9.5 Conclusion

The large body of work exploring the implications of Grice’s theory has forced us to recognize that Grice’s relatively simple view of the boundary between semantics and pragmatics is not tenable. Early work in pragmatics often assumed that pragmatic inferences did not affect the truth-conditional content of an utterance, apart from the limited amount of contextual information needed for disambiguation of ambiguous forms, assignment of referents to pronouns, etc. Under this view, truth-conditional content is almost the same thing as conventional meaning.

In this chapter we have discussed various ways in which pragmatic inferences do contribute to truth-conditional content. We have seen that some (at least) generalized conversational implicatures affect truth-conditions, and we have seen that other types of pragmatic inferences, which we refer to as explicatures, are needed in order to determine the truth value of a sentence. In Chapter 11 we discuss the opposite kind of challenge, namely cases where conventional meaning (semantic content) does not contribute to the truth-conditional meaning of a sentence. But first, in Chapter 10, we discuss a special type of conversational implicature known as an indirect speech act.

Further Reading

Birner (2012/2013: ch. 3) presents a good overview of the issues discussed here, including a very helpful comparison of Relevance Theory with the “neo-Gricean” approaches of Levinson and Horn. Horn (2004) and Carston (2004) provide helpful surveys of recent work on implicature, Horn from a neo-Gricean perspective and Carston from a Relevance Theory perspective. K. Bach (2010) discusses the differences between his notion of “impliciture” and the Relevance Theory notion of explication. Geurts (2011) provides a good introduction to, and a detailed analysis of, scalar and quantity implicatures.

Discussion exercises

A. Explicature. Identify the explicatures which would be necessary in order to evaluate the truth value for each of the
following examples:

1. He arrived at the bank too early.
2. All students must pass phonetics.
3. No-one goes there anymore.
4. To buy a house in London you need money.
5. [Max: How was the party? Did it go well?]  
   Amy: There wasn’t enough drink and everyone left early.

B. Pragmatics in the lexicon.

Horn (1972) observes that many languages have lexical items which express positive universal quantification (all, every, everyone, everything, always, both, etc.) and the corresponding negative concepts (no, none, nothing, no one, never, neither, etc.). In each case, the positive term can be paraphrased in terms of the corresponding negative, and vice versa. For example, Everything is negotiable can be paraphrased as Nothing is non-negotiable. However, most languages seem to lack negative counterparts to the existential quantifiers (some, someone, sometimes, etc.). In order to paraphrase an existential statement like Something is negotiable, we have to use a quantifying phrase, rather than a single word, as in Not everything is non-negotiable.

Try to formulate a pragmatic explanation for this lexical asymmetry, i.e., the fact that few if any languages have lexical items that mean not everything, not everyone, not always, not both, etc. (Hint: think about the kinds of implicatures that might be triggered by the various classes of quantifying words.)

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Examples (3-5) are taken from Carston & Hall (2012).