



On Grice's circle (a theory-internal problem in linguistic theories of the Gricean type)

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Abstract

This paper deals with a theory-internal problem inherent in current pragmatic theories which Levinson (2000) dubbed 'Grice's circle'. The expression 'circle' stems from the fact that conversational implicatures take their input from truth-conditional content, whereas the latter is constituted on the basis of pragmatic augmentations. The paper deals with a conversational fragment whose analysis can contribute to the understanding of the semantics/pragmatics debate (by providing a clear-cut and irreducible example of pragmatic intrusion) and of Grice's circle. After ample discussion of the current literature, the paper explores a logical possibility: explicatures (or implicatures) are non-cancellable: hence there is a way out of the apparently vicious circularity called 'Grice's circle'. It follows that conversational implicatures take their input from contextually supplied, non-cancellable truth-conditional content and that a neat distinction can still be made between meaning augmentations that are cancellable (conversational implicatures) and those that are not.

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0. Introduction

Frege (1956), Strawson (1950) and Stalnaker (1970) may be considered the first pioneers in the area of the semantics/pragmatics debate, even if their considerations are not quoted at length in the recent works by Carston (1999, 2002a, 2002b), Bach (1994a, 1994b, 1999b) and Levinson (2000), perhaps the best recent continuations of those ideas. The basic insights are that in many cases a sentence cannot constitute a complete thought: only an utterance is something that can be said to be true or false, as is shown by the celebrated example "The king of France is bald" which is false in 2004 but perhaps was true at the time when France was a monarchy, depending on who the king was and on whether or not he was bald. On this established and solid view, it will not do

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to equate a sentence with a proposition, unless all the sentence's references are explicit (or unless the sentence expresses an analytic truth).¹

In this paper, I shall contribute to the semantics/pragmatics debate by proposing a number of tentative considerations on the nature of pragmatic intrusion into full propositional forms ready for truth-conditional evaluation—aware that I am tackling a topic that is considerably delicate. After a preamble on a theory of semantics, I shall start with what seems to me an interesting example of pragmatic intrusion deserving lengthy critical discussion, which serves to widen the scope of the standard examples for explicature. I believe that it also has a bearing on the analysis of 'Grice's circle', a theory-internal problem in the current semantics/pragmatics debate; it is the discussion of Grice's circle that is the main topic of this paper.

The problem amounts to the following. Implicatures take their input from what is said (as Récanati (*in press*) claims, "no implicature can be computed unless something has been said, some proposition expressed"), but what is said takes its input from pragmatics. There is a circularity that is pernicious in that it leads to a definitionally impossible task (Levinson, 2000). Of course not all circularities are pernicious, as some simply involve an infinite regress that is finitely representable (see Kasher, 1991 on mutual knowledge), but in the case under consideration the circularity is bad because we really need a starting point in utterance interpretation and we take that to be the semantics of a sentence. It is not a question of having a finite representation of an iterated regress, but of stopping the regress so that we can *start* doing some interpretative work. It should be made clear that the circularity problem is not only a theory-internal problem in theories of the Gricean type; it is a problem for truth-conditional semantics as well. In fact, definitions of semantics usually take for granted that semantics deals with the context-independent (or context-invariant) aspects of meaning.

1. Pragmatic intrusionism: a story

I shall now move on to a section dealing with an example bearing on the semantics/pragmatics debate, in order to expand the data on which standard discussions are based. After discussion of this example I shall move on to the discussion of Grice's circle.

Mrs. M.V.M., who lives on the other side of the straits of Messina, in Reggio Calabria, is complaining about the traffic. The last time she came to Messina (where the conversation occurs), she got stuck in the city traffic in Reggio for three quarters of an hour. She says: "I should have walked to the harbour. The distance between my house and the harbour is only ten minutes' walk". I reply: "Then why don't you walk to the harbour, instead of getting stuck in the traffic?" She continues: "I've got a sore leg. And then, when I come back, I have to walk uphill, which takes much longer". What M.V.M. means, when she says "The distance between my house and the harbour is only ten minutes' walk" is "It only takes ten minutes to walk from my house to the harbour", and a motivation for attributing that meaning to her is that her house is situated higher up than the harbour. She does not mean: "It takes ten minutes to walk from the harbour to my house". Presumably, as I know that she lives somewhere up the hill, she could rely on me for understanding that her intention is to let me know that the distance between her house and the harbour, when it is measured in terms of time, is equivalent to a ten minutes' walk, starting at her

¹ According to T. Williamson (personal communication), it will not do either to simply equate a sentence with a proposition, even if all the references are explicit or the sentence expresses an analytic truth; the reason that the sentence should not be equated with a proposition is that its translation into another language will produce a distinct sentence, expressing the same proposition.

house and ending at the harbour. I understand that she means that it takes her ten minutes to walk from her house to the harbour and not to walk from the harbour to the house, because the context of utterance (what she has previously said, as selected by my cognitive ability to make it bear on the utterance interpretation Sperber and Wilson, 1986) makes it sufficiently clear that this is her *intention*. She has been talking so far of the event of her getting trapped in the traffic while driving from her house to the harbour. Supposing that this topic and her utterance “The distance between my house and the harbour is ten minutes’ walk” are connected, I make the inference that this distance (the length of the event of her walking) corresponds to the length of the event of her walking from her house to the harbour. In the conversation, it is also clear that she is contrasting the event of her getting stuck in the traffic for three quarters of an hour with the possible event of her walking from her house to the harbour. The contrast is more effective if the events contrasted are sufficiently similar, that is, if they both describe M.V.M.’s going from her house to the harbour. In context, it is clear that she cannot be contrasting her driving the car from her house to the harbour with her walking from the harbour to her house, as these are not comparable events. Although both events involve covering the same distance, the direction and kind of the walking/going are different.²

My analysis might be objected to on the grounds that if M.V.M. is observing the maxim of quantity, her particular addressee is licensed to assume that the reverse holds also. If not, M.V.M. should have added “but not the reverse”.³ I believe that, if I were to discuss this paper with M.V.M., she would agree with my understanding of what she meant (in context). Nevertheless, I think that this objection is stimulating, because it independently lends support to the sophisticated elaboration of Grice’s maxim of quantity by Levinson (2000). Levinson believes that Grice’s maxim of quantity must be split into a Q- and an I-principle. The Q-principle says that we should not proffer an assertion that is weaker than our knowledge of the world allows, unless a stronger assertion would violate the I-principle. The I-principle says that we must produce the minimal semantic clues indispensable for achieving our communicative goals (bearing the Q-principle in mind). In a specified context, the I-principle allows the participants to use underdetermined propositions because they can rely on a rich shared context. In this case, the Q-principle does not apply, because it conflicts with the I-principle.

The objection concerning Grice’s maxim of quantity in relation to our example can thus be easily dismissed by resorting to the interaction between Levinson’s I- and Q-principle. However, this is not tantamount to admitting that the explicature is, in fact, a conversational implicature. The role played by the I-principle here is *simply* to allow the use of underdetermination; a specific interpretation is chosen by referring to some crucial pieces of knowledge deriving from the contextual background. Surely there are cases in which conversational principles play a more active role in explicature calculation (interacting with what I, in section 5, will call the GSDP), but the M.V.M. example is not a case in point.

There is a further aspect to this discussion. When M.V.M. says “The distance between my house and the harbour is ten minutes’ walk”, this amounts to her implying “If you measure the distance between my house and the harbour, that is equivalent to a ten minutes’ walk”. But obviously, this needs further interpretation. One who has the habit of walking from the harbour to M.V.M.’s house would say that it is false that the distance is ten minutes’ walk. In fact, it takes one

² If we imagine the distance as a straight line with a number of points between the extremes, we may suppose (with a certain amount of idealization) that in her walking, M.V.M. passes through each section of the line (each section must be thought of as big enough to allow this idealization).

³ This interesting objection was raised by one of the referees.

eighteen minutes to walk up to M.V.M.'s house. But surely we would not say that M.V.M.'s *utterance* is false. What she meant by saying "The distance between my house and the harbour is ten minutes' walk", is "It takes ten minutes to walk down to the harbour from my house".

2. Recent views on the semantics/pragmatics debate

Levinson (2000) proposes that pragmatics intrudes into propositional forms and thus is constitutive of truth-conditional meaning (read: truth-conditional content; we are dealing here with what Szabó (*in press*) calls 'relative truth conditions', as opposed to the 'absolute truth conditions' of a sentence, which are the context-independent aspects of meaning). However, unlike Bach and Carston, Levinson does not differentiate terminologically between inferences that contribute to propositional forms and inferences that take input from propositional forms. Arguably, Levinson (2000:188) proposes a framework with a presemantic Gricean pragmatics-1 and a postsemantic Gricean pragmatics-2.⁴

The examples that, in the current literature, support the analyses detailed so far are of the following type:

- (1) If the king of France died and France became a republic, I would be happy, but if France became a republic and the king of France died, I would be unhappy.
- (2) Take these three plates to those three people over there (there is another set of four plates close to the set of three plates).
- (3) You will not die (said to John who has just cut his arm).
- (4) I am not ready (to start the journey).
- (5) The ham sandwich is getting hungry.

If only what is literally said is taken into account, (1) must count as a contradiction (on the above views). However, the statement is not contradictory, if we admit that pragmatics intrudes into what is said and that 'and' may be interpreted as "as a result of that" (in accordance with Carston), or that it expands what is said (following Bach, who claims that there is some middle ground between what is said and conversational implicature). In (2), scalar conversational implicatures either determine or further develop what is said, in this way determining full propositional forms. A scalar conversational implicature is one that takes its input from a lexeme that is part of an ordered set of expressions based on certain characteristics such as entailment, semantic relatedness, and lexical simplicity (the scalar items must be similarly lexicalised, according to Levinson, 2000). If two lexemes x, y form a Horn-scale $\langle x, y \rangle$, such that x entails y , then by the use of y , the speaker will implicate that, for all he knows, the stronger item is not applicable. Levinson (2000) argues that the references to the set of plates and the set of people in (2) are sufficiently established/fixed by the scalar implicatures that serve to properly differentiate the sets in question (without scalar implicatures, it is not possible to properly distinguish the set of three plates from a set of four plates, as the cardinal number would serve to refer to an unbounded series of objects, having just an inferior limit: "at least three"). In (3), some expansion work is needed to transform the sentence into a statement that can be true (the statement will be understood to mean "You will not die from this cut"). Without this inferential expansion, the statement will be necessarily false, according to some (whose view I do not share, however). In fact, it might be possible to explain this example of expansion in a different way. It

⁴ This is how an anonymous referee has summed up Levinson's work. I am inclined to agree with this referee's opinion.

might be claimed that, in the absence of the process of expansion, the pragmatic anomaly exhibited by the sentence is the lack of relevant specificity, as is made clear by the positive version of this example. An oncologist saying to his or her patient “You are going to die” presumably is not saying something that is trivially true; on the contrary, we may assume that his utterance possesses relevant specificity (Bach, 2002a, 2002b). As to (4), what is said here needs to be completed in order to arrive at a complete thought. (5) is a falsehood unless it is interpreted as meaning “The person who ordered the ham sandwich is getting hungry”.

In addition to these examples, discussed by Levinson (2000), one also needs to take into account examples such as (6) (due to Stainton, 1998):

- (6) An editor of *Natural Language Semantics* (said while pointing to some empty seats in the front row).

Stainton (1998) analyses the use of quantifier phrases in isolation (which he distinguishes from cases of ellipsis, in that, according to him, one cannot begin a conversation with an elliptical sentence, as it relies on a context for its understanding). So, according to Stainton you could point to some empty seats in front of you and say “An editor of *Natural Language Semantics*”, meaning that one of the seats indicated is reserved for an editor of the journal *Natural Language Semantics*. Surely the quantifier in isolation cannot form a proposition by itself, and thus pragmatics intervenes to rescue this *prima facie* implausible utterance fragment and provides as output what in the context sounds like the most plausible proposition intended: one of these seats is reserved for an editor of *Natural Language Semantics*.

Such uses of quantifier phrases in isolation are very interesting. It is not possible to go into them here in greater detail, but at least a few things need to be said about Stainton’s important proposal. Stainton calls these uses elliptical in one sense of ‘elliptical’, which involves the elision of a linguistic constituent. However, if one takes ‘elliptical’ in another, more technical sense, these uses are not elliptical, according to Stainton. Stainton has in mind cases of ellipsis such as “He doesn’t”, which, in a certain dialogic frame such as “Does John smoke?” means “John does not smoke”. Stainton makes it clear that in ‘ellipsis’ proper, the omitted constituent in an elliptical structure may be recovered through the linguistic context, whereas the predicate in (6) cannot be retrieved from the preceding linguistic context (e.g. an adjacency pair first part or a previous assertion) but, instead, is matched to the quantifier phrase (used in isolation) by accessing the most salient assumption. Stainton’s analysis is cast in the relevance theory model and represents an important contribution to the semantics/pragmatics debate. In fact, Stainton says that the use of a quantifier phrase in isolation constitutes a statement that can be said to be true or false. This claim amounts to saying that the pragmatic inference that matches the quantifier phrase ‘An editor of *Natural Language Semantics*’ to the predicate ‘is going to sit there’ provides a full-fledged truth-evaluable proposition.

3. Grice’s circle

In this section, I will address a theory-internal theoretical problem known as ‘Grice’s circle’ (Levinson, 2000:186, but see also footnote 16, p. 399). So far we have considered the theoretical implications of some examples that are standardly taken to support recent views current in the semantics/pragmatics debate. Now it is time to consider the difficulties with each of these views. First off, it is not clear how to define pragmatics on any of them (nor is it clear that the authors in question actually attempt to provide a broad, general definition of pragmatics). The views in

question have all abandoned the neat definitional proposal due to Gazdar (1979) and Levinson (1983), according to which pragmatics amounts to meaning minus truth-conditional semantics (what Lyons, 1987 called ‘a negative view of pragmatics’). Such a proposal has the advantage of offering a picture in which semantics and pragmatics play complementary roles (admittedly, such a picture is oversimplified)⁵: if you know what semantics is, you also know what pragmatics is. The proposal fitted in very well with Grice’s original view of pragmatics, according to which conversational implicatures are cancellable. For Levinson (2000), who adopts the view that conversational implicatures contribute to truth-conditional content (read: propositional forms), the pragmatic enterprise that concedes that pragmatics intrudes into semantics (read: truth-conditional content or propositional forms) is a circular, hence definitionally impossible enterprise. Conversational implicatures, in fact, take their input from what is said, but what is said takes its input from conversational implicatures; this is what has been called ‘Grice’s circle’.

So far, we have confined our attention to generalized conversational implicatures. But there are other types to consider as well. Grice has divided non-logical inferences into two types: *generalized* and *particularized implicatures*. Generalized implicatures are those that arise in a default context, that is to say, without the assistance of a particular context. Particularized implicatures are those that arise in particular contexts.

It is time to turn to particularized implicatures. Consider the following example (adapted from Levinson, 1983:105):

- (7) A: I need to buy some petrol.
B: There are two garages around the corner.

As Grice has noted, utterances need to be related in order to make up a coherent and cooperative conversation. Thus, B’s utterance will very well be interpreted as “If you want to buy some petrol, you will find some by going to either of the two garages around the corner”. This particularized implicature, one may notice, arises after the hearer builds up fully truth-evaluable propositional forms. Thus, it seems reasonable to suppose that some pragmatic mechanisms must have provided the full propositional forms (for example, the scalar implicature arising from the use of ‘two’ must have been calculated before relation implicatures arise). But the need to consider such implicated assumptions as part of the truth-conditionally evaluable content raises the question whether we should reformulate the notion of conversational implicature itself. In addition, another associated question arises: if an implicature contributes to truth-conditional content, is it then non-truth-conditional (that is, can it be cancelled)? I will answer the latter question first and then turn to the former.⁶

4. Can implicatures that intrude into propositional forms be cancelled?

A crucial question is whether we can cancel implicatures that intrude into propositional forms. It is interesting to note that Bach (2001a) claims that inferring that Jack and Jill are engaged to each other from “Jack and Jill are engaged” is an implicit element of communication, but is not part of what is said. In Bach’s words, “That it is not part of what is said is clear from the fact that it

⁵ Bach (personal communication) believes that the picture not only is oversimplified but confused.

⁶ From now on I shall discuss the phenomenon called ‘Grice’s circle’ with reference to Levinson’s view, while incorporating Carston’s suggestion to differentiate implicatures from explicatures.

does pass Grice's test of cancellability" (p. 152). Although Bach takes "what is said" a literalistic sense, contrary to other linguists (e.g. Carston), I think that we can extend his intuition also to non-literalistic notions of what is said. When a law says, e.g. that "The president of the USA must not tell lies", it does not admit exceptions; and if a law says, e.g. "If the President of the USA tells a lie and he does not admit that, he is to be prosecuted", then this is a non-literalistic, yet quite strict, notion of what is said: once we establish the proper anaphoric links between the pronominal and the definite description (even if the latter is interpreted attributively), we cannot go on and cancel the pragmatic intrusion that contributed to the original proposition. Hence we have here a solid basis for building a serious, legalistic theory of what is said that incorporates pragmatic intrusion. Consider again the examples (3)–(5), here for convenience's sake reproduced as (8)–(10):

- (8) If the king of France died and France became a republic, I would be happy
but if France became a republic and the king of France died, I would be unhappy.
- (9) Take these three plates to those three people over there.
- (10) You will not die (said to John who has just cut his arm).

Suppose somebody utters (8), then goes on to cancel the resulting implicature of causality:

- (11) But I do not mean to say that if France became a republic as a result of the fact that the king of France had died, I would be happy and that if the king of France died as a consequence of the fact that France had become a republic, I would be unhappy.

Cancelling a causality implicature that allows us to make sense of an otherwise contradictory (or at least highly indeterminate) statement results in an unacceptable utterance. Hence, in this case, it is not possible, in my view, to build the propositional form, while allowing for pragmatic intrusion, and then cancel the related implicature, without rendering the discourse incoherent. While in ordinary cases of implicature cancellation, the speaker can still be considered to have said something intelligible, something that is coherent in itself and non-contradictory, in cases where pragmatics contributes in a decisive way to the propositional form, such a contribution cannot be withdrawn without causing havoc.

Likewise, in (9), the scalar implicature (exactly three plates; exactly three people) serves to identify reference, and, since reference fixing is its point, it cannot be cancelled. It would be odd to add (12)

- (12) But I do not mean that the set of plates I am referring to is constituted by only three plates.

The fact that the set is constituted by three pieces may serve to distinguish it from a set of, say, four plates. Cancelling the implicature results in a statement that cannot be assessed as true or false (in that one of the NPs fails to refer).

As to (10), it presumably needs some expansion in order to be understood. The result is a particularized implicature and, again, it will not be possible to cancel the implicature "not dying from this cut" without making a necessarily false statement. Without this expansion, the speaker will have to be understood as meaning that the addressee will never die – a highly implausible interpretation, to say the least – or that he will not die at some unspecified time (a highly

indeterminate reading in this case). The latter option is totally uninformative, since there are a great many times t_1, \dots, t_n at which the statement is true and the hearer cannot be sure which t_i the speaker is referring to. Cancelling the implicature will result in attributing an implausible or totally obscure intention to the speaker.

Examples like these, where implicatures intrude into propositional forms and resist subsequent efforts to cancel those very implicatures can be multiplied ad libitum. If the inferential expansions of the utterance in question cannot be cancelled without the utterance being perceived as false, or at least not truth-assessable, then we are faced with a class of inferential processes distinct from conversational implicatures (the latter, in fact, unlike explicatures, still being cancellable on the present view).

Such inferential completions/expansions are like implicatures in their mode of inference (we need Gricean reasoning to derivate the implicatures), but unlike implicatures proper, they cannot be cancelled; hence they have to be called ‘explicatures’, adopting Carston’s terminology,⁷ in order to distinguish them neatly from implicatures. Explicatures are inferential processes that complete or expand logical forms. Although they are constructed instantaneously and need not be reflexive or conscious, we “are still dealing with conceptual representations manipulated under constraints of rationality” (Récanati, 2002:121). They take their input from logical forms, whereas implicatures take their input from fully truth-evaluable propositional forms. While explicatures seem to be determined by the need to conform to the convention of truthfulness, conversational implicatures may skirt the issue of truth. Explicatures and implicatures are distinguished in that the former result in a compound statement that can be true or false, whereas the latter bypass the truth issue.

5. A tentative solution

In the preceding section, I have discussed a possible problem that theories dealing with issues in the semantics/pragmatics debate encounter, namely the non-cancellability of explicatures. It may turn out, however, that this theoretical problem carries the key to its own solution. Conversational implicatures take their input from what is said; they should not take their input from conversational implicatures. It might be objected, that, after all, what is said is also obtained thanks to pragmatic intrusion, and that in this way any solution is circular: we build on pragmatics to solve a pragmatic problem. I might reply that although the mode of inference is pragmatic, the result obtained is part of the truth-conditional content and thus, in a sense, it lacks the essential features of pragmatics (defined as non-truth-conditional meaning). It is possible that what started its life as a pragmatic inference ends up being a truth-conditional aspect of meaning, due to a simple and plausible general semantic and monotonic discourse principle, the General Semantic Discourse Principle, GSDP.

5.1. GSDP

I now express the GSDP.

GSDP

⁷ The notion of ‘explicature’ is originally due to Sperber and Wilson (1986).

Avoid impossibilities and implausible propositions, whenever feasible, by carrying out the necessary adjustments.

I borrowed this principle from a general maxim saying that nobody is required to do what is impossible. This is an overarching principle, overriding any existing law.

It follows that, while we are free in order to obey the overarching GSDP, to use conversational implicatures or to accommodate a number of assumptions (in the sense of Stalnaker), still, whatever we use for this pragmatic purpose will lead to a semantic non-cancellable stratum of meaning (a fully truth-evaluable proposition). So whatever implicatures are under the scope of the GSDP will lead to non-cancellable meaning augmentations (or increments). The principle transforms what starts life as pragmatics into semantics, and very conveniently so, since pragmatics, at this stage, can take its input from semantic information.

It might be thought that there is a relationship of some kind between the GSDP and Grice's maxim of manner. As Grice says:

Finally, under the category of Manner, which I understand as relating not (like the previous categories) to what is said, but, rather, to how what is said is to be said, I include the supermaxim – “Be perspicuous” – and various maxims such as:

1. Avoid obscurity of expression.
2. Avoid ambiguity.
3. Be brief (avoid unnecessary prolixity).
4. Be orderly. (Grice, 1989:27)

Can the GSDP be subsumed under Grice's Maxim of Manner?⁸ I believe that it cannot be incorporated in sub-maxims 2–4, while it might be argued that maxim 1 is wide enough to accommodate it. In fact, impossibilities and implausible propositions, once expressed, are likely to give rise to obscure expressions, and indeed Grice himself makes it clear that the category of manner relates not to *what* is said, but to *how* what is said is to be said. One way to accommodate the GSDP under the first sub-maxim of manner would be to acknowledge that the impossibilities and implausibilities we consider when we resort to explicatures derive from the way the propositions are expressed (that is to say, often, from the underdetermination that results in interpretative ambiguity or obscurity). So, I believe that a linguist interested in accommodating the GSDP under Grice's first sub-maxim of manner, would have to reformulate the principle in such a way as to stress that the impossibilities and implausibilities in question are *prima facie* ones, deriving from the way things were stated. Hence, we need something like the following.

5.2. Revised GSDP

The revised GSDP says:

⁸ A suggestion made by an anonymous referee of the *Journal of Pragmatics*.

Avoid *prima facie* cases of impossibilities and implausible propositions that are due to semantic underdetermination, whenever feasible, by carrying out the necessary adjustments.

The revised definition makes use of the concept of underdetermination, which I propose to explain, using Récanati's words:

There is, I claimed, no such thing as 'what the sentence says' in the literalist sense, that is, no such thing as a complete proposition autonomously determined by the rules of the language with respect to the context but independent of the speaker's meaning. As Bach points out, what the sentence says, in the purely semantic sense, 'excludes anything that is determined by [the speaker's] communicative intention (if it included that, then what is said would be partly a pragmatic matter)'. It is for that reason that I say there is no such thing: in order to reach a complete proposition through a sentence, we must appeal to the speaker's meaning. That is the lesson of semantic underdeterminacy. (Récanati, 2004:59)

It may be thought that the restrictive conditional clause contained in the GSDP ("whenever feasible") renders the principle too weak. What I mean by this is that if the text offers sufficient latitude for obtaining a plausible reading and avoiding impossibilities, then the reader must work out the necessary pragmatic adjustments, promoting a plausible reading that is allowed (permitted) by the underdetermination present in the text. So, I believe we again have to reformulate the principle to avoid confusion:

Re-revised GSDP

Avoid *prima facie* cases of impossibilities and implausible propositions due to the use of semantic underdetermination, by carrying out the necessary adjustments (in case textual underdetermination makes it necessary).

6. Towards a redefinition of pragmatics

It would be good, I think, to bear in mind that our ultimate aim is to distinguish as neatly as we can between semantics and pragmatics. So, it would be good to provide further arguments to show that the GSDP is a semantic, not a pragmatic principle. The GSDP relates to explicatures, but also, in order to avoid impossibilities and implausible propositions, it clearly relies on contextual and background knowledge. Granted that this consideration is reasonable, I would like to say why it is useful to consider it a semantic principle. On the one hand, one who wants to avoid the proliferation of principles of interpretation would be tempted to subsume it under the first maxim of manner; on the other hand, even such a pragmatically-minded linguist would have to acknowledge that the principle is semantic in the limited sense that it relates to semantic interpretation and, in particular, to truth-conditional meaning. Leaving aside the possible latitude of the term 'semantics' (Lyons, 1977 certainly sees semantics as comprising the pragmatic aspects of communication), here I want to stress that the result of applying the principle is a proposition that can be assessed as true or false. So, it is good to have clarified matters, in the light of the ambiguity of the modifier 'semantic'. The principle may very well be pragmatic, but it certainly has a semantic output.

I must admit that my attempt to rigorously distinguish semantics from pragmatics is not devoid of problems. After all, non-cancellability is also a property of conventional implicature.

What is, then, the difference between an explicature and (if they exist at all) conventional implicatures?⁹ The term ‘conventional implicature’ is, of course, Gricean. The current literature, however, with the exception of Bach (1999a), a champion of Gricean ideas, tries to subsume the notion of conventional implicature under the notion of presupposition (Chierchia and McConnell-Ginet, 2000) or of procedural meaning (see Carston, 2002a, 2002b and authors cited there). In the Gricean view, a conventional implicature is a non-cancellable inference that does not have a truth-conditional content. Thus, if I say “John is poor but happy”, I conventionally imply that there is an alleged contrast between being poor and being happy (these qualities being usually judged as mutually exclusive).

My line of defence would be to say that the two phenomena, explicatures and conventional implicatures, are not on a par. The fact that they both involve non-cancellable inferences does not require us to conflate the two categories, in the same way that no semanticist would be bound to conflate entailments and conventional implicatures on the grounds that they both involve non-cancellable inferences. Most importantly, what militates against conflating (or even considering a conflation of) the categories of conventional implicature and explicature is the fact that the non-cancellability of conventional implicatures derives from their being lexical inferences attached to particular lexemes such as ‘but’ or ‘even’, and thus obeys instructions that are part of our lexical knowledge. In contrast, the non-cancellability of explicatures derives from the application of the GSDP, which is not a lexical rule, but a principle that enjoins us to maximise rationality and to avoid impossibilities or implausible propositions. In other words, while on my view, conventional implicatures and explicatures are both non-cancellable inferences, still, the fact that each of them is non-cancellable does not necessarily require their conflation, since explicatures are different types of inference, inasmuch as they often provide missing constituents. Explicatures are calculated under the exigency of supplying an implicit constituent, whereas conventional implicatures are triggered by explicit lexical items (e.g. ‘but’).

Another problem that at first sight appears to militate against my stance in the semantics/pragmatics debate is that, at least in some cases, explicatures appear to be cancellable. Consider the example¹⁰: “You are not going to die [from this little wound], because you are immortal anyhow”. Suppose that the explicating constituent “from this little wound” is deleted, signalling that the explicature in fact is cancelled. Within the theoretical framework I have outlined here, this may constitute a problem. However, I do not take this objection to be fatal; on the contrary, it is extremely illuminating and important. We should notice that the use of a demonstrative in the *prima facie* explicature points to an object in a certain context. I assume that if a *prima facie* explicature such as “from this little wound” is considered as a possible explication of the proposition expressed, this is because the context provides *prima facie* evidence in favour of the utterance “You are not going to die” being related to the wound. Presumably, before we start to process the explanation clause “because you are immortal anyhow”, the operation of the GSDP may already have prompted us to provide the explicature “You are not going to die from this little wound”; the final addition of the explanation “because you are immortal anyhow” may now make us believe that since the explicating clause has been removed, the *prima facie* explicature is cancelled as well.

This example, which is supposed to point up some flaws in my approach, in fact seems to provide support for my line of argument. Normally, we assume that people say things with a purpose in mind. Why, then, is the speaker, in this case, saying “You are not going to die [from this little wound] because you are immortal” (with the explicature understood as

⁹ This point was raised by an anonymous referee.

¹⁰ This important example is due to an anonymous referee.

deleted)? Presumably, he is comforting the hearer who has been worrying, say, about a little cut in his arm. The context of utterance, viz., the fact that the hearer is worrying about a wound, may promote the explicature by a constituent such as [“from this little wound”]. Nevertheless, the speaker may deny this explicature and say “No, there is no connection between what I was saying and the hearer’s wound; I was making that remark on general grounds, it was just a random thought”. In this case, all we need to consider is the utterance/thought “You are not going to die because you are immortal”. Here, there is no implausible or impossible proposition expressed (whether the proposition is true is a different matter) and thus the GSDP will not apply (or it will apply vacuously); no explicature will arise to the effect that the hearer is not going to die from his little cut, and consequently, this is not a case of explicature cancellation. Of course, one might claim that such a conversational contribution still has to obey Grice’s Maxim of Relation, even if the speaker maintains that it is unconnected with what is going on in the situation, but surely the onus of explanation is now placed on those who propound such counter examples.

Now, I do not want to give the impression that I undervalue the importance of this example; but I think it is important for a different reason. It shows that, despite all our efforts to bring in contextual effects when we process utterances and automatically provide explicatures, such efforts may fail, as the perception of the contextual elements that affect the interpretation may be biased towards one point of view only. For example, to justify the apparent unconnectedness between the utterance “You are not going to die because you are immortal” and the situation, we may resort to a bit of stage setting such as the following. John is worrying about a cut in his arm. The philosopher Plato arrives on the scene, reading aloud from one of his books and saying (with reference to John): “You are not going to die because you are immortal”. While Plato is reading, he has the intention of referring to John by the use of the pronominal “You”. However, he is so absorbed in his reading that he does not bother to notice that his utterance may be interpreted as being connected with the scene in front of him. From Plato’s point of view, all he means to say is that John is not going to die because he is immortal (in other words, he will never die). When we use the term ‘the situation of utterance’, we imply that all participants are aware of what is going on, of what is before their eyes, and that all their perceptions coincide to some extent. But it is natural for all such perceptions to be perspectivized to a certain degree. And this may very well sometimes cause the conversationalists to arrive at different interpretations.

There is, I must admit, an important strand of considerations arising out of the example that stimulated the discussion so far. It might be claimed that the example “You are not going to die [from this little wound] because you are immortal anyhow” compels us to see that the example “You are not going to die [from this little wound]” functions only insofar as the wounded addressee, just like all other living beings, is presupposed to be mortal. In contrast, given a hypothetical setting where the addressee is immortal, the explicature would not arise. Hence it must be possible to cancel the explicature in a situation where someone is informed about his immortality (as was the case in our little stage experiment with Plato as the main performer).

The assumption that presuppositions play a role in explicature derivation, as I already noted in my discussion of the M.V.M. example, is an important one, and I do not dispute it. The presuppositions in question, however, are actual pieces of knowledge and normally not cancellable (at most, they are revisable). A presupposition (of the non-linguistic kind) is either there or not. It is basically about a situation whose parameters are known to the interactants. If a presupposition leads you to perceive a certain meaning (on the basis of a certain sentence uttered by one of the interactants), you should not say that the meaning in question is defeasible just because there might be other presuppositions at play. In the case of explicatures, the context fixes the intention and it is no longer possible to deny that intention. In the case of (potential)

conversational implicatures, contextual knowledge may lead you to form chains of reasoning that in turn may lead you to abort or promote an implicature. In this case, the context does not assign you any crucial role in *fixing* an intention (by forcing you to think that a particular intention is the unique basis for interpreting the utterance). Surely, context, in the case of cancelled conversational implicature, may play a role in fixing an intention, but only in the sense of aborting, not in the sense of promoting it. Suppose you say “John and Mary went to bed”. You may want to imply that they ended up in the same bed. Contextual knowledge may lead you to form argumentative steps that point you in this direction, but none of these inferential steps *force* you to go in this direction. If you say that John and Mary went to bed, the intention that they shared a bed is promoted by contextual elements, yet these do not fix the intention; in other words, the context does not force you to consider that intention as being the only possible cognitive state in which the utterance could be proffered. In contrast, explicatures like the ones considered in the literature so far seem to be cases in which contextual elements do force us to think that the intention (attributed to the speaker proffering the utterance) is unique in the sense of ‘the only possible cognitive state on the part of the utterer’. I think that at least all this must be granted.

Another potential difficulty I want to consider here is the following. As we have seen, explicatures appear to be context-sensitive; for example, in the M.V.M. example, if one assumes that the trajectory in question is flat, rather than hilly (other things being equal), the additional meaning would not arise. Now, besides cancellability, context sensitivity may be said to be a property of conversational implicatures as well, especially those that arise as a result of the application of the Maxim of Relation (the so-called particularized implicatures).¹¹ Yet, this does not necessarily create a problem for my approach, as in any case we have to distinguish between conversational implicatures and processes of assigning reference (to a pronominal, for instance). Surely we would not want to say that reference assignment is a case of conversational implicature, on the sole grounds that it is a context-variable phenomenon (after all, “He is wise” may, depending on the context, mean that John is wise, or that Fred is wise, etc.). In other words, while being context-sensitive is a property of (a certain kind of) conversational implicatures, it is not their defining feature (recall also that generalized implicatures as a rule are not context-sensitive, although they may be cancelled in some contexts).

More generally, we need to distinguish between the defining features of a certain linguistic phenomenon and its related properties. Certainly we would not want to include context sensitivity among the hallmarks of conversational implicatures, even if we admit that context plays a role in particularized implicatures (just as it also plays a role in implicature cancellation). Consider also that scholars such as Stalnaker (1999:54) have claimed that even presuppositions are context-sensitive, which shows that a wider range of phenomena than that of conversational implicatures is sensitive to contextual variation.

To return to Grice’s circle: conversational implicatures are blind to whether the propositional form that gives rise to them has been obtained by recourse to pragmatics. Once an inference has obtained status as a truth-conditional aspect of meaning, the relevant implicature is no longer sensitive to its pragmatic history; by the same token, the implicature has been transformed into something that is not an implicature: viz. an explicature, in Carston’s (1999) terminology, and the problem of ‘Grice’s circle’ does not arise. Whereas implicatures are cancellable, explicatures are not: they arise out of what is said, that is to say out of non-cancellable aspects of meaning.

We can still define ‘core’ pragmatics as dealing with those inferential phenomena that take their input from truth-conditional content and yield as output conversational implicatures. The

¹¹ This objection was raised by a referee.

remaining problem, viz. how to deal with ‘non-core’ pragmatics, the ‘residue’ that has to do with completions and expansions, and generates full propositional forms, thus seemingly jeopardizing a unified definition, vanishes if we define pragmatics as comprising those inferential phenomena that are *potentially* non-truth-conditional—i.e. they are non-truth-conditional unless they are needed to construct full propositional forms under the constraint of the GSDP.

Admittedly, the discussion so far has touched on an intricate issue and I do not assume that my considerations cannot be gainsaid. One further problem is that implicatures, when cancelled, may result in incoherent discourse; in particular, implicatures that repair violations of the Maxim of Relation cannot be cancelled for this very reason. There is a way out of this difficulty, however. In the case of an incoherent discourse resulting from cancelling an implicature that was required in order to safeguard the Relation Maxim, the person responsible for the discourse will be said to have generated a text that lacks coherence or intelligibility. While the fragments of this discourse may have a truth-conditional content (and hence can be evaluated as true or false), putting the pieces that are there together in order to form argumentative relations would hardly be feasible; however, since the pieces are there, we can say that some complete, albeit unconnected thoughts have been expressed from the point of view of truth-conditional content. If we are content with this solution, we can say that relational implicatures indeed can be cancelled without necessarily resulting in the production of incomplete or contradictory utterances.

7. A closer look at explicatures

The M.V.M. example bears on the understanding of Grice’s circle, in that we can easily adapt the example to show that a conversational implicature takes its input from an explicature. With regard to the case discussed earlier, the question is how to interpret M.V.M.’s utterance: “The distance between my house and the harbour is a ten minutes’ walk”. We need to do a lot of inferential work in order to obtain the full propositional form. First, we need to know who the speaker is, in order to be able to identify the utterance as meaning that the distance referred to as a ten minutes’ walk is actually the distance between M.V.M.’s house and the harbour. Then we need a scalar implicature of the form: ten minutes > exactly ten minutes. We also must fill in the thematic roles projected by ‘walk’, assuming that the speaker or someone who is sufficiently similar to the speaker (i.e. M.V.M.) is the person who does the walking and that the walk is a walk from M.V.M.’s house to the harbour and not the other way round. However, even after all this expansion work, some further pragmatic enrichments could accrue to this utterance. Suppose M.V.M. had said:

- (13) The distance between my house and the harbour is ten minutes’ walk. And I got stuck in the traffic with my car!

Presumably, she might *conversationally* implicate that next time, she will walk down to the harbour. But then again, she might not. After all, if she has to walk up from the harbour to her house, that might take her eighteen minutes. She may not be prepared for this long a walk. But perhaps the context makes it clear that she is so upset by the chaotic traffic that she might undertake the walk from the harbour to her house anyway. We notice how this implicature is defeasible, in contrast to the explicature that it takes her ten minutes to walk down from her house to the harbour. After all, the latter is supported by our world knowledge, and – unless a miracle happens – it is not defeasible.

I propose we concentrate on this latter point: the defeasibility of the explicature. After all, if the context changes, we would not have any such particular explicature (but then we would replace it with a different one). Here, it is of importance not to confuse defeasibility with context-dependency.

A context provides some *objective* clues for the interpretation of an utterance (Récanati, 2002). If the context were different, the utterance would be interpreted in a different way. So, if I say, while standing in front of a chair, “This chair is quite old”, I cannot cancel the inference that this particular old chair is the one next to me. Surely the context may change; my utterance “This chair is quite old” might in one context pick out a brown chair and in another, a yellow one. But it will not usually do to let some contextual clues guide the interpretation of an utterance and then cancel the contextual implication on the grounds that the context *might* have been different. So, in the M.V.M. case, we cannot just let the contextual clues guide us to interpreting her utterance as: “The distance between M.V.M.’s house and the harbour is measurable in terms of a walk from M.V.M.’s house to the harbour”, and then cancel the explicature on the grounds that the context could have been different. In this particular context, the above interpretation is the only plausible one—no defeasibility applies. Any alternative interpretation, in fact, would be false in that context and amount to assuming that M.V.M. does not know that which, in fact, she knows very well—a rather unreasonable assumption. The explicature, in this case, enables us to make sense of an utterance which, otherwise, might very well appear to be false.

To conclude this discussion, I would like to compare the M.V.M. example with other standard examples; this will be the subject of the next section.

8. Cancelling explicatures: some standard cases

Consider again (8), repeated here as (14):

- (14) If the king of France died and France became a republic I would be happy but if France became a republic and the king of France died, I would be unhappy.

Now suppose we cancel the explicature. We then end up with a sentence which, in Carston’s view, is contradictory. However, joining forces with Levinson’s fictional opponent, the *Obstinate Theorist* (2000:187), we might claim that, after all, the contradictory sentence is rescued in virtue of a pragmatic readjustment due to the principle of charity. Levinson is quite right in noting that this tack would involve the premise that the sentence, taken by itself, contains a contradiction; rescuing the sentence would impose some extra inferential burden. It is not a good strategy to start with apparent incoherences and then move on to coherent meanings obtained through the principle of charity—for one thing, this strategy does not represent the way we process such apparently contradictory sentences.¹²

In addition, one might maintain that a sentence like (14) is not really contradictory. Contradiction, generally speaking and with the exception of sentences where an analytic constituent is negated, seems to be a logical property of statements (even though, in a loose sense, we sometimes talk of contradictory sentences). If we introduce time variables in the logical form of the conjoined sentences in (14), and instantiate these variables with specific adverbial or prepositional phrases (supplied with the aid of the Maxim of Manner), the sentence has the potential to form a perfectly coherent (or at least consistent or non-contradictory) utterance.¹³ Of course, there always is an implicature of consequence and this may very well render the statement more plausible. But this implicature is accompanied by one of a temporal kind. The two implicatures go

¹² This strategy is also apparently refuted by Récanati’s availability principle Récanati (2002).

¹³ It might be objected that, in this example, it is not so much the temporal dimension but the causal dimension that is at stake in the interpretation.

hand in hand. They can even be cancelled both, in which case we are left with a logical form that is neither inconsistent nor incoherent, either from a temporal or causal implicature point of view.

Some theorists may object to our move, by saying that a view of things which does not have to posit time variables in logical forms is more parsimonious. While we may grant the legitimacy of this position, even so, these theorists would have to show that sentences, not only utterances, can be in principle contradictory. However, as the case of (overt or implicit) indexicals shows, it is generally utterances, and not sentences, that can be properly said to be contradictory (with the exception noted earlier). Thus, when somebody utters (15), he or she seems *prima facie* to produce a contradiction:

(15) This is grey. This is not grey.

Outside of its context, and assuming a default anaphoric link between the first and the second occurrence of ‘this’, what is uttered in (15) seems to be contradictory. But it is simple to show that this sentence is neither contradictory nor non-contradictory. I once bought a stone at a mall. The stone had a special property: it was grey, but as you touched it, it changed its colour and became green. In these circumstances, a sentence like (15) could be a true utterance, which shows that, except possibly for the case of analytic sentences, matters touching on contradiction have to be settled in context.

Even so, one might argue that not all sentences involve context-sensitive elements and that, if a sentence is of the form *P and not P* (in other words, explicitly connecting a proposition and its negation), it must be contradictory. However, this is only the case under the tacit assumption that *P* is not a complex sentence, and that *P* is not interpretatively ambiguous. If *P* is a complex sentence and, furthermore, allows for ambiguous interpretations, then on one reading of *P*, we may have a contradiction, while on another reading of *P*, we may not (Jaszczolt, 1999). The result of uttering *P and not P* is thus not necessarily a contradiction, as the utterance is contradictory only on one set of readings.

Going back to our previous example (8), repeated below as (16), it might be claimed (in what I assume is Carston’s spirit) that in

(16) If the king of France died and France became a republic I would be happy but if France became a republic and the king of France died, I would be unhappy,

the sentence as such (not the utterance) is contradictory. Here, even though we cannot point to any explicit time variables (e.g. in the shape of time adverbs), the possibility of an interpretative ambiguity (in the sense of Jaszczolt, 1999) remains open. This is due to the fact that the temporal relations between the constituent sentences of each conjoined (complex) sentence (here, the sentences conjoined by ‘but’) have not been specified. A contradiction can arise only when we decide on a particular temporal configuration. The evidence of the configurations under which no contradiction arises (along with the examples in which overt context-sensitive elements are present) allows us to say that the sentence is not contradictory *per se*.¹⁴

¹⁴ Something similar might be said of Levinson’s (2000) ‘plates’ example. Matters such as reference must be settled in context, as is well-known—but the sentence, without the explicature, still has a logical form that can be intelligibly understood and may provide the basis for further incrementations. My intention here is not to prove Levinson or relevance theorists like Carston wrong. I have simply pointed out a different avenue of research, one that deprives Levinson’s and Carston’s ideas of their potential “explosiveness” (Levinson’s, 2000 term). I do this by stressing the fact that such considerations are the natural consequence of some classical assumptions by Frege, Strawson and Stalnaker. Neither were Grice’s views necessarily different from theirs.

It may be thought that my way of disposing of Carston's notion of pragmatic intrusion is too informal and that a more refined picture could be obtained by introducing implicit temporal adjuncts at the level of logical form, something which King and Stanley (in press) actually have done. They formalize a sentence such as "Driving home and drinking three beers is better than drinking three beers and driving home" as: *Gen-x, y [better than (x driving home at t and x drinking three beers at t + 1), (x drinking three beers at t and x driving home at t + 1)]*. Their analysis is based on the assumption that every clause must be tensed (either explicitly or implicitly) and that even non-finite clauses include an implicit tense phrase at the level of logical form. Yet, their analysis can be attacked on the grounds that their approach is not satisfactory from a syntactic point of view. When we claim that a sentence has an implicit argument (IA) or, at least, an implicit syntactic constituent, we usually prove that it is syntactically active (it can act as a controller of the constituent PRO, for example, as in "The ship was sunk IA to collect the insurance"; or it can act as an antecedent for an anaphoric element¹⁵). The lack of syntactic evidence for these implicit adjuncts has spawned endless (mostly sterile) discussions—so I assume that my analysis is less controversial, insofar as it makes no reference to implicit adjuncts but merely draws attention to a possible interpretative ambiguity (in the sense of Jaszczolt, 1999), in each of the two sentences making up the argument of the function 'better than' in King and Stanley's example above.

In light of this interpretative ambiguity, the above sentence, considered as a whole, is *not* semantically anomalous, as some proponents of pragmatic intrusion might claim (it is obligatorily interpreted as "x is better than x"). While it is true that this sentence has a basic, stripped-down and underdetermined semantics and thus is in need of contextualization, it still is not clear that it needs to incorporate pragmatic information to be able to function coherently; due to the workings of the (re-revised) GSDP it may function as a solid foundational basis for further appropriate meaning increments. Such increments would transform the sentence into an assertion proper, an act of saying something that conveys information about the world (McDowell, 1998).

My analysis does not make use of time variables; it assumes the existence of an interpretative ambiguity, springing from the lack of temporal specification for each of the clauses making up the complex sentence governed by the predicate 'better than'. Since in general, temporal specification is needed to produce a thought that will result in an understandable utterance, pragmatics 'intrudes' (Carston) and contributes the necessary tense phrases (what King and Stanley call 'temporal adjuncts'), without underwriting any commitment as to there having to be anything in the (deep or surface) structure of the sentence such as a syntactically active, but otherwise empty category. Here, I follow Bach (2002a, 2002b) in saying that the completion of what the speaker means involves the insertion of something (a pragmatic element, I would call it); but this something does not necessarily correspond to any syntactic constituent of the sentence.

The most problematic cases (and the ones most difficult to dispose of) are those based on conditionals. The examples provided in the literature seem to crucially depend on the semantics of conditionals for their understanding. Consider (17) (from Levinson, 2000):

(17) If you ate *some* of the cookies and no one else did, then there must still be some left.

The truth of the consequent depends on the truth of the antecedent.¹⁶ The problem here is that the antecedent of the conditional (the protasis) is a complex sentence and the consequent (the

¹⁵ See the arguments in favour of PRO, for example.

¹⁶ By *modus ponens*; the inferential step, formalized, is: [[If a, b; a]:. b].

apodosis) can be true only on condition that the two parts of the antecedent be true at the same time. However, the contribution of the first part of the antecedent is essential only if the ‘some’ that occurs there is interpreted contextually as ‘some but not all’; if this ‘some’ were interpreted as ‘all’, then the second part of the antecedent would be illogical, as there would be no connection of consequence (but in fact, a contradiction) between eating all of the cookies and there being some left. Levinson takes pragmatic intrusion *in the antecedent* to play a crucial role in making sense of this conditional sentence and of the connection of consequence (and in fact, of logical coherence) between the antecedent and the consequent. Now, obviously, if we want to be pedantic, the interpretation of ‘some’ in the consequent will also need to be contextualized to allow for the necessary pragmatic enrichment, just as it was the case for the ‘some’ in the antecedent. In other words, even if we go along with King and Stanley (in press) in their attempt to explain away this example by invoking Stalnaker’s semantics for conditionals and creating an ad hoc notion of ‘focus’ that will put to work a specific constraint on selection (actually a condition of similarity: only worlds in which some, but not all of the cookies are eaten, are picked up), we have to apply their notion of focus to the occurrence of ‘some’ in the consequent as well. Granting that their treatment is a step forward as far as treating the antecedent is concerned, the connection of consequence that is unequivocally expressed by this particular conditional, similarly, and in a crucial fashion, depends on the pragmatic interpretation of ‘some’ in the consequent.

There are examples which *apparently* cannot be treated in the way I have dealt with (17). Consider again the expansion problem (Bach’s example quoted above as (10), repeated below as (18) for convenience):

(18) You will not die.

(18) is more problematic than (8) and (9), as it *seems* to express a falsehood, if taken literally.¹⁷ Other examples, such as those involving genitive constructions, likewise seem to be intractable for a purely semantic analysis (see Récanati, 2002). Yet, all such examples do not point to genuine pragmatic intrusion: they merely show that the semantic layer of a sentence is just a minimal and sometimes even an incomplete proposition, one that leaves room for interpretative ambiguities. And unless such an ambiguity is posited, (18) is certainly not to be given the semantic interpretation (where t = time, x = human, and C = context) $[\forall t, x \text{ such that } x \text{ is the hearer in } C \text{ and will not die at } t]$. But how if we adopt another semantics for (18), for instance $[\exists t, \exists x, x \text{ such that } x \text{ is the hearer in } C \text{ and will not die at } t]$, and leave it to the contextual parameters to fill in the time variable and add other, possibly needed contextual adjuncts (having to do to with the circumstances of x ’s cut)? Against this pretended solution, T. Williamson (personal communication) has convincingly argued that this reading ($[\exists t, \exists x, \text{ such that } x \text{ is the hearer in } C \text{ and will not die at } t]$) is not plausible in the case of (18), because it is trivially true: the hearer of the words in (18) cannot possibly die at any existentially possible moment whatsoever (there is a time to be born and a time to die, as the Preacher admonishes us, and the moment is not arbitrary). Williamson suggests that what we want is a version of the universally quantified reading, but restricting the quantifier to relevant times, presumably something like this: $[\forall t, t \in d/t, x \text{ will not die at } t]$, where the references of x and of the domain of quantification d/t (roughly: ‘times for dying’) are determined contextually.

The most virulent attacks on classical Gricean pragmatics and on classical semantics come from Chierchia (2001) and Récanati (in press). Their claim is that default implicatures are

¹⁷ My own M.V.M. example is also more problematic than are (15) and (16), as it introduces a kind of speaker-oriented relativity that cannot be dealt with exclusively in terms of an underdetermined logical form.

computed locally at the sub-sentential level (in fact, are associated with syntactic constituents). The arguments are based on sentences such as the following:

(19) John believes he has three children

The theory proposed by Chierchia is intended to resolve the problem of how scalar implicatures are computed under embedding. Chierchia argues that the standard procedures for calculating scalar implicatures under embedding do not work. Presumably, he is of the opinion that there is no way to calculate scalar implicatures in contexts where beliefs are involved, unless one lets the implicatures arise locally. I take issue with this view. If I utter “John believes he has three children”, the belief I attribute to John is the same as the one I would have if our beliefs coincided. What I think is the case here is that, according to me, John assents to the sentence “I have three children” (or to its translation in his language). If I were to think he would assent to the sentence (or its translation) “I have four children”, I would have said “John believes he has four children” (in order to avoid providing a contribution that is weaker than my knowledge of the world allows). But I did not say that. So my hearer takes me to assume that John would not assent to “I have four children (or more)”, and he consequently takes me to have meant that John believes he has exactly three children.

9. Will Bach’s implicatures be able to avoid Grice’s circle?

Bach (1994a, 1994b, 2001a, 2001b) has introduced the notion of *implicature*. According to Bach, implicatures take their input from what is said (in the literal(ist) sense of ‘what is said’). And in his view, what is said is what has been *literally* voiced, as supplemented by the necessary contextual clues that enable the speaker to establish reference.

One of the merits of Bach’s implicature proposal is that it seems to be able to avoid the problems connected with Grice’s circle. On the one hand, Bach seems to believe that we can remain agnostic as to whether the speaker means what the proposition says. I have some doubts about this, as a certain amount of speaker meaning must be involved in order to allow what is said to be properly determined by access to referents of pronominals, proper nouns, or definite descriptions. Bach may try to overcome my objection by saying that, after all, reference can be assigned at a further stage—more precisely at the stage at which implicatures are calculated, or even thereafter. On the other hand, if we look more closely, we see that Bach needs to say something like this in order to escape Grice’s circle. After all, the assignment of reference is based on pragmatic principles (for example, we determine the referents of proper names by selecting the most salient referents associated with such names); similarly, implicatures, which operate on a pragmatic level of meaning, would have to take their input from pragmatics if reference assignment occurred prior to the creation of implicatures. But couldn’t one say that reference assignment happens parallel to implicatures? Such a move is not altogether implausible, but it is still not without its own problems—it involves our reasoning about certain schematic, to a certain extent even incomplete, propositions, while amending implausible or incomplete schematic interpretations by resorting to pragmatics. And even granting all this, we still have to see if, and how, Bach will be able to escape Grice’s circle.

Presumably, implicatures contribute to full propositions and such propositions are the basis of further pragmatic reasoning. Consider for example (20), uttered by my D.Phil. student in the course of a conversation with me, his supervisor:

(20) The government has changed the rules for academic competitions. But I will not die.

Presumably, the (if taken abstractly) false, or (in my view) underdetermined) proposition “I will not die” has to be expanded to “I will not die as a result of this rule change”. Now, there is the issue of whether the meaning of the sentence at the metaphorical level (“I will not fail to obtain an academic job”) should be part of this implicature, or whether metaphorical meanings should be treated on a par with conversational implicatures. If the latter is the case, then the implicature has to be worked out after the creation of the implicature, and Grice’s circle comes into effect. Now, Bach might deny this by saying that both the non-literal meaning and the inferred constituent (‘as a result of this rule’) are part of an implicature. Observe that the student, when uttering the first part of (20), may intend to conversationally implicate that he would like for me to write him a good reference. The second part of (20) seems actually to reinforce this implicature, as it brings out the relevance of the government’s policy to the student’s need to secure an (academic) job for himself. If we assume – as I do – that the complete utterance, and in particular its constituent parts, conversationally implicate something like “I would be grateful if you could write me a good reference”, then the implicature would indeed take its input both from the proposition as expressed and from the implicature(s) that serve(s) to flesh it out. So, in this respect, Bach is not immune to Grice’s circle either. What is needed is a solution similar to the one I have tentatively proposed above.

The idea that implicatures take their input from explicated meaning (as contained in the fully explicated proposition) is also adopted by Ariel (2002). Compare her example, reported here as (21):

(21) we are allowed to bring in,
 ... prior similar conduct. [... denotes a pause; Ariel, 2002:1005. Ed’s Note]

According to Ariel, after establishing reference (we = the prosecutors) and disambiguation (conduct = behaviour), we will still have to cull the necessary information from the context, and integrate this knowledge into the full propositional form, which will look more or less like the following: “The prosecutors are allowed **by law** to bring in evidence about prior behaviour **of the accused, similar to that in the current case**”. Next, Ariel adds, there is the conversational implicature (targeting the witnesses): “You will be testifying about prior similar conduct”. In other words, the procedure of inferential incrementation is ordered: what is said (in Gricean terms), including reference fixing and disambiguation \Rightarrow explicatures/implicatures \Rightarrow conversational implicatures. The ordering presupposes, of course, that implicatures and explicatures are kept neatly differentiated and that one cannot calculate them in the same inferential step. This is also what I think Ariel actually has in mind when she differentiates implicatures from explicatures, and says that conversational implicatures are communicated only implicitly (presumably, she means that they can be denied or retracted) and that they take more time to process (as compared to explicatures).

In another connection, Lepore and Cappelen (in press) discuss examples of the type “I am happy”. According to these authors, such an utterance, apart from expressing the semantic proposition that x is happy (where x is referentially established by the context), might, in addition, express the fact that x is no longer hungry, or that he is looking forward to meet his sister, or that his medication is working. Lepore and Cappelen surely would agree that what is said in a specific context is fixed in relation to this particular context; the question is whether the additional propositions express conversational implicatures or are simply explicatures.

Here, it is interesting to note that Lepore and Cappelen refer to what the speaker might be ‘saying’ in addition to what they call ‘the minimal proposition’. This ‘saying’ is derived pragmatically by letting the minimal proposition interact with contextual information. The resulting pragmatic augmentations look *prima facie* like implicatures, also because the propositions that express them use wording that is distinct from, or only remotely related to, that of the original, semantically expressed, minimal propositions.

Now, if these resulting propositions are implicatures, they should be easy to cancel. Furthermore, as all implicatures, they must be derived by reasoning. Most importantly, conversational implicatures do not just entail the proposition said, but must add something; the link between what is said and what in addition is conversationally implicated need not be direct (recall the classical Gricean example of the professor writing a letter of recommendation for a student, stating that the candidate writes good English, while omitting to comment on his academic qualifications). As to the meaning augmentations referred to by Lepore and Cappelen in the discussion of “I am happy”, none of them seem *prima facie* to entail the proposition said; moreover, if it is true that, depending on the context in which it is uttered, the proposition “I am happy” can mean “I am no longer hungry”, “I look forward to meeting my sister”, or “The medication is working”, such pragmatic enrichments are only indirectly related to the original proposition. But what if these meaning augmentations are mere elliptical expressions for “I am happy that I am no longer hungry”, “I am happy to meet my sister”, “I am happy that the medication is working”? Then, the pragmatically enriched propositions would indeed entail the minimal semantic proposition expressed as “*x* is happy that *P* in *C*” (where *P* works very much like a propositional variable whose content is fixed in context). “I look forward to meeting my sister” would then be a genuine conversational implicature which takes its input from what is said, that is to say from the sum of the minimal proposition and the explicature [I am happy that *P* & *P* = that my sister has arrived], and which is derived through further reasoning (under normal circumstances, everybody is happy to see one’s sister; thus the speaker must mean something else, presumably that he really looks forward to meeting his sister).

10. Concluding remarks

Even though the above considerations are not definitive, I believe that my modest proposal is a possible way out of the dilemma called ‘Grice’s circle’. Since the conclusions reached in the present article will inevitably trigger further reactions, I do not exclude the possibility that these ideas may, eventually, lead to a radical reconsideration of today’s standardly accepted picture of pragmatics. It is my hope that the suggestions offered here will prove to be a small step towards a better understanding of how pragmatics works.

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is it that others can always see those errors of ours which we are not able to detect?). All mistakes are, obviously, my own.

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