Is the Symmetry Problem Really a Problem?

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The current literature on the computation of scalar implicatures is in large part motivated by the *symmetry problem*, which seems to show that the standard Gricean account of scalar implicatures over-predicts. According to the Gricean account, implicatures like that in (1) arise because of the availability of a relevant stronger alternative to what was asserted.

(1)   a.   John ate some of the cake.
        b. $\rightsquigarrow$ John did not eat all of the cake.

Very informally,[1] the Gricean reasoning runs as follows: *the speaker asserted (1a). But she might have asserted something* **relevant** *and* **more informative***, namely 'John ate all of the cake'. Since she didn't assert this (and she is opinionated, cooperative, etc.) she must believe this more informative alternative to be false.* So (1a) implicates (1b), by the maxims of Relevance and Quantity.

    The symmetry problem shows that this reasoning over-predicts implicatures. To see why, note that (1a) partitions logical space into the possibilities in (2).

(2)   a.   John ate some but not all of the cake.
        b.   John ate all of the cake.

In order to derive the implicature in (1), Gricean reasoning appeals to the fact that the speaker asserted (1a) instead of the more informative (2b). But we could equally well reason from the fact that the speaker asserted (1a) instead of the more informative (2*a*). Following this reasoning out, we could derive that the speaker believes (2a) is false, yielding the implicature that John ate all of the cake. So the Gricean reasoning seems to deliver two (contradictory) predictions, where in fact only one implicature is attested.

    Whereas linguists have uniformly taken this problem seriously (and have in response developed a variety of non-Gricean theories of scalar implicatures), the problem is practically unknown among philosophers. Moreover, when confronted with the symmetry problem, philosophers are often inclined to deny that it is really a problem for Grice. They often suspect that there is some straightforward asymmetry between the alternatives in (2), an asymmetry that the Gricean can appeal to in order to rule out (2a) from the running.

    In this paper, I consider two different strategies for finding an asymmetry between the alternatives in (2). The first strategy appeals to **salience**. The alternative in (2b) is more salient than the alternative in (2a); perhaps this explains why we run the Gricean reasoning on the former but not the latter. I will argue that although the salience claim is true and is almost certainly related to the fact that we get an implicature only from (2b), this explanation can't help the Gricean because it's not explanatory.

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[1]I am ignoring, among other important details, the distinction between primary and secondary implicatures, which is not directly relevant to the problem under discussion.

The second strategy appeals to **brevity**. The alternative in (2b) is more brief than the alternative in (2a), and "make your contribution brief" is a sub-maxim of the Gricean Maxim of Manner. If the alternative in (2a) would violate the Maxim of Manner, perhaps this explains why we don't consider it as a viable alternative utterance, so don't generate the unattested implicature. So, can we keep the reasoning based on (2b), and rule out that based on (2a), by appeal to brevity?

Most linguists working on the problem (see, e.g., Matsumoto 1995) have concluded that we cannot. To show this, they have put forward examples of genuinely attested implicatures which, if calculated by the Gricean machinery, would require consideration of an alternative sentence more complex than the one asserted. Clear examples of this kind would indeed refute the Brevity line of defense. Unfortunately, clear examples are hard to come by. Even the most convincing examples in the linguistics literature are controversial at best—in fact, they should fail to convince anyone who wants to defend the Gricean approach. So far, then, the brevity solution to the symmetry problem stands.

Despite my suspicion of the reasons usually given to dismiss the brevity solution, I agree that as a matter of fact brevity *cannot* solve the symmetry problem. The second half of my paper is devoted to developing an argument that *should* convince Gricean holdouts that the Brevity strategy cannot help them. The first step is to note that a hand-wavy appeal to a vague maxim is not enough. The role of brevity in the derivation of scalar implicatures would need to be made precise. Which alternatives, exactly, does it prevent us from considering? Alternatives that are more complex than the one in fact uttered? Alternatives that are more complex than other salient alternatives? It turns out to be difficult to give an answer that has the right predictive consequences.

Roni Katzir has given an account of scalar alternatives that looks like it might save the day for the Griceans. It is a complexity-based account, the main idea of which is that active scalar alternatives must be at least as simple as the utterance made. He gives a formal account of what is "at least as simple," which, on the face of it, appears to be just the sort of formalization of brevity that the Griceans need. I will argue that Katzir's account is indeed the best hope for precisifying brevity so as to solve the symmetry problem, but that it is categorically not a Gricean solution to the problem. For a Gricean, to appeal to an account like Katzir's in solving the symmetry problem would be to give up the game. So brevity cannot save the Gricean account of scalar implicatures.