

THE CO-OPERATIVE PRINCIPLE AND IMPLICATURE

We look at a third type of inferencing, implicature, and at how speakers co-operate in conversation to achieve a shared meaning for utterances.

CONVERSATIONAL IMPLICATURES seem to be less 'straightforward' than those based on entailment or presupposition.

The context provided by the previous utterance can lead to quite a different implicature in every case.

Drawing the appropriate implicature can require a considerable amount of shared knowledge between the speaker and the hearer.

Just how we achieve this level of meaning was an issue tackled by the philosopher, Paul Grice. Grice proposed that all speakers, regardless of their cultural background, adhere to a basic principle governing conversation which he termed THE CO-OPERATIVE PRINCIPLE. That is, we assume that in a conversation the participants will co-operate with each other when making their contributions. Grice then broke this principle down into four basic MAXIMS which go towards making a speaker's contribution to the conversation 'cooperative':

1. RELEVANCE: Make sure that whatever you say is relevant to the conversation at hand.
2. QUALITY: Do not say what you believe to be false. Do not say that for which you lack adequate evidence.
3. QUANTITY: Make your contribution sufficiently informative for the current purposes of the conversation. Do not make your contribution more informative than is necessary.
4. MANNER (or CLARITY): Do not make your contribution obscure, ambiguous or difficult to understand.

Grice pointed out that these maxims are not always observed, but he makes a distinction between 'quietly' VIOLATING a maxim and openly FLOUTING a maxim.

Violations are 'quiet' in the sense that it is not obvious at the time of the utterance that the speaker has deliberately lied, supplied insufficient information, or been ambiguous, irrelevant or hard to understand. In Grice's analysis, these violations might hamper communication but they do not lead to implicatures. What leads to implicatures is a situation where the speaker flouts a maxim. That is, it is obvious to the hearer at the time of the utterance that the speaker has deliberately and quite openly failed to observe one or more maxims. To see how Grice's analysis might work in practice, try the next exercise.

See photocopies from Cutting for a detailed account.

Unlike presuppositions and entailments, implicatures are inferences that cannot be made from isolated utterances. They are dependent on the context of the utterance and shared knowledge between the speaker and the hearer.

Grice has proposed a way of analysing implicatures based on the co-operative principle and its maxims of relevance, quality, quantity and clarity.

In Grice's analysis, the speaker's flouting of a maxim combined with the hearer's assumption that the speaker has not really abandoned the co-operative principle leads to an implicature.