Implicature and conversational meaning: introductory remarks

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In the beginning there was ...

The Cooperative Principle

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. (Grice 1975)

Maxims of conversation

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.

Quality:

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

Relation:

Be relevant.

The importance of relevance

- Relevance plays a central part in Grice's own account.
- Post-Gricean theories tend to
 - either focus on this notion and seek to come to terms with it (with mixed results),
 - or replace it with more tractable notions (e.g. pragmatic scales).

Scalar implicature

Data:

- [1] Some soldiers are happy \rightsquigarrow Not all soldiers are happy.
- [2] George has two daughters → He doesn't have more than two daughters.
- [3] Tony might be in Washington → He might be somewhere else.

The neo-Gricean story

Ingredients:

- [1] 'All A are B' entails 'Some A are B' (barring vacuous quantification); 'Must φ ' entails 'Might φ ', etc.
- [2] Pragmatic scales: (all, most, many, some), (must, might), (..., three, two, one), (and, or), (boiling, hot, warm), etc.

Scalar implicature:

- [3] IF there is a scale $\langle \alpha_0, \ldots, \alpha_i, \ldots, \alpha_n \rangle$ AND
- [4] for all j, $0 \le j < i$, $\varphi(\alpha_j)$ entails $\varphi(\alpha_i)$, but not v.v., THEN
- [5] for all j, $0 \le j < i$, $\varphi(\alpha_i)$ implicates not- $\varphi(\alpha_j)$

Hence, 'Some A are B' implicates 'Not all/most/many A are B', 'Might φ ' implicates 'Not must φ ' (i.e. 'Might not φ '), etc.

Why do we need scales at all?

Scalar implicatures made easy:

- [1] IF $\varphi(\alpha_i)$ entails $\varphi(\alpha_i)$, but not v.v., THEN
- [2] $\varphi(\alpha_i)$ implicates not- $\varphi(\alpha_j)$

Problem: this produces way too many implicatures:

- [3] Tony has a dog \rightsquigarrow Tony doesn't have a poodle.
- I bought a new tie yesterday ~> I didn't buy a new tie and a hamburger.
- Pragmatic scales drastically reduce the number of implicatures. They substitute for Grice's relevance rider, 'for the current purposes of the exchange'.

Quantity and strength

It is tempting to construe Grice's 1st quantity maxim as enjoining the hearer to make his interpretations as strong (i.e. informative) as possible.

But:

- This is not what Grice says, and rightly so, because
- There is no evidence that, in general, stronger interpretations are preferred to weaker ones.
- In particular, there is no evidence that the following holds: (PSM) Prefer the strongest meaning

If an utterance allows of more than one contrual, the strongest reading is preferred.

Evidence against the PSM

[1] autohyponyms:

Fred picked a fight with a Yankee.

Fred picked a fight with an inhabitant of the US.

- Fred picked a fight with an inhabitant of the Northern States of the US.
- [2] syntactic ambiguity:

The cover of Bettys latest novel is decorated with pink fruits and vegetables.

[pink fruits] and vegetables

pink [fruits and vegetables]

[3] scope ambiguity:

- All department members speak two Romance languages. All department members [speak two Romance languages].
 - Two Romance languages [are spoken by all department members].

Reciprocals and the strongest meaning hypothesis (Dalrymple et al. 1998)

Data:

- [1] House of Commons etiquette requires legislators to address only the speaker of the House and refer to each other indirectly. [Every individual bears R to every other individual.]
- [2] Five Boston pitchers sat alongside each other. [Every individual bears R to every other individual, if not directly then indirectly.]
- [3] The tables were stacked on top of each other. [Every individual bears R to at least one other individual.]
- The Strongest Meaning Hypothesis (SMH):

The hearer will choose the strongest reading that is consistent with his beliefs about the world.

Problems with the SMH

- The SMH is an idle wheel in Dalrymple et al.'s analyses, because the crucial factor is always world knowledge.
- If world knowledge does not play a role, the SMH fails:
 - [1] The yogs are zogging at each other.
 - [2] Riddle: I have here a number of tennis balls, which I have arranged in such a way that they touch each other. How many tennis balls do I have?

A projection problem for implicatures?

The 'filtering' of implicata seems to occur in compound sentences in the same way that filtering of presupposition occurs. (Atlas & Levinson 1981)

Not!

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Presupposition projection

- [1] Fred regrets that he kissed Betty ~-> [*] Fred kissed Betty.
- [2] Fred doesn't regret that he kissed Betty \rightsquigarrow [*].
- [3] It's possible that Fred regrets that he kissed Betty ~> [*].
- [4] Barney believes that Fred₁ regrets that he₁ kissed Betty → [*].

No implicature projection

- Fred kissed some of the girls → [*] He didn't kiss all of them.
- [2] Fred had to kiss some of the girls $\not \to [*]$.

Projection or pseudo-projection?

 Fred didn't kiss some/any of the girls → [*] He didn't kiss all of them.

This is an entailment, not an implicature.

But, prima facie at least, the following cases do seem to involve something like implicature projection:

- [2] Fred may have kissed some of the girls \rightsquigarrow [*].
- [3] Fred either kissed some of the girls or picked a fight with some of the boys ↔ [*].

These inferences can still be accounted for by standard Gricean means, i.e. without projection.

'Blocking' implicatures

Blocking implicatures is very much unlike blocking presuppositions:

- [1] The water is warm, and perhaps even hot.
- [2] ?Fred's wife did it, and perhaps Fred isn't married.
- [3] The water is warm. In fact, it is hot.
- [4] ?Fred's wife did it. In fact, Fred isn't married.
- [5] The water is warm, if not hot.
- [6] If Fred is married, then Fred's wife did it.
- [7] If tomorrow is Sunday, then the water is warm.
- [8] If tomorrow is Sunday, then Fred's wife was here.

So:

- If it exists, implicature projection is quite different from presupposition projection.
- But it is doubtful that it exists, in the first place.

Summing up



- Scales
- Informativeness
- Implicature projection