Conversational implicature and the cancellability test

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Matthew Weiner has recently argued in this journal that not all conversational implicatures are explicitly cancellable and he has inferred from this that Grice's familiar 'cancellability test does not help determine when an implicature is present' (2006: 129). Bearing in mind that the cancellability test has traditionally been considered the most reliable and effective criterion for distinguishing conversational implicatures from other linguistic phenomena – such as conventional implicature, semantic entailment and semantic presupposition – Weiner's conclusion is of great importance for much of contemporary linguistics and philosophy: as a brief look at the literature demonstrates, Grice's cancellability test has been brought to bear not only in linguistics and the philosophy of language but also in areas as diverse as ethics, epistemology, metaphysics and the philosophy of mind.[1] Thus, considering the pervasiveness of the cancellability test in philosophical debates and its resultant importance for philosophical methodology, Weiner's arguments surely deserve a more thorough examination than they have received thus far.

Let us begin the discussion of Weiner's views by taking a closer look at Grice's cancellability test. Here is a quotation from Grice:

> [A] putative conversational implicature that *p* is explicitly cancellable if, to the form of words the utterance of which putatively implicates that *p*, it is admissible to add *but not p*, or *I do not mean to imply that p*, and it is contextually cancellable if one can find situations in which the utterance of the form of words would simply not carry the implicature. (Grice 1975: 44)

If we let *P* and *Q* be sentences of English and *q* the proposition semantically expressed by *Q* in context *C*, then we can extract from this quotation what I shall call the *Principle of Explicit Cancellability* (EC) and the *Principle of Contextual Cancellability* (CC):

[1] See, for instance, Williamson 2000: 248; Grice 1961: 133–37, 1989; Finlay 2005: 10–17; Burton-Roberts 1984: 184–88. It is also noteworthy that Weiner's scepticism about cancellability has been warmly welcomed by Rysiew (2007: 639) and Hazlett (forthcoming: 19) who both claim that 'knowledge'-ascriptions trigger non-cancellable conversational implicatures: why worry about the cancellability test, Rysiew and Hazlett argue, if it has been shown that not all conversational implicatures are cancellable?

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(EC) If an utterance of *P* conversationally implicates *q* in *C*, then utterances of ⌜*P*, but not *Q*⌝ or ⌜*P*, but I don't mean to imply that *Q*⌝ are admissible in *C* and they cancel the speaker's commitment to *q*.

(CC) If an utterance of *P* conversationally implicates *q* in *C*, then there is a context in which utterances of *P* do not commit the speaker to *q*.

Grice thought that since each of these two principles articulates a necessary condition on the presence of conversational implicatures, they provide us with a useful test for when such implicatures are *not* present: if the consequent of at least one of the two principles is not satisfied, Grice contended, then we can be sure that we are not dealing with a case of conversational implicature. Thus defined, the cancellability test has found application across a wide variety of areas of philosophical enquiry over the last thirty years.[2]

What is Weiner's argument against Grice's well-entrenched cancellability test? Weiner objects to the test by offering counterexamples to (EC), i.e. he offers examples of conversational implicatures that cannot be cancelled explicitly. Here is one of Weiner's cases:

> *Train Ride*: Suppose that Alice and Sarah are in a crowded train; Alice, who is obviously able-bodied, is sprawled across two seats, and Sarah is standing. Sarah says to Alice: [*P*:] 'I'm curious as to whether it would be physically possible for you to make room for someone else to sit down.' The implicature is that Alice should make room. [...] Suppose now that Sarah adds: [⌜but not *Q*⌝:] '[But n]ot that you should make room, I'm just curious.' This has the form of an explicit cancellation of the implicature. Nevertheless, the implicature is not cancelled. Sarah is still suggesting, even more rudely, that Alice should make room. (Weiner 2006: 128)

Given the context of utterance in *Train Ride*, Sarah's second assertion of ⌜but not *Q*⌝ is most plausibly interpreted as ironic. Thus, Weiner's case is indeed a counterexample to (EC), for when Sarah adds ⌜but not *Q*⌝ to her earlier assertion of *P*, she is not cancelling her commitment to *q*, but rather

[2] There are, of course, obvious exceptions to this test. As Davis (1998: 6) points out, conversational implicatures are sometimes *semantically entailed* by what we literally say. In such cases the implicature is neither contextually nor explicitly cancellable. However, note that such cases do not call into question the usefulness of the cancellability test, which is meant to establish that a given proposition is *merely* conversationally implicated and thus not semantically entailed by what is literally said. Davis's cases can accordingly be accommodated by inserting 'merely' into (EC)'s and (CC)'s antecedents.

strengthening it by again conversationally implicating *q*. As a consequence, (EC) fails, for there are contexts in which one cannot cancel conversational implicatures.[3]

How unsettling is Weiner's conclusion for the advocate of Grice's cancellability test? To see why it is not as unsettling as it may seem at first glance, note that the implicature of Sarah's utterance in *Train Ride* can be cancelled contextually. Consider the following case:

> *Star Trek I:* Klingons have gained control over Alice's space ship by means of a tractor beam, a device that allows the Klingons to hold material objects in fixed locations. On initial impact of the tractor beam, Alice was thrown on top of the bridge's command chairs, both of which she is now obstructing with her body. To free the ship from the tractor beam, its deflector shields must be activated, which can usually be done by verbally commanding the on-board computer. Since the on-board computer is unresponsive, Alice radios her mother ship to ask for help. Sarah advises Alice and her crew as follows:
>
> 'If the computer cannot activate the deflector shields, you have to activate them manually, from the control panel on the left armrest of the main command chair. This may turn out very difficult, given the force inflicted on you by the tractor beam. Alice, I'm curious as to whether it would be physically possible for you to make room for someone else to sit down. Once we have a crew member in the main command chair, it may be possible to activate the shields.'

Surely, in this case Sarah does not implicate that Alice should make room (for reasons of politeness and courtesy), as she did in Weiner's example. On the contrary, in the above case Sarah really just means what her sentences express: she is curious as to whether it would be physically possible for Alice to make room for someone else to sit down. Thus, what my example shows is that implicatures of *q* as triggered by utterances of *P* can be cancelled contextually.[4]

[3] Weiner (2006: 129) also notes that adding phrases such as 'I mean it' or 'I'm not speaking ironically' do not suffice to cancel Sarah's commitment to *q*, for such additions would themselves be most plausibly interpreted as being ironical. In the context at issue, Weiner maintains, it is impossible to convey ~*q*, whichever form of words one chooses.

[4] It seems as if Weiner (2006: 129) does not want to dispute the contextual cancellability of the implicature at issue when claiming that '[o]nly a madwoman or a philosopher concerned with free will would really be curious about whether it was physically possible for Alice to make room'.

Considering that there are contexts in which utterances of *P* do not implicate *q*, it seems plausible that there are also contexts in which utterances of *P* implicate *q*, but in which that implicature is explicitly cancellable. Here is an example of such a context:

> *Star Trek II:* Unbeknownst to Alice, who is sprawling over several seats on the recreation deck, Sarah and one of her engineering officers are testing a portable tractor beam. For the purposes at issue, the tractor beam has to be strong enough to make it impossible for Alice to make room for someone else to sit down next to her. After activating the beam Sarah asks Alice via the intercom:
>
> Sarah: Alice, I'm curious as to whether it would be physically possible for you to make room for someone else to sit down.
>
> Alice: (*baffled*) Why should I? There's nobody else here who *wants* to sit down ...
>
> Sarah: Oh, I'm sorry. I didn't mean to imply that you *should* make room. We are testing a new tractor beam on you and we are curious as to whether you *can* do it. This would give us an important indication as to how strong the beam really is.

Clearly, in this example Sarah manages to cancel the implicature that Alice should make room with her second utterance. Consequently, there are contexts in which utterances of *P* implicate *q*, while the implicature at issue can be cancelled explicitly.

What are we to conclude from these data? Considering that there are contexts in which utterances of *P* implicate *q*, while the implicature is explicitly cancellable, the idea suggests itself that Grice's (EC) is to be weakened to the claim that if an utterance of *P* conversationally implicates *q* in *C*, then there is a context *C′* – not necessarily identical to *C* – in which the implicature is present but can be explicitly cancelled. Along Gricean lines, this weaker notion of explicit cancellability, I shall call it explicit cancellability*, can be captured by the following principle:

(EC*) If an utterance of *P* conversationally implicates *q* in *C*, then there is a sentence *Q* and a context *C′* such that
(1) utterances of *P* convey *q* in *C′*,
(2) utterances of ⌜not *Q*⌝ convey ~*q* in *C′*,
(3) utterances of ⌜I don't mean to imply that *Q*⌝ convey that the speaker doesn't mean to imply *q* in *C′* and

(4) utterances of ⌜*P*, but not *Q*⌝ or ⌜*P*, but I don't mean to imply that *Q*⌝ are admissible in *C′* and cancel the speaker's commitment to *q*.[5]

As far as I can see, all uncontroversial cases of mere conversational implicature are explicitly cancellable*.[6] Consequently, we can use (EC*) to formulate a new cancellability* test: if the consequent of either (EC*) and/or (CC) is not satisfied, then we can be sure that we are not dealing with a case of conversational implicature. Thus, I agree with Weiner that not all conversational implicatures are explicitly cancellable. However, something very similar to Grice's original claim is true: all conversational implicatures are explicitly cancellable*. We do, after all, have a reliable and effective test for conversational implicatures.[7]

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[5] Note that principles blocking Weiner's argument do not necessarily refer to utterances of ⌜not *Q*⌝ or ⌜I don't mean to imply that *Q*⌝. Here is a logically weaker principle sufficient to block Weiner's argument:

(EC′) If an utterance of *P* conversationally implicates *q* in *C*, then there is a context *C′* and some form of words *F* such that utterances of *P* convey *q* in *C′* and the assertion of *F* is admissible in *C′* and cancels the speaker's commitment to *q* in *C′*.

[6] Moreover, I take it that all uncontroversial cases of semantic entailment and conventional implicature are non-cancellable*.

[7] I am indebted to James Morauta, Ian Phillips and Tim Williamson for comments on earlier versions of this paper.