MIT Student

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24.251: Philosophy of Language

Comprehension Exercise 2: Grice, "Logic and Conversation"

In "Logic and Conversation", Paul Grice proposes a mechanism for what he terms *conversational implicature*, the process by which we suggest meaning separate and not strictly entailed by our utterances. His system rests on an observation of rational conversation called the *cooperative principle*: that any contribution to a conversation should be made as required, at the stage of the conversation in which it occurs, and by the purpose and direction of the conversation.

The cooperative principle includes the following maxims of conversation:

1. *Quantity*: The speaker should be as informative as required, but no more informative.
2. *Quality*: The speaker should not say anything which is either false or which lacks evidence.
3. *Relation*: The speaker should give only relevant information.
4. *Manner*: The speaker should avoid obscurity, ambiguity, disorderliness, or verboseness.

Violations of the cooperative principle are then viewed as giving rise to conversational implicature. The general mechanism goes as follows, to paraphrase Grice: Suppose a speaker says *p*, which, in the context of the conversation, appears to violates the cooperative principle. The listener assumes the cooperative principle and realizes that the speaker has appeared to violate it. The only way that *p* would not be a violation is if the speaker is also assuming *q*, and knows that the listener can work out this assumption. In this case, we therefore say the speaker is implicating *q* as a result of saying *p*.

Hence, the speaker deliberately *flouts* a maxim, in such a way that he knows the listener can work out what he means in doing so. In deriving the conversational implicature, Grice suggests the listener utilizes a number of facts, which include:

1. The conventional meaning of the words used, together with any references they might make;
2. The cooperative principle and its maxims;
3. The context, including but not limited to the linguistic one; and
4. The fact that each of the above items is known to the participants of the conversation.

From this mechanism, Grice deduces several general properties of conversational implicature.

By its nature, conversational implicature is distinct from logical entailment and also from what Grice calls "conventional implicature", an example of which (due to Grice) is "He is an Englishman; therefore, he is brave" implicating that Englishmen are brave. Thus, it should always be possible in a case of conversational implicature to bring the cooperative principle to the forefront and *cancel* the implication.

Grice also claims conversational implicature is *non-detachable*—the implication remains even after substituting the spoken sentence with another that has the same literal meaning. Hence conversational implicature is on the speaker and the context, not the particular verbal form used.

The truth of a conversational implicature is also not dependent on the truth of what is said— it is not determined by what is said but "the saying of what is said". Finally, Grice notes that because there are presumably many ways of arriving at a possible resolution of any given violation of the cooperative principle, and hence many possible implications, the conversational implicatum is the disjunction of all the ones the listener can come up with.

To a certain degree, Grice's theory of conversational implicature is an obvious observation about the way we take advantage of the expectations of our listeners when we use language. Thus, it is, to this degree, an empirical assertion about the way language works. The psychological game of guessing a hidden assumption from context and a mismatch of expectations is one we are all familiar with, and Grice's examples are all highly plausible. So there is indeed a good body of observational evidence for a Gricean implicature-component to language, at the very least.

But what may not be as obvious is where the maxims in particular come from in the first place. They certainly make for useful, or at least familiar, rules for intelligible and effective conversation, but there is no obvious reason to believe that they are optimal, complete, or efficient. Grice says that the maxims are something "reasonable for us to follow, [something] that we should not abandon," but concedes that even his attempt to consider it a contractual agreement did not cover all the bases, as with letter writing or quarrelling. Although it should be granted that some form of cooperative principle governs conversation, Grice really only offers an instrumental understanding of it.

Another problematic point is the mechanism of the implicature itself. While most of Grice's examples are fairly noncontroversial, they all follow a somewhat heuristic and ad hoc fashion. To take an analogy, arriving at the q is much like arriving at a proof for a math theorem known to be true. Even though the mechanism of conversational implicature stipulates that the speaker knows that the listener can deduce q, there is nothing said about how the speaker knows that, and it always seems like magic each time the listener arrives at the correct implication. The fact that implication of this sort rarely ever fails in daily use stands as an empirical fact left unexplained: as described by Grice, it does not seem reasonable to assume conventional implicature has such a high success rate. In Lycan, the difficulty is explained to be in the "positive" step of the mechanism—after we realize the speaker has violated the cooperative principle, we look for the q that explains everything, and how we go about doing this, how such a search beings to take place, and how the speaker knows that we can do it, is not so clear.

There seems to be the possibility of a rich theory for how, given a context, all participants have an understanding of what the other participants will try first, second, and so on in order to arrive at the implicatum. Digging a little deeper, it even appears that the cooperative principle can be derived from an understanding of our abilities to know what we expect each other think, since it is just the statement that, given these mutual, shared expectations, we try to act accordingly; and conversational implicature would then just be a systematic use of these expectations to convey meaning in a non-literal manner.

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