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.

- **Pragmatics**: The study of language use, context, implicatures, cooperativity, rationality, etc.

In a recommendation letter for a job in philosophy:

(1) Mr. X has excellent handwriting and is always very punctual.

« He has no philosophical qualities. 

The inference explained as a conversational implicature:

- If the writer had known any virtue of Mr. X that actually mattered for the job, it would have been cooperative/rational (the standard recipe, but insufficient, cf. below)
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Pragmatics is referred to as the *wastebasket*, in two senses:

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I will argue that, from a *Gricean* perspective:

▶ (i) ought to be (or can be) turned around; and
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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.
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- **Semantic theory**: sentences denote pieces of information;
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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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Both of which, however, he also criticizes/refines.
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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 $\psi$’s $p$;
(ii) that the hearer recognizes her intending (i);
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(and several refinements)
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$\rightarrow$ Which speakers? In which circumstances?
3.3. Rationality and sentence meaning

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

To see what a speaker means:
▶ one must recognise her intention;
▶ this requires that her behaviour accords with her intentions;
▶ hence, a speaker must presume that she is rational.

(This argument may be new; cf. Neale, 1992.)

Certain things will follow from this presumption, perhaps even typically, that need not be part of sentence meaning: Conversational implicature (CI)

A part of what is meant, the intended recognition of which relies on the hearer's presumption of the speaker's rationality.

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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.
3.7. Bringing order into the semantics wastebasket

This requires that we answer the following question:

- Why are conventions the way they are?

  - Conventions must be useful and learnable;
  - Compositionality would be beneficial;
  - As would convexity of lexical concepts;
  - As would non-arbitrariness, e.g.:
    - Iconicity (e.g., onomatopoeia);
    - Naturalness (e.g., biological codes (Gussenhoven, 2004)).

This is the semanticist's toolbox, given a pragmatic theory.

(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)
4.2. Why implicatures are often considered weak

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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’;
(ii) the CI may depend on defeasible contextual cues;
(iii) the rationality presumption may itself be given up.

True, but if that happens the CI simply isn’t there, because:

▶ a rational speaker ensures that the CI is understood;
▶ after all, the CI is (part of) what is intended to be conveyed.

Grice called this the CI’s calculability.

This does not mean CI are defeasible, because:

▶ even if I do not in fact believe in a person’s rationality,
▶ to see what she means I need but pretend that she is;
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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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4.5. Cancelability does not imply weakness

So, conversational implicature is cancelable in two ways:

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

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

- **explicitly**: a hearer may 'opt out' from a maxim:

\[\text{(4) Starting with his }\{\text{least relevant / non-academic}\}\text{ virtues, Mr. X has excellent handwriting and is always very punctual.}\]
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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);
▶ but *when present*, the CI is as strong as can be.
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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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In both examples, there wasn’t a CI to begin with:

▶ in (5), there was perhaps an unintended inference, not a CI;
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(7) [In response to “How many students did you see?”]
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Thus:

- When present, CI are as strong as can be.
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Thus:

- When present, CI are as strong as can be.
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4.7. Cancelability $\neq$ defeasibility

Crucially, cancelability does not imply:

- “A rational speaker can make a conversational implicature and then contradict it.”

(And none of the examples in the literature are of this kind.)
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In fact, if CI’s were contradictable it would have been puzzling:

- CIs are part of speaker meaning, hence *intended*;
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More directly:

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

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

- But isn’t this maxim ‘stronger’ than the others?
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*The maxims do not seem to be coordinate. The maxim of Quality [...] does not seem to be just one among a number of recipes for producing contributions; it seems rather to spell out the difference between something’s being, and (strictly speaking) failing to be, any kind of contribution at all. False information is not an inferior kind of information; it just is not information.* (Grice, 1989, p.371)
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I disagree; a speaker can opt out and still make a contribution:

(8) a. Okay, I’ll just guess: ...
    b. What I’m about to say is false: ...


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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.

(7) [In response to “Did you see all?”]
   I saw *some* of the students. ♯ Indeed, I saw all.

Experiments (e.g., Van Tiel et al.) show mixed results, because:
▶ intonation is left implicit;
▶ question under discussion is left implicit;
▶ role of experimental task is ill-understood;
▶ ... (e.g., Schwarz, 1996)

Participants may: (cf. Westera & Brasoveanu, 2014)
▶ fill in the gaps according to typical usage; and/or
▶ take the CI to be absent (because a rational speaker/experimenter would have been more clear).

This explains the apparent weakness of CI in experiments.
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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
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Semantics is the wastebasket, in the sense that:

► what it must minimally account for is determined by a pragmatic theory
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- only cancelable (but so are entailments).

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

- systematic context-dependence;
- the systematicity is governed by *rationality*;
- studying this is the goal of pragmatics.
5.2. Outlook: my dissertation (due date October 2014)

Argue for the following methodology:

1. take your favourite linguistic puzzle;

▶ exhaustivity implicatures (e.g., (1));
▶ intonational meaning: focus, contrastive topic, final contours;
▶ questions, “yes” and “no”;
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Thank you!