

Examples of conversational implicature:

“Somebody ate my breakfast”

MARGE Where is everybody?

LOU Well - it's cold, Margie.

A theory of Conversational Implicature explains:

- (1) How is it possible to conversationally implicate things? (Cf. how do sentences get their meanings?)
- (2) How can we distinguish what is conversationally implicated from what an utterance means?

We want a theory of conversational implicature:

- (1) So we can evaluate philosophical debates like the Moore–Wittgenstein conflict on “I know this is a pencil”

and

- (2) So we can resolve a tension between compositional and informal intuitions about language.

Grice’s theory of Implicature (my loose approximation):

- (1) Conversation consists in actions which are goal-directed, intentional, done for reasons, co-ordinated and co-operative
- (2) The Co-operative Principle and Maxims capture the sense in which conversation is co-operative—to violate the maxims is to fail to be perfectly co-operative.
- (3) Implicature is an apparent violation of CP and the Maxims which is (a) done for reasons that the speaker intends to be transparent to her audience, and (b) done with the goal of communicating something to the audience.

Are violations of the Maxims unco-operative?

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.” (26)

Grice offered four Maxims as cashing out the CP. For example, one way to fail to “make your conversational contribution such as is required” is to fail to say something informative, which is a violation of the maxim of Quantity.

One question the CP and Maxims answer is: In what sense are rationally worthwhile conversations *co-operative* activities? In what sense is having a conversation with someone like carrying a boat with her?

The following examples illustrate that violating the Maxims is sometimes but perhaps not always a failure to be co-operative.

- (1) Quantity (be informative)

MONICA Is your tongue swelling up?

ROSS Either that or my mouth is getting smaller.

JOEY Oh mommie, oh daddie, I am a big old baddie! Oh mommie, oh daddie, I am a big old baddie!

ROSS I guess he musta gotten the part in that play.

CHANDLER Yeah, either that, or Gloria Estefan was right, eventually, the rhythm is going to get you.

(2) Quality (“try to make your contribution one that is true”)

ROSS [...] No big deal? Right?

JOEY Right. No big deal.

ROSS Okay.

JOEY In Bizarro World!! [...]

(3) Relation (be relevant)

RACHEL Monica, what is so amazing? I gave up, like, everything. And for what?

PHOEBE You are just like Jack.

RACHEL ... Jack from downstairs?

PHOEBE No, Jack and the Beanstalk.

MONICA Ah, the other Jack.

(4) Manner

“Time flies like an arrow, time flies like a banana”
(violates ‘avoid ambiguity’)

MONICA Oh, can I borrow this? My milk's gone bad.

CHANDLER Oh, I hate that. I once had a thing of half and half, stole my car.

ROGER Aaaah, what's wrong, c'mon.

PHOEBE It's, I mean, it's nothing, I'm fine. It's my friends. They-they have a liking problem with you. In that, um, they don't.

Questions: (a) *necessity*: Is every violation of every Maxim is unco-operative? (b) *sufficiency*: Do all failures to be conversationally co-operative involve violating at least one of these Maxims?

Another question: co-operation would seem to involve both parties but the Maxims are all requirements on a speaker. Doesn't co-operation require something from the audience?

Which maxims are violated where in this conversation?

MARGE Okay, I want you to tell me what these fellas looked like.

HOOKER ONE Well, the little guy, he was kinda funny-looking.

MARGE In what way?

HOOKER ONE I dunno. Just funny-looking.

MARGE Can you be any more specific?

HOOKER ONE I couldn't really say. He wasn't circumcised.

MARGE Was he funny-looking apart from that?

HOOKER ONE Yah.

[...]

MARGE Is there anything else you can tell me about him?

HOOKER ONE No. Like I say, he was funny-looking. More'n most people even.

MARGE And what about the other fella?

HOOKER TWO He was a little older. Looked like the Marlboro man.

MARGE Yah?

HOOKER TWO Yah. Maybe I'm
sayin' that cause he smoked
Marlboros.

MARGE Uh-huh.

HOOKER TWO

A subconscious-type thing.

MARGE Yah, that can happen.

The Moore–Wittgenstein Clash

Inappropriate but true ...

“How was your seminar?” “Richard wasn’t drunk”

“What’s on at the cinema tonight?” “A film”

“Someone ate my breakfast” is true but inappropriate.

“The horse ran past the barn fell”

[Question: Why is repetition inappropriate?]

Appropriate but false ...

“I’ve cut myself!” “You’re not going to die”

“How was the exam?” “Better than chocolate”

“I was so hungry I ate a horse”

“My shoes are fed up of walking, they’re about to go on
strike”

SO: There is a systematic discrepancy between truth and
appropriateness for utterances.

Wittgenstein’s method for identifying knowledge:

“We are asking ourselves: what do we do with a
statement “I know ...”? ... *that* is how one must decide
whether something is knowledge or not.” (Wittgenstein
1974: §230)

On appropriateness conditions for “I know ...”:

“One says “I know” when one is ready to give
compelling grounds. “I know” relates to a possibility of
demonstrating the truth. ... If what [someone] believes
is of such a kind that the grounds he can give are no
surer than his assertion, then he cannot say that he
knows what he believes.” (Wittgenstein 1974: §243)

What’s the relation between these:

(1) “I know that this is a pencil”

(2) Moore is ready to give compelling grounds which
show that this is a pencil

“... the final test for the presence of a conversational
implicature [has] to be, as far as I [can] see, a derivation of
it. One has to produce an account of how it could have
arisen and why it is there. And I am very much opposed to
any kind of sloppy use of this philosophical tool, in which
one does not fulfil this condition. (1981, p. 187)” {Grice
quoted in \Neale, 1992 #844@527}.

“The correct use of the expression “I know”. Someone with
bad sight asks me: “do you believe that the thing we can see
there is a tree?” I reply “I know it is; I can see it clearly and
am familiar with it” (Wittgenstein 1974: 476)

Mood and force

<i>Mood</i>	<i>force</i>
indicative	assertion
imperative	command
Interrogative	question

(a) matching:

“Do not feed the lions!” (imperative/command)

“Is that a new hat?” (interrogative/question)

(b) mismatching:

“You left the door open” (indicative/command)

“I will not stand to be disparaged.”
(indicative/command)

Tone can be used to ask a question with an indicative.
(use “You closed the door.”)

“Have you been drinking my milk again?”
(interrogative/assertion”)

“Are you wearing that hat to church?”
(interrogative/command)

Question: are there any examples of imperatives with the force of a question or assertion?

Using Grice to explain compositional/informal intuitions

First example:

- a. “I broke a finger” (mine)
- b. “I visited a house” (not mine)

Contrast:

- c. “I broke one of my fingers”
- d. “I visited someone else’s house”

Utterances of (c) and (d) seem to be potentially defective for roughly the reason that “Richard wasn’t drunk” is an inappropriate reply to “How was your seminar?” They conversationally implicate that it might easily be someone else’s finger, or your own house. Question: Which Maxim is responsible for this implicature?

Another example that seems to work in the same way, except here Groucho cancels the implicature:

“I’ve had a great evening. This wasn’t it.” (Marx)

Note that in deriving conversational implicature we *start with* assumptions about the meaning of the utterances.

Exercise Go back to examples from p.3 of the handout from Lecture 02. Which of these can be explained as involving words with fixed meanings plus conversational implicatures? If they can, how? If not, why not?