Philosophy of Language

Lecture 6: Implicature and figurative speech

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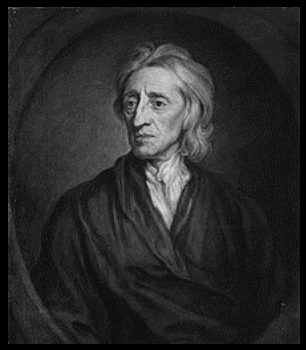
0. Finding out what was meant

1. The Lockean model



"To make words serviceable to the end of communication, it is necessary […] that they excite in the hearer exactly the same idea they stand for in the mind of the speaker. Without this, men fill one another's heads with noise and sounds; but convey not thereby their thoughts, and lay not before one another their ideas, which is the end of discourse and language."

John Locke, *Essay* 3.9.4.

Suppose I have a thought and I'd like to share it with you. First, I encode it as a sentence of a language I assume we both speak, and then I utter this sentence when I think I have your attention. Upon hearing me, you first identify the sentence uttered, and then you use the reverse of my encoding to recover the thought I had.

On this view, i. linguistic communication is entirely conventional and ii. entirely direct.

0. Finding out what was meant

2. The Gricean criticism

In *Logic and Conversation*, Paul Grice has launched an extended critique of the Lockean model.

Against i.: Being privy to linguistic conventions is not enough for communication – to figure out what the speaker meant hearers engage in general means-ends reasoning.

Against ii.: Because speakers expect hearers to reason this way they often refrain from making themselves fully explicit.

You will fall.

To interpret an utterance of this sentence the hearer must figure out the force of the utterance (is it a prediction? a warning? a threat?) and its content (who will fall? when will I fall? am I going to fall on my face or down a hole?).

0. Finding out what was meant

3. An example

A long time ago there were a king and queen who said every day, “Ah, if only we had a child,” but they never had one.

Implicit force: the speaker is not making an assertion.

Implicit content: the king and queen (i) were married to each other, (ii) had no children, (iii) often said Ah, if only we had a child, (iv) wanted to have a child.

Most of these inferences are automatic and hard to account for. We need to separate the project of saying what an implicit force or content is from the project of saying how hearers identify them.

1. The Gricean picture

1. What is meant

Grice stresses that meaning that so-and-so is not simply a matter of conveying the belief that so-and-so. What the speaker meant in making a utterance can be

… less than what she conveyed (for she may have conveyed things unintentionally)
… more than what she conveyed (for she may have failed to convey everything she wanted to).

Speakers are authoritative but fallible about what they mean. When they mean something they expect their audience to be able to find out what that is.

1. The Gricean picture

2. What is said

What a speaker meant (in making an utterance) is divided into what she said and what she implicated.

What a speaker said (in uttering a sentence) is typically the contextual meaning of the expression she used. But is some cases (e.g. malapropism) the two may diverge.

On Grice's view, you cannot say what you don't mean. This is controversial but not obviously false, especially once we note that Grice uses say in roughly the sense of state.

3. The Gricean picture

3. What is implicated

What a speaker implicated (in uttering a sentence) is what she meant but did not say. What is the basis of the expectation that the audience will be able to figure out what was implicated?

Sometimes there are conventions the hearer can rely on. When these conventions are linguistic, we have what Grice calls conventional implicatures.

Sometimes the speaker relies on the presumption that she and the hearer are cooperating towards a shared goal. These are cases Grice calls conversational implicatures.

In principle there could be implicatures that are neither conventional nor conversational.

1. The Gricean picture

4. Grice's example

A: How is C doing?
B: Quite well, I think; he likes his colleagues, and he hasn't been to prison yet.

What B said is, roughly, that C is doing well, he likes his colleagues, and he has not been imprisoned.

What B conventionally implicated is roughly, that he is not entirely certain that C is doing well.

What B conversationally implicated is roughly, that C and his colleagues are committing a crime.

2. Conversational implicature

1. Cooperation

Cooperative Principle:

"Make your conversational contribution such as it is required, at the stage at which it occurs, by the accepted purpose or direction of the talk exchange in which you are engaged."

Paul Grice, 'Logic and Conversation'

It does not follow that people in conversation cannot be in conflict. If you and I have no shared goal there is no reason either of us should engage the other. (Of course, one can still talk at another – especially if the other can be coerced to listen – but that is no conversation.)

2. Conversational implicature

1. Cooperation

Cooperative Principle:

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The point is not about what we should call conversation. It is, rather, that among talk exchanges there are some that are as equally rational for all those engaged and that these may well be is some sense the explanatorily basic (because other talk exchanges are best seen as deviations from these). This is a substantive hypothesis.

2. Conversational implicature

2. Shared goals

Conversations can have a great many shared goals. Grice assumes that in the most central cases the shared goal is the exchange of information.

(He actually says maximally efficient exchange of information, but maximal efficiency should not be construed as part of the goal. Whatever one's goal might be, it is rational to try to achieve it by maximally efficient means.)

So, suppose the shared goal is the exchange of information. What information? Presumably, information about some topic of common interest. We can think of the topic as the question under discussion – then the Gricean hypothesis is that the shared goal of conversation is pooling:

Pooling: to make the most complete answer to the question under discussion compatible with what the participants know common ground.

2. Conversational implicature

3. Lies

Are lies even possible under this view of conversation? Suppose you and I are having a conversation whose aim is to pool our information on a topic and I lie about that topic. My lie shows that I no longer engage in the same conversation. But that does not mean I am no longer conversing with you.

(i) I may have covertly shifted the topic. We are now pooling our information about a narrower topic even though you still think we are pooling our information on the broader topic. This is what often happens with plain lies.

(ii) I may have overtly shifted the tone. The topic remains the same but we no longer think the conversation will yield genuine information on it. This is what often happens with bold-faced lies.

2. Conversational implicature

4. The maxims

When we are engaged in pooling it usually makes sense to follow these maxims:

Maxims of Quantity:	1. Make your contribution as informative as required. 2. Do not make your contribution more informative.
Maxims of Quality:	1. Do not say what you believe to be false. 2. Do not say that for which you lack adequate evidence.
Maxim of Relation:	1. Be relevant.
Maxims of Manner:	1. Avoid obscurity of expression. 2. Avoid ambiguity. 3. Be brief. 4. Be orderly.

2. Conversational implicature

5. The supermaxim

Once we have questions under discussion on board the first three maxims can be replaced with this one supermaxim:

Say the weakest thing that entails the strongest answer to the question under discussion compatible with what you know.

Maxims of manner are just hodgepodge set of rules about how best to ensure that the hearer understands what the speaker says.

2. Conversational implicature

6. Failure to comply

There are many ways a speaker can fail to comply with a maxim:

- she may quietly violate it (and thereby most likely mislead),
- she may opt out of it (and thereby most likely stall the conversation),
- she may be faced with a clash (and be forced to violate a maxim)
- she may openly flout a maxim.

Some students failed.

If all students failed, the speaker would be violating the first Maxim of Quantity in saying this. Therefore (assuming the speaker is cooperative, and knows whether all students failed), she knows that not all students failed, and (since she expects that the hearer can reproduce this rationale) can be taken to mean this.

2. Conversational implicature

7. Tests

Cancelability. You can explicitly or implicitly indicate that you opt out of the Cooperative Principle, and thereby cancel the implication.

Non-detachability. You cannot get rid of the implication merely by rephrasing the sentence uttered.

Calculability. You can go through an explicit reasoning based on what is said, some background information, the assumption that the speaker is cooperative, and the maxims, to derive the implication.

2. Conversational implicature

8. Caveats

Cancelability. Attempts to cancel an implicature without giving a credible reason why one misled the hearer are likely to fail.

Non-detachability. Implicatures due to violations of maxims of manner can obviously not be detached.

Calculability. We should not assume that these calculations are actually performed by the hearer. Rather, they are what the hear might produce if asked to justify her interpretation of the utterance.

3. Conventional implicature

Alfred has not come
Alfred has not come yet
≈ Although Alfred was expected to come by now, Alfred has not come

Ernest is poor and honest
Ernest is poor but honest
≈ Although poor people are often not honest, Alfred is poor and honest

Linguistic convention plays a role in fixing the added content. But this content is arguably not part of what the speaker said.

These implicatures arguably fail non-detachability, and unquestionably fail cancelability and calculability.

4. Backgrounded content

Ignoring context-sensitivity we could say that what the speaker says and what she conventionally implicates in uttering a sentence are different dimensions of the conventional meaning of the sentence. Conventional implicatures are backgrounded, which is why we often ignore them when we assess the truth or falsity of an utterance.

Conventional implicature is not at-issue in a smooth conversation. But conversational implicature could be:

A: Are you coming to the party tonight?
B: I've got a lot of work to do and have to get up early tomorrow.

What is at issue here is whether B is coming to the party. In her response she conversationally implicates that she is not.

5. Figurative speech

1. Examples

Allusion: Saying He made me an offer I couldn't refuse meaning that he used an implicit threat to persuade me.

Synecdoche: Saying Brussels insists on the measure meaning that officials in Brussels on behalf of the European Union insist on the measure.

Hyperbole: Saying That boat goes faster than the wind meaning that the boat is considerably faster than normal boats.

Meiosis: Saying I've had a difficult day when I lost both legs in an accident.

Irony: Saying This was the perfect ending after a dismally unentertaining show is interrupted by a fire alarm.

5. Figurative speech

2. The easiest case: deferred reference

(1) I am parked in the back
(2) My car is parked in the back

Is it possible that I shifts its interpretation in (1) to my car? No:

(3) # I, a blue Audi, am parked in the back

Is it possible that parked in the back shifts its interpretation to the owner of a car parked in the back in (2)? No:

(4) I am parked in the back and so is my wife's red Toyota

5. Figurative speech

3. The hardest case: metaphor

Metaphor pulls together meanings from distinct domains. They are often (but not always!) semantically anomalous:

Juliet is the Sun.
No man is an island.

The interpreter must discover a connection (sometimes called analogy) between the object (sometimes called tenor) and the attributed feature (sometimes called vehicle).

5. Figurative speech

4. Open-endedness

Figurative speech is often open-ended – it does not seem plausible that a speaker who engages in figurative speech tries to convey a specific content.

But that does not mean that anything goes. The speaker can exercise considerable control over what counts as a permissible interpretation:

A: All the world's a stage.
B: Yeah, I hate it that people are constantly watching you.
A: No, that's not what I meant. I just regret how scripted human life is.
B: No, the point is that people are watching you.

A's response to B's interpretation is entirely appropriate; B's retort is completely out of line. B doesn't get to override A's take on her own words.

5. Figurative speech

5. Truth in fiction

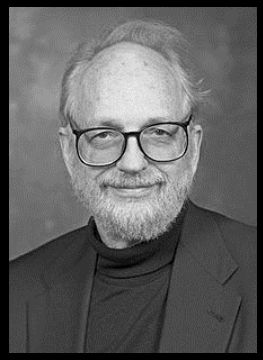
Sherlock Holmes lives in Baker Street 221b.
Crotone is on the arch of the Italian boot.

Both are false but true in a fiction. The Sherlock Holmes fiction and the Italian boot fiction are games of make-believe, where the addressees are invited to imagine various things. What is true in a fiction is what participants in the game can be expected to imagine, according to the rules of the game.

Fictional truths are permeated with regularities we project from our own real world. That's why it is true in the Sherlock Holmes fiction that Holmes lives near Melcombe Street (something that is never mentioned in the novels) and why it is true in the Italian boot fiction that Reggio Calabria (a town the speaker may never have heard of) is on the toe of the Italian boot.

5. Figurative speech

6. Orientation of fiction



Sherlock Holmes lives in Baker Street 221b.
Crotone is on the arch of the Italian boot.

Both of these fictions employ real world objects – Baker Street and Italy – to help us generate fictional truths. These entities function somewhat like props on the stage aiding imagination.

The first sentence exploits the audience's knowledge of the prop to flesh out a content ("this is where one might expect to find bachelor lodgings of the sort Holmes and Watson occupy"); the second exploits a content to inform about the prop ("this is the part of Italy where Crotone is to be found").

Metaphor can be thought of as prop-oriented make-belief.

5. Figurative speech

7. Figuralism

Could it be that apparent reference to suspicious entities involves metaphor? Consider possible worlds:

'Napoleon could have won the battle of Waterloo' is true only if there is a possible world where Napoleon won the battle of Waterloo.

This entails that there is at least one possible world. If there isn't it is false but true in a possible world fiction. The fiction could be the one described by Lewis, according to which there are multiple causally and spatio-temporally disconnected universes. Talk of possible worlds could be prop-oriented make-belief.

5. Figurative speech

8. Invitation to deceive?

Figuralists recommend that we should suspend our beliefs in possible worlds but continue to speak as if we believed in their existence. Isn't that an invitation to deceive others?

That depends on the topic and the tone of the conversation. If we are talking about ontology it probably is, but if we are talking about history it needn't be. If we are ready to believe what we conversationally accept it probably is, but if we are not it needn't be.

6. Summary

- Grice has developed a view of communication that improves on the Lockean picture by abandoning its commitment to thoroughgoing conventionality and directness.
- The Gricean model assumes that conversations have a shared goal (often the exchange of information) and that participants pursue this goal rationally. The model can accommodate various forms of non-cooperative behavior.
- The maxims can be replaced by a single supermaxim.
- A fruitful way to think about metaphors is to see them as moves within a prop-oriented game of make-belief.

the end (for now)