

INTERDISCIPLINARY APPROACHES TO LANGUAGE AND ITS USE

Maxims: How implicatures arise

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MAXIMS OF CONVERSATION

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 cooperative principle breaks down to a number of maxims

Grice 1975: 45-46

- Quality (truth)
- Quantity (informativeness)
- Relevance
- Manner

MAXIM OF QUALITY

Maxim of 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.

(1) *Situation:* After having seen a clearly bad movie.

A So what do you think?

B It was a masterpiece.

'It was terrible.'

irony

IMPLICATURE

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IMPLICATURE

- B FLOUTS (“blatantly fails to fulfill”) the maxim of quality.
- A knows that B suspects that A shares her view of the movie.
- Saying that the movie was terrible would almost be trivial.
- A concludes that B decided to convey the trivial truth in a less trivial way.

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Violating the maxim of quality also accompanies the following phenomena:

- metaphor (*John's a couch potato*)
- understatement (litotes; *I'm not very happy that...*)
- overstatement (hyperbole; *John is the smartest guy in the world*)
- statements that are trivially true (*War is war*)

MAXIM OF RELEVANCE

Maxim of relevance (or relation)

Be relevant.

(2) A Is John coming to the meeting?

B He's sick.

'John is not coming.'

IMPLICATURE

- B violates the maxim of relevance (she does not resolve A ignorance).
- A knows that B is cooperative and tries to interpret B's response as relevant.
- A exploits the pragmatic presupposition 'If somebody is sick, they don't go to work' to derive the implicature that John is not coming.
- The implicature resolves A's ignorance and hence is relevant.

Notabene: A relevant answer can also be derived from the maxim of quantity (see below).

MAXIM OF QUANTITY

Maxim of 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.

The maxim of quantity typically interacts with other maxims.

INTERACTION BETWEEN MAXIMS: QUANTITY AND QUALITY

(3) A Where's my phone?

B Somewhere in the living room.

'B does not know where exactly.'

IGNORANCE IMPLICATURE

- B violates the maxim of quantity – she does not give enough information for her to immediately find her phone.
- A assumes that B is cooperative and that if he knew where exactly the phone is, she would have said it.
- Because B did not say it, A assumes that B says the maximum for which she has evidence – saying more would have amounted to violating the maxim of quality.

Alonso-Ovalle & Menéndez-Benito 2013

INTERACTION BETWEEN MAXIMS: QUANTITY AND QUALITY

(4) A How did the students do at the exam?

B Some passed.

'Not all passed (= Some failed).'

SCALAR IMPLICATURE

Notabene: 'Some students passed' is logically true in a situation in which all students passed. Logically speaking, A's utterance means 'Some and possibly all students passed.' Yet, saying that all students passed would have been more informative (if all passed, it holds that some passed; but not conversely).

- A assumes that B is cooperative and that he would give A the maximally informative response (quantity) – *All passed* – if true (quality).
- Yet B gives a less informative response (*some*), violating quantity.
- A infers that B does not have evidence / does not believe that 'all students passed' is true (otherwise, B would have said it, respecting quantity).
- A concludes that 'All students passed is false', deriving the scalar implicature.

INTERACTION BETWEEN MAXIMS: QUANTITY AND RELEVANCE

(5) A Is John joining us today?

B His mother won't let him go because she thinks we'd spoil him.

(i) 'John is not coming' IMPLICATURE (relevance violated)

(ii) 'B takes the additional info to be relevant for A.'
IMPLICATURE (quantity violated)

- B violates two maxims at the same time – she does not answer the question (violating relevance) and she says more than needed (violating quantity).
- A assumes that B has reasons for both of these violations.
- A derives the answer ('John is not coming') as an implicature arising from the relevance violation (she attempts to interpret B's response as relevant).
- A resolves the violation of quantity by assuming that B believes the additional information to be relevant for A.

READING AND WATCHING TIPS

- Huang, Yan. 2017. Neo-Gricean pragmatics. In Yan Huang (ed.), *The Oxford handbook of pragmatics*, 47–78. Oxford: Oxford University Press. <https://doi.org/10.1093/oxfordhb/9780199697960.013.12>
- Wilson, Deirdre and Dan Sperber. 2004. In Laurence R. Horn and Gregory Ward (eds.), *The handbook of pragmatics*, 607–632. Malden, MA: Blackwell.
- Davis, Wayne. 2019. Implicature. In Edward N. Zalta (ed.), *The Stanford encyclopedia of philosophy*. Stanford, CA: Metaphysics Research Lab, Stanford University. <https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/fall2019/entries/implicature/>

YouTube videos:

- How Communication Works: Grice's cooperative principle: How to mean more than you say
<https://youtu.be/qj5w216eNIQ>
- The Ling Space on Grice's maxims
<https://youtu.be/rzxyjFhh-y8>
- The Ling Space on relevance theory
<https://youtu.be/yRv1agt776c>

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- Alonso-Ovalle, Luis & Paula Menéndez-Benito. 2013. Two views on epistemic indefinites. *Language and Linguistics Compass* 7. 105–122.
- Davis, Wayne. 2019. Implicature. In Edward N. Zalta (ed.), *The Stanford encyclopedia of philosophy*, Stanford, CA: Metaphysics Research Lab, Stanford University. <https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/fall2019/entries/implicature/>.
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- Horn, Laurence R. 2004. Implicature. In Laurence R. Horn & Gregory Ward (eds.), *Handbook of pragmatics*, 3–28. Oxford: Blackwell.
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- Wilson, Deirdre & Dan Sperber. 2004. Relevance theory. In Laurence R. Horn & Gregory Ward (eds.), *The handbook of pragmatics*, 607–632. Malden, MA: Blackwell.