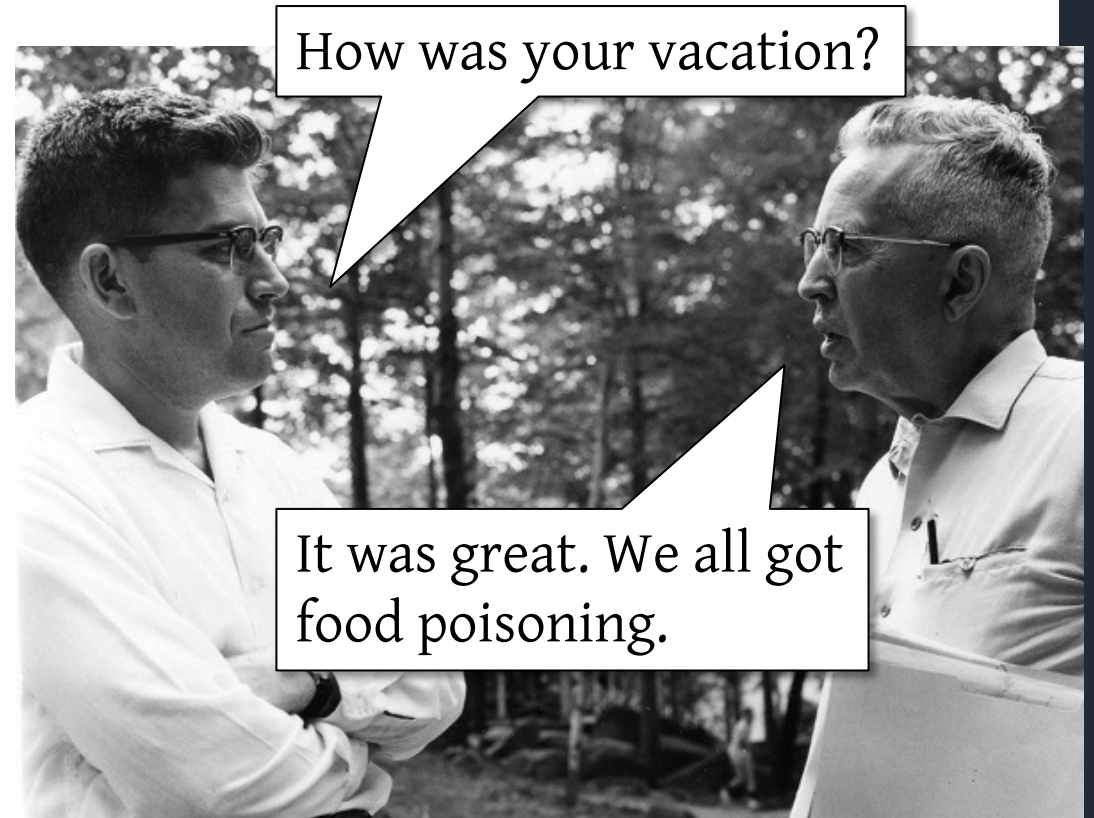
RELATION

MANNER

Try to make your contribution one that is true.

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

Why does the guy on the right say the vacation was “great” if they all got food poisoning?



“Metaphors, irony, and other figures of speech like those [below] can be seen as flouting the maxim of quality, since their literal semantic content is clearly untrue and intended to be recognized as such.” (145)

- You are the cream in my coffee.
- Queen Victoria was made of iron.
- A fine friend he turned out to be!

How is a lie different from a joke?

- A) A priest, a cowboy, and an alligator wrestler walk into a bar...
- B) I once got in a bar brawl with Channing Tatum.

Jokes – like metaphors, irony, and figures of speech – are “clearly untrue and intended to be recognized as such,” while a lie is meant to be believed.

1. Make your contribution as informative as is required (for the current purposes of the exchange).
2. Do not make your contribution more informative than is required.

Why does the guy on the right give such an insufficient answer?



MAXIMS:

QUALITY

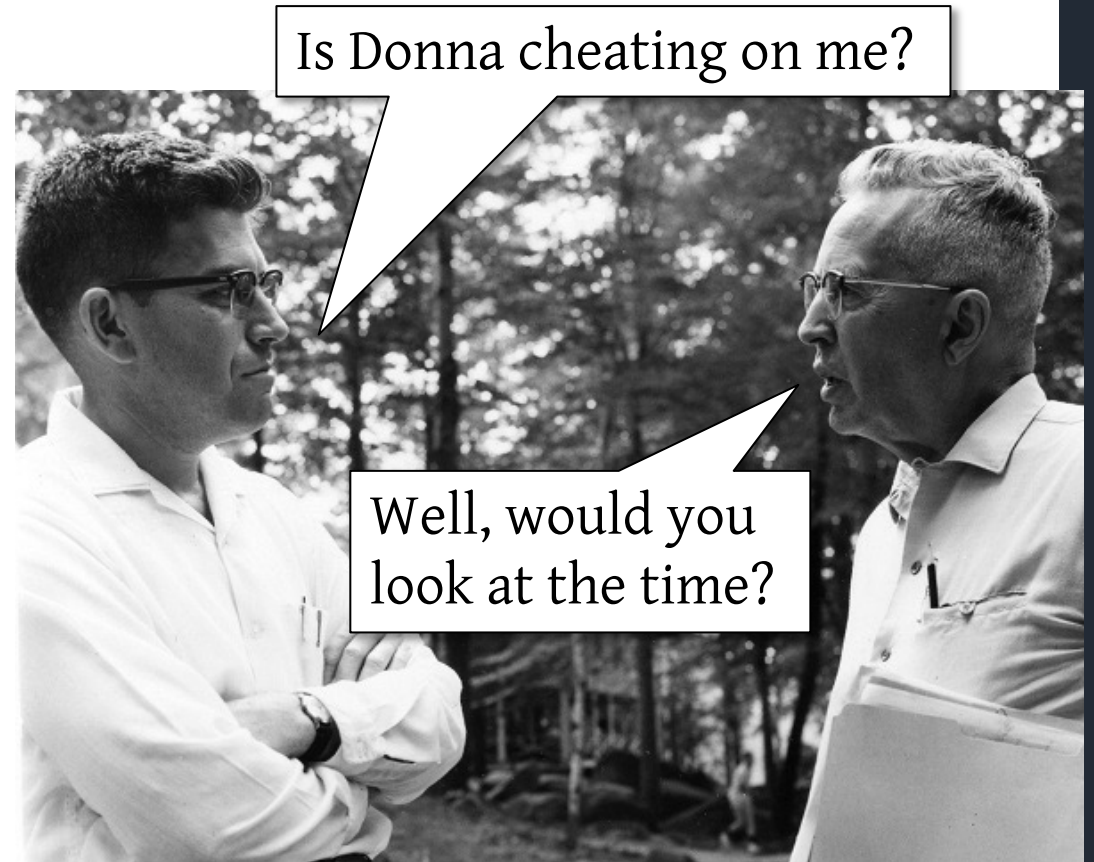
QUANTITY

RELATION

MANNER

Be relevant.

What's going on here?



- Similar examples – maxim of relation/relevance *seems* at first to be violated, but isn't – can be seen here:

A. I'm out of gasoline.

B. There's a service station around the corner.

What implication
does this trigger?

A. Smith doesn't seem to have a girlfriend these days.

B. He has been paying a lot of visits to NY lately.

What implication does
this trigger?

Other examples like this?

MAXIMS:

QUALITY

QUANTITY

RELATION

MANNER

Be perspicuous.

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

How does the guy on the right feel about McDonald's?



Violating the maxims

- More examples of maxims being flouted:
 - A. A professor is writing a letter of reference for a student who is applying for a job as a philosophy teacher:
“Dear Sir, Mr. X’s command of English is excellent, and his attendance at tutorials has been regular. Yours, etc.”
 - B. Review of a vocal recital:
“Miss X produced a series of sounds that corresponded closely with the score of *Home sweet home*.”



What maxim’s violated here?
Why?

What maxim’s violated here?
Why?

Other examples like these?

MAXIMS:

QUALITY

QUANTITY

RELATION

MANNER

A. Conversational implicature. For each pair of sentences, (i) identify the likely implicature carried by B's reply; (ii) state which maxim is most important in triggering the implicature; and (iii) explain how the implicature is derived.^a

(1) A: Are you coming out for a pint tonight?
B: My in-laws are coming over for dinner.

(2) A: Who is that couple?
B: That is my mother and her husband.

(3) A: Did you enjoy having your sister and her family come to visit?
B: The children were perfect angels. We didn't really want that antique table anyway, and I'm sure the cat likes to have its tail pulled.

(4) A: Jones has just taken a second mortgage on his house.
B: I think I saw him at the casino last weekend.

(5) A: Did you make us a reservation for dinner tonight?
B: I meant to.

MAXIMS:

QUALITY

QUANTITY

RELATION

MANNER

For December 1st...

- Finish reading this chapter.
- Complete writing assignment #5 by 11:59pm on 1 Dec.:
Imagine a Thanksgiving dinner. One guest, (A), brings up a controversial topic, making other guests uncomfortable. How might another guest, (B), make use of Grice's maxims of conversation to indirectly get the message across to (A) that their contribution is not welcome?
Give an example of what (B) might say, and explain which of Grice's maxims they are flouting.
- Don't forget, there will be no class next week (24 November). Have a happy Thanksgiving!

