

6. Experimental results

Like textbook example (6), most experiments on CI suffer from contextual/intonational underspecification. Example:

- (9) a. There are at most ten apples on the table.
b. There are less than ten apples on the table.

Without context, only (9a) seems to imply *ignorance*.
(Geurts & Nouwen '07, Coppock & Brochhagen, '13)

But in response to certain questions, they behave alike:
(Westera & Brasoveanu, SALT 2014)

- “Exactly how many apples ...?” (ign. for both)
- “Approximately how many apples ...?” (ign. for neither)
- “How many apples are on the table?” (ign. only for (9a))

Our explanation:

- Ignor. is inferred only if a precise answer was required;
- (9a)/(9b) *typically* address different kinds of questions;
- this kicks in if the context is underspecified, i.e., if participants are left to guess.
(Similar for *scalar inferences*, Van Tiel, et al.)

In an underspecified context, participants *cannot understand* what is meant. Experimenters, be rational! (Schwarz, 1996)

7. “Well, entailments are still stronger than CI.”

“...because one cannot opt out of Quality.”

[Quality] seems rather to spell out the difference between something's being and (strictly speaking) failing to be any kind of contribution at all. (Grice, 1989, p. 371)

Actually, it seems that one *can* opt out of Quality:

- (10) What I say next will be a lie: it is raining.

But if Quality implicatures are cancelable, then what does **Moore's paradox** show?

- (11) ?? It's raining but I don't believe it.

The problem is that, for (10) it to be a *single* contribution, a weird maxim must be taken to hold like:

“Say only that of which you believe only the 2nd conjunct”

But seen as *two* utterances, (10) isn't impossible, e.g., a quiz:

- (12) (Time is up!) Ok... 1815! But it's only a guess!

8. What are these entailments anyway?

“Sentences have entailments, but don't have CI” (Bach, 2005)

Actually, CI is a *technical* term, so nothing prohibits the def.:

A *sentence conversationally implicates p* iff speakers in ordinary circumstances (to be defined) CI *p* by *S*.

“CI” and “entailment” are *both* technical terms, meant to subdivide the *non-technical* term “meaning” in a potentially useful way.

To my awareness no precise decision exists; but I think one can define entailments by the *methodological role* they play.

[...] the final test for the presence of a CI [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 no cheating!] (Grice, 1981, p. 187)

These explanations have to *terminate somewhere*.

1. The speaker meant that *p* by sentence *S*, because
2. she complied with Quality, and *S* means that *p*, i.e.:
3. rational speakers mean that *p* by *S*, and *that's* because:
4. they comply with Quality and... hmm...

- This convention ought to be further explained in terms of diachronic change (inc.: learnability, iconicity, compositionality, ...).
- But the lazy pragmaticist can say: “it's an entailment.”
- The CI/entailment division defines a *mode of explanation*.

Entailments are the wastebasket of pragmatics.

Importantly, as parts of speaker meaning, entailments and CI are necessarily equally reliable.

And now let's solve some puzzles!

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Giving conversational implicatures the status they need and deserve

Matthijs Westera
Matthijs.Westera@gmail.com

Institute for Logic, Language and Computation,
University of Amsterdam

Main aim

- On the one hand, many of us seem to subscribe (in part) to the Gricean (1989) view that communication is about conveying *intentions*, that *speaker meaning* is what matters.
- On the other hand, *conversational implicatures* (CI) are commonly described as being “flimsy”, “weak”, and “uncertain”.
- Stressing the role of *rationality* and *calculability* in Grice's work, I argue for a view of CI as reliable meaning carriers, on a par with entailments.

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Start here! →

1. Grice on meaning and CI

[...] it is necessary to distinguish between a notion of meaning which is relativized to the users of words [...] and one that is not so relativized; [...] the unrelativized notion is posterior to, and has to be understood in terms of, the relativized notion; [...] what words mean is a matter of what people mean by them. (Grice, 1989, p. 340)

A speaker means *p* by a sentence *S* iff she intends:

- i. that the hearer comes to think that the speaker believes *p*;
- ii. that the hearer recognizes the speaker's intending (i);
- iii. that (i) obtains in part due to (ii). (+ several refinements)

A sentence *S* means *p* iff speakers in ordinary circumstances (to be defined) mean *p* by *S*.

CI are an integral part of his theory of meaning (Neale, 1992):

A speaker conversationally implicates (CI) *p* by *S* iff she means *p* by *S* and, in addition, intends:

- iv. that (ii) relies on the hearer's presumption of the speaker's rationality.

[...] the use of language is one among a range of forms of rational activity. (Grice, 1989, p. 341)

I think this is not *just* a reasonable assumption:

1. to see what sp. means, we must recognise her intention;
2. but then her behaviour must reflect her intentions;
3. rationality provides the necessary link (and it isn't clear what else possibly could).

(But then what does clause (iv) really add?)

2. Conversational implicature in popular culture

Yet, implicatures in plain cases are well known to be flimsy and context-dependent. (Magri, 2011, p.13)

[CI] are uncertain in a way entailments [...] are not. [...] inherently fuzzy [...] bound to be tentative. (Geurts, 2010, p.22)

But the effect is correspondingly weak: [it] produces cancelable implicatures rather than indefeasible truth conditional effects. (Beaver & Clark, 2008, p.41)

[...] a philosophically important distinction between the "genuinely semantic" and "merely pragmatic" implications of a statement [...] (Neale, 1992, p.1)

3. Context-dependence and calculability

We know that:

1. CIs depend on the rationality presumption;
 2. what is rational depends on the context;
 3. hence, CIs depend on the context, e.g.:
- (1) A: Who of you saw some of the students?
B: I saw some of the students! (Indeed, I saw all)
 - (2) A: Did you see *all* of the students?
B: I saw *some* of the students. (?? Indeed, I saw all)

But this context-dependence doesn't compromise CI, because:

Calculability: If a rational speaker conversationally implicates *p* by *S*, she will try to ensure that the intended inference is reliably made (after all: it's intended).

This *might* be what Grice had in mind:

The presence of a conversational implicature must be capable of being worked out; for even if it can in fact be intuitively grasped, unless the intuition is replaceable by an argument, the implicature (*if present at all*) will not count as a conversational implicature; [...] (Grice, 1989, p.31)

Of course, speakers are fallible, but:

- what a speaker means (and CIs) is independent of what a hearer *understands* (Bach, 2005);
- *if* the hearer understands, uncertain inferences can't be CI.
- and if she *doesn't*, entailments are likewise compromised.

“Surely inferring a CI is *more prone* to misunderstanding!”

Well, even if so, a rational speaker would be aware of that, and spend more effort on getting CIs across.

In sum, when one says:

Implicatures are [...] abductive inferences, or inferences to the best explanation [...] (Geurts, 2010, p.34)

This overlooks the *necessity* of the rationality presumption for communication, and, via calculability, of the CI itself.

4. Cancelability

[CI] may be *explicitly canceled*, by the addition of a clause that states or implies that the speaker has opted out [of the Cooperative Principle], or it may be *contextually canceled*, if the form of utterance that usually carries it is used in a context that makes it clear that the speaker is opting out. (Grice, 1989, p.57)

The latter falls under *context-dependence*; and the former?

- (3) I cannot say more, my lips are sealed. (Grice, ...)
- (4) On an unrelated note, it's raining.

The speaker *reveals* (3) or *manipulates* (4) the context.

Cancelability, both explicit and contextual, amount to systematic context-dependence (i.e., on what is rational).

And context-dependence doesn't weaken CI (see box 3).

(Somewhat relatedly: knowing that someone is lying doesn't compromise our understanding of what she means:

- (5) Merkel: We are not collaborating with the NSA.

To find out what is meant we need merely *pretend*.)

5. Textbook examples of 'cancelation'

- (6) I saw some of the students. Indeed, I saw all.
- (7) There's a garage around the corner, but it's closed. (Geurts, 2010, p.23)
- (8) ... But I did not mean to imply... (Grice, 1989, p.44)

But these are a mixed bunch:

- (6) is context-dependence in disguise: contextual (and intonational) **underspecification** is disambiguated by the “indeed”-continuation.
- In (7) “it's closed” changes the utterance, **preventing** an implicature, just like changing it can prevent entailments. (cf. Geurts, 2010, p.22)
- (8) is **making sure** an *unintended* inference wasn't made by the hearer – we can do this also for entailments.

As Geurts also notes, none of these support the idea that a CI is weak (e.g., that it can be made and then revoked).