

Why *semantics* is the wastebasket



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Outline

Introduction

Warming up: the implicature in (1)

Semantics is the wastebasket (in the first sense)

- Grice on meaning

- Semantics and pragmatics

- Bringing order into the semantics wastebasket

Pragmatics is not a wastebasket (in the second sense)

- Those “flimsy” conversational implicatures

- Defeasibility

- Cancellability

- Mixed experimental results

Conclusion & outlook

1.1. Semantics and pragmatics

Rough division of labour:

- ▶ **Semantics:** The study of sentence meaning, entailments, compositionality, etc.
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1.2. The *pragmatics* wastebasket?

Pragmatics is referred to as the *wastebasket*, in two senses:

- (i) what semantics cannot explain is left to pragmatics;
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(Yes, I do pragmatics.)

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Some problems: (Groenendijk & Stokhof, 1984)

- ▶ The obtained implicature is too weak: not-knowing, rather than knowing-that-not.
- ▶ The account fails to tell (1) from (2):

- (2) Mr. *X* has excellent handwriting etc., or both that *and* he is a fantastic philosopher. \rightsquigarrow He has no philosophical qualities.

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Intuitive solution: (Westera, 2013; & submitted)

- ▶ rationality is not only to *assert* all relevant, *true* information;
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→ This will make for a good illustration below.

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This places Grice in: (cf. Neale, 1992)

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...it is necessary to distinguish between a notion of meaning which is relativized to the users of words or expressions and one that is not so relativized;... of the two notions 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)

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A **speaker** means $*_{\psi}p$ (by a sentence S) iff she intends:

- (i) that the hearer comes to think that the speaker ψ 's p ;
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(and several refinements)

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→ Which speakers? In which circumstances?

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Thus, a theory of (conversational) rationality is presupposed by any theory of sentence meaning.

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Given (ii), *semantics* is the wastebasket (in the first sense):

- ▶ What pragmatics cannot explain is left to semantics.

3.6. What about 'attentive' semantics and pragmatics?

Recall, to deal with (1):

- ▶ **Richer semantic theory:** informative content plus **attentive content**, i.e., the possibilities *mentioned*.
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Attentive *pragmatics*, however, does double duty:

- ▶ it fixes what is meant by “attentive content”, i.e., what exactly is modeled by attentive semantics; and
- ▶ it simplifies the job left for semantics, by accounting for CI.

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(Work in progress: a compositional attentive semantics.)

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...by characterizing a philosophically important distinction between the “genuinely semantic” and “merely pragmatic” implications of a statement, Grice clarified the relationship between classical logic and the semantics of natural language. (Neale, 1992, p.1)

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Why would CI be weaker than entailments?

- ▶ “The presumption of rationality is **defeasible**; inferring intentions from behaviour is mere *abduction*.”
- ▶ “Conversational implicatures are **cancelable**.”
- ▶ “**Experiments** on implicatures show mixed results.”

4.3. Conversational implicatures are not (really) defeasible

CI may seem defeasible in, I think, three main ways:

- (i) it may be unclear what counts as 'rational';
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@(i): True, but if that happens the CI simply *isn't there*, because:

- ▶ a rational speaker *ensures* that the CI is understood;
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CI may seem defeasible in, I think, three main ways:

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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)

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(Besides, even **entailments** rely on the rationality presumption...)

4.4. Grice on cancellability

Since, to assume the presence of a conversational implicature, we have to assume that at least the Cooperative Principle is being observed, and since it is possible to opt out of the observation of this principle, it follows that a conversational implicature can be cancelled in a particular case. [...]

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It may be explicitly canceled, by the addition of a clause that states or implies that the speaker has opted out, or it may be contextually cancelled, if the form of utterance that usually carries it is used in a context that makes it clear that the speaker IS opting out. (p.57)

4.5. Cancelability does not imply weakness

So, conversational implicature is **cancelable** in two ways:

▶ **contextually**: what is rational is context-dependent:

- (3) [*In response to an inquiry about handwriting/punctuality:*]
Mr. X has excellent handwriting and is always very punctual.

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Cancelability implies that:

▶ the presence of CI correlates with what is *rational* in the given context (which may be explicitly announced/changed);

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But (3)/(4) are not the textbook examples of cancelation...

4.6. Textbook examples of cancelation are misleading

More typical examples (similar to Grice's...):

(5) He is seeing a woman. (Oh,) but I didn't mean to imply that...

(6) I saw some of the students. Indeed, I saw all.

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(cf. **experiments**)

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Crucially, cancelability does *not* imply:

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More directly:

1. CI follow from rationality presumption;
2. *hence*: if CI is false, speaker must be irrational.

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Entailments enter speaker meaning only via the *Maxim of Quality*.

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(elsewhere I've argued that a *final rise* can do the same.)

4.9. Mixed experimental results

Consider again the role of context/intonation:

(6) I saw some of the students. Indeed, I saw all.

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This explains the apparent weakness of CI in experiments.

Outline

Introduction

Warming up: the implicature in (1)

Semantics is the wastebasket (in the first sense)

- Grice on meaning

- Semantics and pragmatics

- Bringing order into the semantics wastebasket

Pragmatics is not a wastebasket (in the second sense)

- Those “flimsy” conversational implicatures

- Defeasibility

- Cancellability

- Mixed experimental results

Conclusion & outlook

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- ▶ ...which also *fixes* what the semantic objects 'mean'.

Pragmatics is not a wastebasket, in that CIs are:

- ▶ not really defeasible (and no more so than entailments);
- ▶ only cancelable (but so are entailments).

Cancelability of CIs does *not* imply weakness, but:

- ▶ **systematic context-dependence**;
- ▶ the systematicity is governed by *rationality*;
- ▶ studying this is the goal of pragmatics.

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And illustrate this in a number of cases:

- ▶ exhaustivity implicatures (e.g., (1));
- ▶ intonational meaning: focus, contrastive topic, final contours;
- ▶ questions, "yes" and "no";
- ▶ Maybe: conditionals, presuppositions.



Thank you!