8.4: Types of implicatures

8.4.1 Generalized Conversational Implicature

Grice distinguished two different types of conversational implicatures. He referred to examples like those we have considered up to this point as particularized conversational implicatures, meaning that the intended inference depends on particular features of the specific context of the utterance. The second type he referred to as generalized conversational implicatures. This type of inference does not depend on particular features of the context, but is instead typically associated with the kind of proposition being expressed. Some examples are shown in (14).

(14) a. She gave him the key and he opened the door.
Implicature: She gave him the key and *then* he opened the door.

b. The water is warm.
Implicature: The water is not hot.

c. It is possible that we are related.
Implicature: It is not necessarily true that we are related.

d. Some of the boys went to the rugby match.
Implicature: Not all of the boys went to the rugby match.

e. John has most of the documents.
Implicature: John does not have all of the documents.

f. That man is either Martha’s brother or her boyfriend.
Implicature: The speaker does not know whether the man is Martha’s brother or boyfriend.

Generalized conversational implicatures are motivated by the same set of maxims discussed above, but they typically do not involve a violation of the maxims. Rather, the implicature arises precisely because the hearer assumes that the speaker is obeying the maxims; if the implicated meaning were not true, then there would be a violation. In (14a) for example, assuming that the semantic content of English \textit{and} is simply logical \textit{and} ($\wedge$), the implicated sequential meaning (‘and then’) is motivated by the maxim of manner (sub-maxim: Be orderly). If the actual order of events was not the one indicated by the sequential order of the conjoined clauses, the speaker would have violated this maxim; therefore, unless there is evidence to the contrary, the hearer will assume that the sequential meaning is intended. (We will return in the next chapter to the question of whether this is an adequate analysis of the meaning of English \textit{and}.)

A widely discussed type of generalized conversational implicature involves non-maximal degree modifiers, that is, words which refer to intermediate points on a scale. (Implicatures of this type are often referred to as scalar implicatures.) The word \textit{warm} in (14b), for example, belongs to a set of words which identify various points on a scale of temperature: frigid, cold, cool, lukewarm, warm, hot, burning/sizzling/scalding, etc. The choice of the word \textit{warm} implicates ‘not hot’ by the maxim of quantity. If the speaker knew that the water was hot but only said that it was warm, he would not have been as informative as would be appropriate in most contexts; a hearer stepping into a full bath tub, for example, would be justified in complaining if the water turned out to be painfully hot and not just warm. This inference does not depend on particular features of the context, but is normally triggered by any use of the word \textit{warm} unless something in the context prevents it from arising. The same reasoning applies to \textit{possible} in (14c), \textit{some} in (14d), and \textit{most} in (14e).

The maxim of quantity also motivates the implicature in (14f), since if the speaker knew which alternative was correct but only made an \textit{or} statement, he would not have been as informative as would be appropriate in most contexts. Again, this inference would normally be triggered by any similar use of the word \textit{or} unless something in the context prevents it from arising.

The indefinite article can trigger generalized conversational implicatures concerning the possessor of the indefinite NP, with different implicatures depending on whether the head noun is alienable as in (15a–b) or inalienable as in (15c–d). How to account for this difference is somewhat puzzling.

(15) a. I walked into a house.
   Implicature: The house was not my house.

b. Arthur is meeting a woman tonight.
   Implicature: The woman is not Arthur’s wife or close relative.

c. I broke a finger yesterday.
   Implicature: The finger was my finger.

d. Lady Glossop: How would you ever support a wife, Mr. Wooster?
   Bertie: Well, it depends on whose wife it was. I would’ve said a gentle pressure beneath the left elbow when crossing a busy street normally fills the bill.

\[\text{[Jeeves and Wooster, Season 1, Episode 1; ITV1]}\]
8.4.2 Conventional Implicature

Grice identified another type of inference which he called conventional implicatures; but he said very little about them, and never developed a full-blown analysis. In contrast to conversational implicatures, which are context-sensitive and motivated by the conversational maxims, conventional implicatures are part of the conventional meaning of a word or construction. This means that they are not context-dependent or pragmatically explainable, and must be learned on a word-by-word basis. However, unlike the kinds of lexical entailments that we discussed in Chapter 6, conventional implicatures do not contribute to the truth conditions of a sentence, and for this reason have sometimes been regarded as involving pragmatic rather than semantic content.

Grice illustrated the concept of conventional implicature using the conjunction therefore. He suggested that this word does not affect the truth value of a sentence; the claim of a causal relationship is only conventionally implicated and not entailed:

If I say (smugly), He is an Englishman; he is, therefore, brave, I have certainly committed myself, by virtue of the meaning of my words, to its being the case that his being brave is a consequence of (follows from) his being an Englishman. But while I have said that he is an Englishman, and said that he is brave, I do not want to say that I have said (in the favored sense [i.e. as part of the truth-conditional semantic content—PK]) that it follows from his being an Englishman that he is brave, though I have certainly indicated, and so implicated, that this is so. I do not want to say that my utterance of this sentence would be, strictly speaking, false should the consequence in question fail to hold. (Grice 1975: 44)

Frege had earlier expressed very similar views concerning words like still and but, though he never used the term “conventional implicature”. He pointed out that the truth-conditional meaning of but is identical to that of and. The difference between the two is that but indicates a contrast or counter-expectation. But this is only conventionally implicated, in Grice’s terms; if there is in fact no contrast between the two conjuncts, that does not make the sentence false.

With the sentence Alfred has still not come one really says ‘Alfred has not come’ and, at the same time, hints that his arrival is expected, but it is only hinted. It cannot be said that, since Alfred’s arrival is not expected, the sense of the sentence is therefore false… The word but differs from and in that with it one intimates that what follows is in contrast with what would be expected from what preceded it. Such suggestions in speech make no difference to the thought [i.e. the propositional content—PK]. [Frege 1918–1919/1956]

A few more examples of conventional implicatures (CI) are given in (16):

(16) a. I was in Paris last spring too.\(^7\)
CI: some other specific/contextually salient person was in Paris last spring.

b. Even Bart passed the test.\(^8\)
CI: Bart was among the least likely to pass the test.
Conventional implicatures turn out to have very similar properties to certain kinds of presuppositions, and there has been extensive debate over the question of whether it is possible or desirable to distinguish conventional implicatures from presuppositions. We will have more to say about conventional implicatures in Chapter 11.

6 Exx. (15a–b) are adapted from Grice (1975: 56).

7 Barbara Partee, 2009 lecture notes; [http://people.umass.edu/partee/MGU_2...MGU098_2up.pdf](http://people.umass.edu/partee/MGU_2...MGU098_2up.pdf)

8 Potts (2007b).