

# RETHINKING IMPLICATURES

Draft of January 14, 2020

Matheus Silva

## ABSTRACT

This paper advances the following criticisms against the received view of implicatures: (1) implicatures are relations of pragmatic implication and not attempts to convey particular speaker meanings; (2) conversational implicatures are non-cancellable; (3) generalised conversational implicatures and conventional implicatures are necessary to preserve the cooperative assumption by means of a conversational maxim of conveyability; (4) implicatures should be divided in utterance implicatures and assumption implicatures, not speaker implicatures and sentence implicatures; (5) trivial implicatures are genuine implicatures; (6) Grice's theory of conversation cannot explain most of his own examples of particularised conversational implicatures; (7) the apparent attempts of explicit cancellation of implicatures are apologies, not attempts to avoid misunderstandings.

**Keywords:** pragmatic implication; implicatures; speaker's meaning; cancellability; cancellation.

## 1. INTRODUCTION

This paper is not an exhaustive analysis of every minutia presented in the contemporary debate about implicatures. In fact, any endeavour of this kind would be fruitless, since the contemporary debate was heavily influenced by the received view of implicatures criticised in this paper. The received view of implicatures is marred by basic conceptual mistakes that were inherited from Grice's seminal work and piled up as the literature on the subject grew. We got to the point where the most basic features of implicatures are misunderstood. The only way out of this systemic misunderstanding is a revision of the received view of implicatures. This will require not only a stricter examination of Grice's work on implicatures as some digging into the origins of the concept.

## 2. IMPLICATURES ARE RELATIONS OF PRAGMATIC IMPLICATION

The phenomenon in which an utterance pragmatically implies a proposition was identified early on by different authors, but it was not until Grice that it received its first systematisation and became part of a theoretical framework with explanatory power. In order to prevent any potential confusion of pragmatic implication with logic implication, Grice nicknamed the first 'implicature' and attributed to it a central role in his theory of conversation. This theoretical role turned implicatures into one of the most important concepts in pragmatics. This theoretical success, however, came with a price. In the process of unifying a wide variety of linguistic phenomena associated with pragmatic implication, Grice inadvertently distorted the concept by confusing relations of pragmatic implication with attempts to convey particular speaker

meanings. What is worse, this erroneous idea have been the most influential concept in Grice's theory of conversation. This crucial mistake will become clear once we consider how the notion of pragmatic implication inherited by Grice was used before his work<sup>1</sup>.

One of the earlier proponents of the use of pragmatic implication was G. E. Moore, who argued that the use of an indicative sentence involves both the assertion of the content of a sentence and the implication that there is a compromise with the truth of its content<sup>2</sup>. Moore introduced the distinction in an attempt to explain the famous paradox that now receives his own name. Suppose one says: 'It is raining here, but I don't believe it is'. This is puzzling utterance seems paradoxical even though it is logically consistent. What is wrong? The paradoxical nature of this sentence, argued Moore, lies in the fact that the pragmatic implication that follows from the first conjunct is contradicted by what is asserted in the second conjunct.

O'Connor would later identify puzzles of this kind as pragmatic paradoxes. Sentences with the form '*P*, but I don't believe that *P*' may not be logically contradictory, but they are pragmatically self-refuting. Thus, the example is not so much a logical paradox as a pragmatic paradox<sup>3</sup>. Moore's paradox specifically occurs because some epistemic assumptions are implied by people's behaviour. Therefore, any attempt to deny them will be pragmatically self-refuting.

This way of thinking is relevant to understand Grice's own argumentation. In a way, Grice can be interpreted as arguing that since cooperative assumptions are implied by

language use, their apparent counter-examples in conversation are pragmatically self-refuting. The self-refuting aspect of these counter-examples disappears once we realise that their uncooperative nature occurs at the level of what is said (or appears to be said) but not at the level of what is implicated.

There are some significant differences though. Moore's paradox involves an artificial statement that would never occur in natural language. This strange statement has a self-refuting nature because part of what it says contradicts a trivial implicature about the speaker's own epistemic assumptions. In Grice's discussion, the pragmatic paradoxes are present in everyday conversations. The self-refuting aspects of those examples are explained by a contradiction between what the speaker says (or appears to say) and the trivial implication of cooperative expectation that follows from language use. Their paradoxical nature is then disarmed by the inference of additional implicatures that may be about the speaker's assumptions or about his attempt to communicate something in a speaker meaning act.

This notion of pragmatic implication was employed afterwards by different philosophers in the 50s and 60s. P. H. Nowell-Smith and J. O. Urmson stand out because they were both colleagues of Grice in Austin's discussion group in Oxford, the Play Group, and both anticipated ideas that are reminiscent of Grice's posterior work. Nowell-Smith observed that we have rules of contextual implication that follow from language use, such as the rule that by stating something the speaker contextually implies that he believes the assertion is true. He also

---

<sup>1</sup> The examples presented here are presented in more detail in Chapman's brilliant scholarly work, 'Paul Grice: Philosopher and Linguist' (cf. Chapman, 2005: 92–93).

<sup>2</sup> Moore (1942: 543).

<sup>3</sup> O'Connor (1948).

added that this rule could be violated depending on the characteristics of the context, for instance, in case the speaker is being ironic<sup>4</sup>. Nowell-Smith also suggested the implied rule that the speaker should have good reasons for his statement and that what he says 'may be assumed to be relevant to the interests of his audience'<sup>5</sup>. Urmson says something practically identical when he observed that when a speaker states something there is an implication that he claims the truth of what he says. Unless, of course, the situation suggests otherwise, for instance, if the speaker is just reporting in an incredulous manner what another person said<sup>6</sup>. Urmson also suggested that it is a presupposition of communication that people will have some ground for their statements<sup>7</sup>. These rules pragmatically implied by language use are what Grice would later identify as the maxims of quality and relevance.

Grice was obviously influenced by this notion of pragmatic implication. This becomes clear in his defence of a causal theory of perception in 1961. This theory analyses expressions such as 'I am seeing something red' as equivalent to 'Something red is causally responsible (in an appropriate manner) to make it look that here is something red in front of me'. One objection against this explanation is that usually if someone sees something red he would not say 'This looks red to me', but only 'This is red'. Grice's answer to this criticism is that we need to distinguish between what is literally said and what is pragmatically implied by the utterance. When one says 'This looks red' this

utterance pragmatically implies that what he is seeing it is not red, but he didn't literally say that what he is seeing it is not red<sup>8</sup>. The puzzle engendered by the causal theory of perception is explained by Grice in typical Moorish fashion by recognising the role of pragmatic implication.

In 1967, Grice would present his William James lectures at Harvard University and completely changed his approach. Not only he distinguished this notion of pragmatic implication from logical implication by renaming it 'implicature', but he also gave it an explanatory role in the dynamics of conversation. The examples of contextual implication presented by Nowell-Smith and Urmson are now dismissed. In Grice's view the only genuine implicatures are assumptions that are not trivially required to maintain the cooperative presumption. The rules that are contextually implied by normal use preserve the cooperative presumption trivially and should be ignored. This scepticism was motivated by his interest in implicatures that prevent the occurrence of pragmatic paradoxes in conversation. The emphasis on particularised conversational implicatures and their association with their role in speaker meanings would prove costly.

A speaker can intend to mean more by his utterance than what the words that he utters mean. What is conveyed beyond what an expression means is a speaker meaning. The speaker may be an implicit addition to the literal expression meaning (e.g., an ellipsis) or explicitly replaced it with a non-literal meaning (e.g., in figures of speech such as ironies or metaphors). Take metaphors for

---

<sup>4</sup> Nowell-Smith (1954: 81).

<sup>5</sup> Nowell-Smith (1954: 82).

<sup>6</sup> Urmson (1952: 483).

<sup>7</sup> Urmson (1952: 483).

<sup>8</sup> Grice (1961: 124).

instance. What the speaker says in a metaphor such as ‘You are the cream in my coffee’ would violate a maxim of quality if interpreted literally. In order to preserve the assumption that the speaker is being cooperative, the hearer will assume that the speaker is trying to say something else in a non-literal manner. The speaker is probably attributing to his audience some features that resembles the cream in the coffee.

The interesting thing is that the speaker is able to communicate a meaning that goes beyond the conventional meaning of the words by means of an implicature that can be inferred by the hearer. It is implicated by the speaker’s utterance, the cooperation presumption and related maxims that he is trying to say something else. Now, notice that we can describe this process as if the speaker was able to exploit these conversation dynamics in a systematic way to convey implicatures. Another similar way of describing the example is that the attempt to convey a speaker meaning is as an attempt to convey an implicature. This loose way of talking suggests that the speaker implicates something when he conveys a speaker meaning, and that an implicature is an intentionally conveyed meaning. But this is a confusion. But when we say that the speaker implicates something, the speaker is not really doing an implicating action at all, since the implicature is a pragmatic implication that can be inferred by a hearer given what the speaker says in a particular context and the cooperative assumption.

This confusion is still one of the most common misunderstandings about implicatures and it is evidenced in Grice’s testimonial example:

‘Dear Sir, Mr X’s command of English is excellent, and his attendance at tutorials has been regular. Yours, etc.’ The information given is grossly inadequate; the writer appears to be seriously in breach of the first maxim of Quantity, enjoining the utterer to give as much information as is appropriate. However, the receiver of the letter is able to deduce that the writer, as the candidate’s tutor, must know more than this about the candidate. There must be some reason why the writer is reluctant to offer the extra information that would be helpful. The most obvious reason is that the writer does not want explicitly to comment on Mr X’s philosophical ability, because it is not possible to do so without writing something socially unpleasant. The writer is therefore taken conversationally to implicate that Mr X is no good at philosophy; *the letter is cooperative not at the level of what is literally said, but at the level of what is implicated*. In examples such as this a maxim is deliberately and ostentatiously flouted in order to give rise to a conversational implicature; such examples involve exploitation<sup>9</sup>.

Grice’s remark that ‘the speaker is being informative not at the level of what is said, but on the level of what is implicated’, betrays his belief that the speaker is being informative in an indirect manner by consciously conveying a veiled message, and that this communicative act would be the implicature. But implicatures are pragmatic implications that can be reconstructed or inferred from what the speaker says (or pretend to say) and the conversational norms, not something that a speaker does by himself.

This passage also suggests a view of implicature that is also incompatible with Grice’s own theory of meaning and the plausible intuition that speakers can’t say something without meaning it, for saying something is meaning it. If a speaker is trying to be informative by implicating something, this is what he means and what he wants to say. However, this would suggest that the

---

<sup>9</sup> Grice (1975: 52).

speaker can mean two things at once, the literal meaning and the non-literal (implicated) meaning, which is implausible. At best, a speaker can pretend to say something (or making as if to say something) in order to say something else, but this non-literal meaning is what he wanted to communicate in the first place.

Another passage in which Grice appears to commit the same mistake is when he presents his rationale for refusing trivial implicatures:

On my account, it will not be true that when I say that *p*, I conversationally implicate that I believe that *p*; for to suppose that I believe that *p* (or rather think of myself as believing that *p*) is just to suppose that I am observing the first maxim of Quality on this occasion. I think that this consequence is intuitively acceptable; *it is not a natural use of language to describe one who has said that p as having, for example, "implied," "indicated," or "suggested" that he believes that p*; the natural thing to say is that he has expressed (or at least purported to express) the belief that *p*. He has of course committed himself, in a certain way, to its being the case that he believes that *p*, and while this commitment is not a case of saying that he believes that *p*, it is bound up, in a special way, with saying that *p*. The nature of the connection will, I hope, become apparent when I say something about the function of the indicative mood<sup>10</sup>.

Grice's criticism in this passage only make sense if we understand that the speaker 'implied' his belief in *p* as an action of consciously suggesting his belief in *p*. But when we say that 'the speaker implies his belief in *p* by asserting *p*' this only means that 'by asserting *p* and given the conversation norms, it follows that the speaker believes in *p*'.

Now, consider Grice's example in which an implicature is conveyed by a violation of the requirement to avoid obscurity:

Suppose that A and B are having a conversation in the presence of a third party, for example, a child, then A might be deliberately obscure, though not too obscure, in the hope that B would understand and the third party not. Furthermore, if A expects B to see that A is being deliberately obscure, it seems reasonable to suppose that A is implicating that the contents of his communication should not be imparted to the third party<sup>11</sup>.

In other words, A is implicating to B that the child shouldn't understand the contents of the conversation in the sense that he is suggesting or conveying a message in a veiled or indirect manner. But this would imply that A must do two things at once: say something to B in a more obscure manner and indirectly say that the child shouldn't understand what is being said. It would be more reasonable to suggest that A knew that B would infer from what is being said that he doesn't want to be explicit in front of the child.

The confusion between implicatures and speaker meaning acts is recurrent in the literature about the subject. Take for instance the following passage of Bach:

It is in uttering sentences that speakers implicate things. Yet for some reason, implicatures are often attributed to sentences themselves. Perhaps that's because implicatures are often illustrated with the help of numbered sentences, which are then confused with utterances, which are then treated as if they are agents rather *than as the actions that they are*. Anyway, Grice was careful to use the verb implicate, not imply, for what speakers do, and he coined the term implicature to use instead of implication for what speakers implicate<sup>12</sup>.

---

<sup>10</sup> Grice (1978: 114).

<sup>11</sup> Grice (1975: 55).

<sup>12</sup> Bach (2006b: 22).

Speakers say (or make as if they say) certain things. These are actions. What follows from what they say (or make as if they say) given the conversational maxims and context is not an action, but an implication process. The utterance of a speaker given the conversational norms and context implicates something in the same sense that a group of premises in a valid argumentative form implicates something: if the premises are true, one can be sure that the conclusion is true. It doesn't make sense to talk about the implication relation between premises and conclusion of a valid argumentative form as an action. For the same reason, it doesn't make sense to talk about the relation of pragmatic implication between the utterance of a cooperative speaker and the implicatum as an action.

Bach is also against the idea that anything 'that may be inferred from the fact that a speaker uttered a certain sentence is an implicature':

For example, there is the claim that if you assert something, you implicate that you believe it, you implicate that your audience should believe it, and you implicate that it is worthy of belief. This claim overlooks, among other things, the distinction between what a speaker means (has a communicative intention to convey), which is the content of an utterance (over and above its semantic content), and what the conditions are for making the utterance felicitously. Also, a speaker's saying a certain thing might reveal information about him, such as that he craves attention, that he hates his father and loves his mother, or that he has a certain ulterior motive, but *such bits of inferable information aren't implicated unless they're part of what he means*<sup>13</sup>.

But the only occasions where what the speaker means what is implicated is in speaker's meaning examples where the implicatum is the intended non-literal meaning or part of the intended meaning (ellipsis).

The idea of particularized conversational implicatures as something intentionally conveyed beyond conventional meaning have been the most influential concept in Grice's theory of conversation. Introductory texts about the subject tend to focus on particularised conversational implicatures because of this erroneous idea. What is worse, all major pragmatic theories will dispute different aspects of Grice's theory, including the explanation of conversation in terms of cooperative principle and maxims, generalized implicatures and conventional implicatures, but none of them will refuse the notion of particularized conversational implicatures as something intentionally conveyed beyond conventional meaning.

The idea that implicatures are speaker meaning acts also explains why there is still so much debate about phenomena that could be easily explained as examples of ellipsis. As we saw before, in an ellipsis there is an omission of words that the hearer is able to infer from the context. For instance, the assertion of 'John is late' is not a complete proposition since he must be late for something. The context may suggest that he is late for work. The hearer will then complete the missing portion of what the speaker meant, e.g., 'John is late for work'. Now, it has been suggested that these examples require a more complicated explanation in terms of 'implicature' or 'explicature', instead

---

<sup>13</sup> Bach (2006b: 26).

of being interpreted as an ellipsis whose content is conversationally implicated<sup>14</sup>. The theoretical details that accompany each concept are different<sup>15</sup>, but the underlying rationale in both cases is the same: since an implicature is something that the speaker means beyond the conventional meaning, then they can't be responsible for the examples of completion. But since implicatures are not non-literal speaker meanings, this point is moot.

The confusion between implicatures and speaker meaning is also one of the main reasons why some authors regard generalised conversational implicatures and conventional implicatures with scepticism. Grice himself stated that conventional implicatures should be better explained before 'any free use of it, for explanatory purposes'<sup>16</sup>. We can sum up the crux of the matter as follows: (1) particularised conversational implicatures examples are widely accepted as the paradigmatic examples of implicatures; (2) those examples ensure inferences about what a speaker means in a non-literal or non-explicit manner (figures of speech, ellipsis, etc.); (3) those speaker meaning acts are then confused with the implicature process itself, which is just a relation of pragmatic implication; (4) generalised conversational implicatures and conventional implicatures only ensure inferences about speakers' assumptions, but they don't attribute communicative intentions to speakers; (5) since generalised conversational implicatures and conventional implicatures examples are

transparently different from particularised ones, they are not perceived as implicatures.

What is interesting is that the only uncontroversial idea of Grice was his worst mistake, whereas his most plausible ideas, such as generalised and conventional implicatures, are controversial because of this influential mistake. Generalised conversational implicatures and conventional implicatures are challenged precisely because their character as implicatures is pronounced and can't be associated with speaker meaning acts. Be that as it may, the attempts to refute these solid notions faced numerous problems. Bach tried to challenge the coherence of the concept of conventional implicature by explaining the supposed examples of conventional implicatures as involving two types of entailment. For instance, the conjunction 'The player is tall, but agile' entails the conjunction 'The player is tall, and he is agile' (primary entailment), and 'If the player is tall, he is not agile' (secondary entailment). The supposed implicature in this case is a secondary entailment, which does not affect the truth conditions of the conjunction and its primary entailment<sup>17</sup>.

Bach intends to maintain this idea by observing that the alleged vehicles of conventional implicatures can occur in indirect descriptions of utterances. Thus, Mary could have said 'Shaq is enormous, but agile' and this could be described indirectly as 'Marv said that Shaq is enormous, but she is agile'. Bach then suggests that the supposed implicature associated with the use of 'but' is an integral element of what is literally said<sup>18</sup>.

---

<sup>14</sup> Bach (1994) is a proponent of implicatures, while Sperber & Wilson (1986) and Carston (2002) are exponents of explicatures.

<sup>15</sup> See Bach (2006a) for a detailed exposition on the subject.

<sup>16</sup> Grice (1978: 117).

<sup>17</sup> Bach (1999).

<sup>18</sup> Bach (1999: 339).

Bach's argumentation, however, is problematic. Consider the idea that the use of 'but' involves entailment relations. His explanation implies that the secondary entailment, the supposed implicature, is incompatible with the very conjunction asserted in this context. The speaker asserted the conjunction with the form '*A*, but *B*' when he accepts both *A* and *B*. In this case we have a primary entailment such as '*A* and *B*', and the secondary entailment such as 'if *A*, then not-*B*'. Since the speaker accepts *A*, the secondary entailment can only be true if not-*B* can also be true. However, the speaker already accepts the truth of *B*. Thus, the secondary entailment that should be the substitute of the alleged implicature must be false!

Bach could reformulate the explanation by representing the secondary entailment as a proposition 'Usually, tall players are not agile', which is compatible with a conjunction. However, this explanation still faces difficulties. Instead of postulating two entailed propositions, it is more plausible to interpret these cases as involving two assumptions that we can attribute to the speaker, namely, the trivial assumption that he accepts the two conjuncts, and the additional assumption that he would not expect that the two conjuncts were simultaneously true.

Moreover, the indirect descriptions of what is said by another speaker must be fine grained enough to involve distinctions between semantics and pragmatics, propositional content and grammatical form, assertion and implicature, etc. However, Bach's example does not involve these distinctions. By stating 'Marv said that Shaq is enormous, but he is agile', everything that the speaker does is to indirectly quote the

speech acts of the speaker, which does not involve not only what it was said, but also the manner by what was said was said, and this can be implicated (or assumed) by the speaker. To think that an indirect description offered in the example would involve only what is said would be circular reasoning.

One way to avoid the confusion between implicatures and speaker meaning acts is to emphasise Grice's distinction between 'implicature', the pragmatic implication, and 'implicatum', what is implicated<sup>19</sup>. The implicatum may include linguistic items as varied as speakers' assumptions, speakers' presuppositions, speakers' non-literal meanings and ellipses. These items were also sloppily designated by Grice as implicatures in some occasions, but they are not implicatures themselves, since they are not processes of pragmatic implications themselves. If this distinction is not acknowledged, one may be led to believe that implicature (the process), must be identified with one particular item that is implicated (the content).

Finally, the belief that some implicatures are embedded is easily explained if implicatures are understood as pragmatic implications. Thus, from the assertion of 'John believes that there are four students on the class' it follows that John doesn't believe that there are more than four students in the class simply because John's belief can be inferred from this indirect statement.

### 3. CONVERSATIONAL IMPLICATURES ARE NON-CANCELLABLE

The utterance in given a conversational context and the cooperative assumption will

---

<sup>19</sup> Grice (1975: 157).



implicate certain truths either about what the speaker says or assumes. Grice thought that this implication relation should receive a different moniker in order to differentiate it from logical implication. The reason being that unlike logical implication, this pragmatic implication could be cancelled. Hence the name ‘implicature’. According to Grice, only particularised or generalised conversational implicatures could be cancelled. They can be cancelled either explicitly or implicitly<sup>20</sup>. An implicature *P* is explicitly cancellable if it is admissible to add qualifications such as ‘but not *P*’ or ‘I didn’t mean *P*’. Let’s take the garage example. Suppose that after I said that there is a garage round the corner I decided to add ‘But you won’t find any petrol in it. In fact, the garage is closed’. This qualification would amount to an explicit cancellation of the implicature.

Jackson interpreted this implicature cancellation as a consequence of the defeasibility of inductive inferences, i.e., the fact that inductive inferences are non-demonstrative and non-monotonic. An inductive argument which may seem strong can become implausible if we add additional premises. For instance, the inference ‘Every morning until now the farmer fed the chicken. Therefore, the farmer will feed the chicken tomorrow’ is defeated by the addition of the premise ‘The farmer will make a feast with the chicken tomorrow’. In the same way,

implicatures could be interpreted as the conclusions of an inductive inference from premises which include assumptions about the conversational relevance of what is said by the speaker. To use an example presented by Jackson, by saying ‘John is hard working’, you can infer from this that I implicated that John is not very smart, but this inference could be defeated if I added ‘But with this I don’t want to suggest that he is not smart, since he is bright’<sup>21</sup>.

There is also an implicit cancellation if it is possible to find a situation in which the same assertion would not convey the same implicature. Suppose that *A* asks *B* whether a given student is smart and *B* answers this question by saying: ‘He is very dedicated’. The implicature in this context is that the student is not very bright. Now, suppose that the context was slightly different and *A* was asking *B* whether the student was hard working. In this context, the same statement would not convey the implicature that the student is not smart.

But while it is undeniable that there are differences between logical and pragmatic conversational implication (e.g., unlike pragmatic implication, logical implication is guaranteed by the logical form of their premise(s) and conclusion), they are similar in regard to their non-cancellable nature. We can interpret a conversational implicature as a pragmatic implication where the premises are

---

<sup>20</sup> Grice (1975: 57).

<sup>21</sup> Jackson (1987: 89).

the cooperative assumption, the conversational context, and the utterance, while the conclusion is the proposition that follows from these premises<sup>22</sup>. Conversational implicatures are non-cancellable since there are no possible circumstances where the premises are true and the conclusion is false<sup>23</sup>.

Conversational implicatures do *seem* cancellable but that is only conceivable if we ignore that the conversational context, which is one of the premises that generate the implicature. If we focus exclusively on the cooperative assumption and the utterance, it is easy to conceive a slightly different scenario where the implicatum does not follow. But that only happens if we disregard the original conversational context, which was one of the premises responsible for the pragmatic implication in the first place. In other words, the examples of cancellation of implicature don't hold water because one of the premises of the implicature is missing in the examples.

This problem is evident in the notion of implicit (or contextual) cancellation. Grice thinks that an implicature is implicitly cancelled when it is not conveyed by an assertion in a given context. This idea is strange, since it is more plausible to think that an implicature was not generated in a context in which was not conveyed, than to think that it was implicitly cancelled. In fact, to suggest that an implicature can be cancelled by the context is to ignore what makes the

implicature occur in the first place. This would be much the same as if someone argued that a *modus ponens* inference can be cancelled if we consider a different context where one of the premises is missing.

Despite appearances, putative examples of explicit cancellation are fundamentally similar to putative examples of implicit cancellation in the sense that they are also guilty of requiring a different conversational context that was one of the premises responsible for the implicature. It may seem that when an implicature is explicitly cancelled, the speaker adds a clause to block the implicature in the same context, but that's incorrect. The conversational context also includes the intended meanings of the speaker that generated the implicature. The same utterance added with a qualification that intends to block the implicature means that one of the original premises responsible for the implicature was false after all.

One could object that the context is not one of the premises, but this is implausible since without the conversational context, the implicature can't be inferred. Another foreseeable objection is that the context is one of the premises, but it is not enough to ensure the implicature. Maybe the speaker is crazy enough to utter things without their usual meaning and making the hearer's task of drawing the intended meaning impossible<sup>24</sup>. The natural answer to this objection is that one implicit premise of implicatures is that

---

<sup>22</sup> The apparent violation of the cooperative assumption is one of the main premises in the generation of implicatures involving ellipses and speaker's non-literal meaning. However, for clarity of exposition, we shall neglect this detail.

<sup>23</sup> Weiner (2006) presented two putative counter-examples—the Train Case and the Sex Pistols Case—in which a conversational implicature cannot be cancelled by the speaker. Blome-Tillmann (2008) and Hazlett (2012) agree with him. Borge (2009: 151) objects that both attempts are not a real attempt of implicature cancellation. Dahlman (2013) offers a slightly different analysis of one of the putative counter-examples, but also concludes that they don't work. Instead, she argued, they only show that a conversational implicature cannot be cancelled 'if the speaker, whose utterance gives rise to the implicature, does not intend to cancel it'. I won't discuss these examples since I will present a stronger case against cancellability: no conversational implicature can be cancellable due to the nature of implicatures themselves.

<sup>24</sup> Davis (1998: 74–75).

the speaker has linguistic competence and behaves in a normal way. When this premise is acknowledged, the implicature ensues.

In some examples the implicature appear cancellable because the conclusion is interpreted incorrectly. Take for instance this passage of Bach:

The difference [between implicatures and implication] is fundamental. If a sentence is true, what it implies must be true, whereas a speaker can utter a true sentence and implicate something false. For example, you could say that there's a gas station around the corner and falsely implicate that it's open and selling gas (maybe it's closed for the night or maybe there's a gasoline shortage). If there's a gas station around the corner, it doesn't follow that the gas station is open and selling gas. But it does follow that the gas station is not directly across the street<sup>25</sup>.

It can be argued that Bach didn't make a proper assessment of the implicatum involved in this case. The implicature has as its premises both the utterance that there's a gas station around the corner and the observance of conversation norms. The conclusion, i.e., the implicatum, *is that the speaker believes that the gas station around the corner it's open and selling gas*. If these premises are true, the conclusion must be true.

One could argue that the conclusion is the proposition that the gas station around the corner it's open and selling gas, and not the speaker's belief that the gas station around the corner it's open and selling gas. But if that were the case, no implicature would be generated by the speaker's utterance, since it doesn't follow from his utterance and the conversational norms that the gas station around the corner it's open and selling gas. If there is a pragmatic implication we call implicature, it is not cancellable due to its

own nature. To have both an implication and cancellability it's like having the cake and eating it.

It is also worth noting that the widespread and erroneous idea that particularised conversational implicatures are attempts to convey speaker meanings together with the belief that they can be explicitly cancelled leads to absurdity. If an implicature is only generated when it is intentionally conveyed by a speaker, we would have to admit that in explicit cancellation cases the speaker has both the intention to convey something by means of implicature and the intention of not conveying the implicature in the first place, which is absurd. If an implicature is an intentional speech act, they can't be cancellable.

One of the main reasons for the widespread acceptance of the cancellability of implicatures is the misguided notion that implicatures can work as a criterion to demarcate semantics from pragmatics. The rationale is as follows: it is undeniable that implication is a semantic process that is uncancellable in nature, but it is also self-evident that implicatures are cancellable. Ergo, implicatures must be pragmatic since they are implication process that are cancellable. But this reasoning is not needed to differentiate semantic from pragmatic phenomena either because there are plenty of other distinguishable features in the use of the language or because we can simply concede that the semantic-pragmatic distinction is blurry.

The idea that implicatures are non-cancellable means that they are *sui generis*. On one hand, the pragmatic inference should be understood as an inference to the most likely explanation, an abduction. But on the

---

<sup>25</sup> Bach (2006b: 22).

other hand, the inference is monotonic because it can't be defeated with additional information. This implies that a new category should be added to the prevalent taxonomies of inferences.

The non-cancellability of conversational implicatures has two far-reaching consequences. First, it shows that implicatures have been used as a criterion to distinguish pragmatics from semantics for the wrong reasons. The reasoning is that we can refuse a proposition and accept its related implicature, or refuse an implicature, but accept the proposition which is its vehicle, since the truth conditions of a proposition are a semantic phenomenon, but an implicature is a pragmatic phenomenon. However, if implicatures are non-cancellable and their supposed cancellability establish their pragmatic character, we will have to accept that they are a semantic phenomenon, which only reinforces how unreliable cancellability is as a demarcation criterion.

The crux of the matter is that the use of implicatures (cancellable or not) was never a proper criterion to distinguish semantics from pragmatics for the simple reason that an implicature can be part of what is literally said (e.g., in the ellipse cases), or a logical consequence of what is literally said. In some cases, what the speaker implicates is precisely the semantic content of the sentence he asserted or is entailed by it. For instance, suppose that someone would say 'Nobody ever made a long jump higher than 28 feet'.

His reply 'What do you mean? Bob Beamon made a long jump higher than 29 feet a long time ago in 1968'. Here you would be implicating that Bob Beamon made a long jump higher than 29 feet, which is also entailed by what is said<sup>26</sup>.

The second significant consequence is that the Gricean strategy of eliminating phenomena as mere cancellable implicatures becomes obsolete. One of the main reasons why cancellability is such a central feature in Grice's theory of implicatures is that it can be employed to eliminate what he considers needless theoretical assumptions. Grice employed this strategy when he defended a causal theory of perception<sup>27</sup> and later on when he argued that the connectives of classic logic such as ' $\supset$ ', ' $\vee$ ', '&' and their natural language counterparts 'if', 'or', 'and', only seem to have distinct truth conditions due to the presence of generalised conversational implicatures associated with the use of the last ones<sup>28</sup>. These implicatures, however, are cancellable, so they are pragmatic elements that don't have any semantic significance and shouldn't affect our understanding in logic matters.

This Gricean strategy of eliminating phenomena as mere cancellable implicatures has an importance in philosophy that cannot be overestimated. Blome-Tillmann observes that cancellability is important not only in philosophy of language and linguistics but also in areas<sup>29</sup> such as ethics<sup>30</sup>, epistemology<sup>31</sup>, and metaphysics<sup>32</sup>. It is

---

<sup>26</sup> Bach (2006b: 24).

<sup>27</sup> Grice (1961: 133–137).

<sup>28</sup> Grice (1967), Grice (1975).

<sup>29</sup> Blome-Tillmann (2008: 156).

<sup>30</sup> Finlay (2005: 10–17).

<sup>31</sup> Williamson (2000: 248).

<sup>32</sup> Burton-Roberts (1984: 184–88).

arguable that cancellability is also used as a resource in aesthetics<sup>33</sup> and philosophy of law<sup>34</sup>. But conversational implicatures are non-cancellable, so all this work was in vain.

#### 4. THE MAXIM OF CONVEYABILITY

It is important to observe that one can say the truth in a misleading way. Joshi argues that the maxim of quality should be modified having this possibility in mind, since the cooperative speaker not only aims to speak the truth, as it also tries to avoid leading the hearer to accept false conclusions<sup>35</sup>. But although this conversational requirement is important, it does not require a revision of the maxim of quality for an obvious reason: the speaker can only say something true in a misleading way if he also violates the maxims of quantity and relation. Besides, even if it were necessary to create a specific maxim to avoid misleading suggestions, it wouldn't be a version of maxim of quality, since it is a maxim about our beliefs on what we say.

It is reasonable to infer the observance of a maxim related to the conversational expectations about the expressions we use and whose aim is to ensure the correction of conversational inferences of the hearer. Take for instance the sentence 'If it rains, the match was cancelled'. Unless the context suggests otherwise, the assertion of such sentence will lead the hearer to infer (or assume) that the speaker does not know whether it actually rained or not. The reason for that is that the use of term 'if' in the antecedent usually indicates the absence of a compromise with an established truth value. If a conditional is asserted with the antecedent 'If it rains...',

the audience will infer that the speaker does not know that in fact rained. This is the most reasonable interpretation of his communicative intentions in the context of assertion given the assumption that the speaker is cooperative. After all, if the speaker had asserted the conditional only because he knew that it had rained he should have had made this assumption explicitly in the sentence in order to prevent the hearer from making an incorrect inference of his assumptions. Instead, he should have said something along the lines of 'Since it rained, the match was cancelled'. Therefore, the communication involves a mutual understanding expectation even on the level of the expressions we employ. From this, we can infer the following maxim from language use:

##### **Maxim of Conveyability**

Use expressions that properly convey your beliefs.

This maxim will be observed by a cooperative speaker and it is usually observed by speakers in conversation. What is more interesting is that generalised conversational implicatures and conventional implicatures are necessary to preserve this maxim. For instance, the assertion of 'She is poor, but honest' implicates that the speaker believes that there is a usual contrast between poverty and honesty. To use the word 'but' without accepting their correlated assumptions would be misleading and convey a false implicatum about the speaker's assumptions. Consequently, it would represent a violation of the maxim of conveyability. Thus, the

---

<sup>33</sup> Abell (2005: 55–66).

<sup>34</sup> Poggio (2011: 21–40).

<sup>35</sup> Joshi (1982: 190).

examples of generalised conversational implicatures and conventional implicatures can be both interpreted as an apparent violation of the cooperative assumption and, consequently, are required to preserve a conversational maxim.

According to Grice, the pragmatic paradoxical aspect involves only particularised implicatures, but a counterfactual situation in which the speaker didn't have the assumptions required by the vehicles of generalised and conventional implicatures would generate a pragmatic paradox and violate the maxim of conveyability. The only way to eliminate this paradoxical aspect in these hypothetical cases is to draw the implicatures.

One of the reasons why some authors still refuse the notion of conventional implicatures is that they don't fit in the role we would expect from implicatures in the semantic-pragmatic divide. Conversational implicatures are on the pragmatic side because they derive from conversational circumstances, but conventional implicatures are different since they are generated from the meanings of particular expressions<sup>36</sup>. A similar suspicion applies to generalised implicatures. Since they are language dependent, they appear to be governed by the choice of words and not conversational expectations. But while generalised and conventional implicatures are related to particular expressions, they are based on conversational dynamics involving the preservation of the maxim of conveyability, and this maxim is obviously pragmatic in character.

Let me give two examples to show how generalised and conventional implicatures may involve an apparent violation of the

maxim of conveyability. First, let's consider an example of conventional implicature. Take for instance the sentence 'She is poor, but honest'. If the speaker uttered this sentence but doesn't believe that poor people are usually dishonest, his assertion is paradoxical. This paradoxical aspect is prevented by the convention that precludes such use. Thus, in order to prevent the maxim of conveyability from being violated, we have to conclude that the implicatum does follow from the choice of words. In this case, we have to conclude that the speaker's belief in a contrast between the two conjuncts follows from the use of 'but', since he wouldn't have used an expression that doesn't convey his beliefs in a proper manner. Thus, the notion that conventional implicatures arise solely due to the conventional features of the words employed in an utterance is mistaken. Instead, they are determined by an explanation in terms of conversational rules.

Now consider the generalised conversational implicature of failure associated with the word *try*. According to Grice, if one says 'A tried to do x' he implicates that A failed in his attempt to do x<sup>37</sup>. The manner in which this implicature is inferred is as follows: after hearing this utterance, listeners will assume that A failed in his attempt to do x, since if he had done x, the speaker would have said that because he is trying to be as informative as required. But notice that there is a different way of inferring the implicature. The hearer can infer from the utterance that A tried to do x that A failed in his attempt to do x because otherwise the speaker would misleadingly convey assumptions he doesn't have, i.e., he would violate the maxim of conveyability. The

---

<sup>36</sup> Bach (1994: 327).

<sup>37</sup> Grice (1978: 115).

implicature is not determined by the word ‘try’, but by what is inferred about the speaker on the basis of the utterance and the conversational maxims.

Now, consider the following criticism advanced by Bach:

A typical claim is that in uttering “Some of the boys went to the party,” the speaker implicates that not all of the boys went to the party. But this assumes that the speaker means not one but two things, that some of the boys went to the party and that not all of them did. Really, though, the speaker means only one thing, that some but not all of the boys went to the party<sup>38</sup>.

The maxim of conveyability also allows us to explain the problem with this criticism. My reply to this is that the speaker means only one thing, namely, that some of the boys went to the party. Indeed, he implicates that not all of the boys went to the party, but only in the sense that this can be inferred from his utterance and the maxim of conveyability. Otherwise, we would confuse implicature with an attempt to convey a speaker meaning. If the speaker uttered that some of the boys went to the party knowing that all boys went to the party, he would be using the expression ‘some’ in a misleading manner. The only way to avoid this conclusion and preserve the cooperative expectation is by drawing the implicature that not all of the boys went to the party.

## 5. UTTERANCE IMPLICATURES AND ASSUMPTION IMPLICATURES

According to Grice, there are three types of implicatures, namely, conversational particularised implicatures, conversational

generalised implicatures and conventional implicatures. More specifically, Grice proposed that conversational implicatures are (1) part of what the utterance communicates; (2) dependent on particular features of the context; (3) necessary to preserve the cooperative assumption; (4) neither conventionally determined by the meaning of the sentence nor conveyed by the specific use of certain terms; and (5) cancellable. Grice’s characterisation of generalised conversational implicatures suggests that they satisfy the conditions expressed in (2) (at least to a certain degree), (3), and (5), but fail to satisfy (1) and (4); whereas conventional implicatures fail to satisfy (1)-(5), being especially determined by their conventional and non-cancellable character.

The examples of particularised conversational implicatures presented by Grice include two types of speaker meaning (figures of speech and ellipsis), and one single example of pragmatic implication about a speaker’s assumption, namely, that he lacks evidence that is relevant for the conversation at issue.

Perhaps with the exception of the testimonial example presented in (1a), all the remaining examples of the Group C presented in *Logic and Conversation* are speaker meanings. For instance, irony is explained as a flouting of the first maxim of Quality. If I say of someone who is known for having betrayed me in the past ‘X is a fine friend’, the hearer will infer that I’m not being sincere and that ‘the most obviously related proposition is the contradictory of the one he purports to be putting forward’<sup>39</sup>.

Next we have the examples of ellipsis presented on group A, ‘in which no maxim is

---

<sup>38</sup> Bach (2006b: 29).

<sup>39</sup> Grice (1975: 53).

violated, or at least in which it is not clear that any maxim is violated'. Consider the following example:

A is standing by an obviously immobilized car and is approached by B; the following exchange takes place:

A: I am out of petrol.

B: There is a garage round the corner. (Gloss: B would be infringing the maxim 'Be relevant' unless he thinks, or thinks it possible, that the garage is open, and has petrol to sell; so he implicates that the garage is, or at least may be open, etc.)<sup>40</sup>.

In the example part of what is said is not fully explicit, but it is implicated from the utterance in order to preserve the assumption that he is observing the maxim of relation. In this case, both a part of what is said and the conversational context implicate the other part of what is being said in an inexplicit manner. In other words, what is being said in a less explicit form is implicated by what is being said in an explicit form. What motivates ellipsis are considerations of brevity. The speaker uses some word as short for others because this is more economic.

Finally, we have Grice's solitary example of a particularised implicature that is neither a speaker meaning act nor an ellipsis. This is the only example introduced in the Group B:

A is planning with B an itinerary for a holiday in France. Both know that A wants to see his friend C, if to do so would not involve too great a prolongation of his journey:

(3) A: Where does C live?

B: Somewhere in the South of France.

(Gloss: There is no reason to suppose that B is opting out; his answer is, as he well knows, less informative than is required to meet A's needs. This infringement of the first maxim of Quantity can be explained only by the supposition that B is aware that to be more informative would be to say something that infringed the maxim of Quality, 'Don't say what you lack adequate evidence for', so B implicates that he does not know in which town C lives)<sup>41</sup>.

B does not say that he does not know in which town C lives. This is an assumption that can be inferred from what he said.

The examples of conventional and generalised implicatures presented in *Logic and Conversation* are comparatively fewer in numbers. The only example of conventional implicature in this lecture involves the use of the word 'therefore': 'If I say (smugly), He is an Englishman; he is, therefore, brave. I have certainly committed myself, by virtue of the meaning of my words, to its being the case that his being brave is a consequence of (follows from) his being an Englishman'<sup>42</sup>. The influential example of conventional implicature was presented earlier in 'A Causal Theory of Perception'. The utterance of 'She was poor but she was honest', implies that there is some contrast between poverty and honesty<sup>43</sup>. These examples are fairly simple: in each case an utterance implicates certain speaker's assumptions.

Finally, we have generalised implicatures. The examples encompass cases involving the use of the indefinite articles 'a' and 'an'. If the speaker uses expressions such as 'a X' or 'an X', he implicates in most circumstances that 'the X does not belong to or is not otherwise closely connected with some identifiable person'. For instance, if I say that

---

<sup>40</sup> Grice (1975: 51).

<sup>41</sup> Grice (1975: 51–52).

<sup>42</sup> Grice (1975: 44).

<sup>43</sup> Grice (1961: 127).



‘X is meeting a woman this evening’ this will usually implicate that the person he will meet was not his wife, mother, sister, etc. In some circumstances this implicature is not generated. If I say ‘I have been sitting in a car all morning’ this would not implicate that I’m sitting in someone’s else car.

Grice division of implicatures into conventional and conversational reflects what he thought were their important properties such as the presence or lack thereof of cancellability or whether they are necessary or not to preserve the cooperation assumption. But the importance of these features for their understanding is overrated. It was shown that conversational implicatures are non-cancellable, and that both generalised and conventional implicatures are similar to particularised ones in that they can also be required to preserve the cooperation assumption by means of a maxim of conveyability. Besides, generalised implicatures are very similar to conventional ones. The only difference between them is that while conventional implicatures are always conveyed by the use of certain expressions, generalised implicatures are usually conveyed by the use of certain expressions. Also notice that the example of particularised implicature introduced in the Group B is similar to conventional and generalised implicatures in that an utterance implicates that the speaker has certain assumptions. These implicatures have in common the fact that they encompass speaker’s assumptions that are not communicated, but can be inferred from his utterance. Let’s call them assumption implicatures. The remaining group includes implicatures whose implicatum is part of what is communicated, namely, speaker

meanings. We can call them utterance implicatures. So particularised conversational implicatures will include two types of utterance implicatures and one assumption implicature. Meanwhile, the examples of generalised conversational implicatures and conventional implicatures are all assumption implicatures.

This suggests that Grice’s division doesn’t cut the conversational dynamics into its joints. Instead of discussing three types of implicatures (particularised, generalised and conventional), we should be discussing two types (assumption implicatures and utterance implicatures). Of course, we would be also better off if the name ‘implicature’ was dropped in favour of ‘pragmatic implication’, but it’s too late to change now, since the term is already ingrained in the literature. This new taxonomy is an improvement over Grice’s in that it emphasises their distinctive features without all the hurdles introduced in the William James lectures.

This division between utterance implicatures and assumption implicatures also represents an improvement over the existent attempts to improve Grice’s taxonomy. For example, both Davis and Levinson claim that generalised implicature do not involve an inference about the speaker intentions<sup>44</sup>. Davis specifically makes a distinction between speaker implicature (which is dependent on recognising speaker intentions) and sentence implicature (which is not, but rather involves conventionality), but this terminology wrongly suggests that some implicatures are about the sentences themselves, when they are actually about the speaker’s assumptions.

This becomes clear when we distinguish between utterance implicatum and

---

<sup>44</sup> Davis (1998), Levinson (2000).

assumptions' implicatum, since all examples of conveyed implicatum are either about what is said or about what is assumed by the speaker. This clarifies and reinforces what is at stake in the examples of implicatures under discussion. The pertinent distinction is not between the conventional and intentional aspects of meaning, but between speaker's intentions and speaker's assumptions. They are both about the speaker.

## 6. TRIVIAL IMPLICATURES ARE GENUINE IMPLICATURES

If every assumption that is necessary to maintain the cooperative presumption is an implicatum, numerous trivial assumptions should be implicated. One example of trivial assumption is that the speaker believes in what he says. Grice, however, never accepted this conclusion and postulated that the only genuine implicatures are assumptions that are not trivially required to maintain the cooperative presumption<sup>45</sup>. This restriction, however, is *ad hoc*, since trivial implicatures follow conceptually from the notion of implicature.

One of the many reasons why Grice rejected trivial implicatures is that he confused implicatures with attempts to convey speaker meaning. When discussing his view regarding the Moore's paradox, he observed that:

On my account, it will not be true that when I say that *p*, I conversationally implicate that I believe that *p*; for to suppose that I believe that *p* (or rather think of myself as believing that *p*) is just to suppose that I am observing the first maxim of Quality on this occasion. I think that this consequence is intuitively acceptable; *it is not a*

*natural use of language to describe one who has said that *p* as having, for example, "implied," "indicated," or "suggested" that he believes that *p*; the natural thing to say is that he has expressed (or at least purported to express) the belief that *p*. He has of course committed himself, in a certain way, to its being the case that he believes that *p*, and while this commitment is not a case of saying that he believes that *p*, it is bound up, in a special way, with saying that *p*. The nature of the connection will, I hope, become apparent when I say something about the function of the indicative mood<sup>46</sup>.*

But this criticism only makes sense if we understand that the speaker 'implied' that he believes that *p* as an action. When we say that the speaker implies his belief in *p* by asserting *p*, the speaker is not really doing an implicating action at all. That Grice went on to identify the characterisation that the speaker implied his belief in *p* as tantamount to the speaker indicating or suggesting his belief *p* only makes this confusion even more pronounced. The implicature is a process that has a life of its own once the utterance was made in the sense the hearer can infer something from what the speaker says in a particular context, namely, his belief in *p* from his assertion of *p*.

It can be also argued that Grice rejected trivial implicatures because they don't fit in his taxonomy. Trivial implicatures are obviously non-cancellable, e.g., I can't assert that *p* and then add that I don't believe in *p* without contradicting myself in conversational terms. However, trivial implicatures are not easily interpreted as conventional because the implicatum doesn't follow from a particular choice of words in an utterance. In the eyes of Grice this idea would be a monstrosity.

---

<sup>45</sup> Grice (1978: 114).

<sup>46</sup> Grice (1978: 114).

Trivial implicatures may seem theoretically uninteresting, but they are fundamental to Grice's theory of conversation. The conversational maxims are implicatum themselves since they are contextually implied by the use of language. Grice was only able to infer that speakers followed maxims of quantity because they always try to be informative when they talk. In other words, a conversational maxim is nothing but a pattern that follows from speaker's behaviour. This means that Grice can only infer the existence of conversational maxims if trivial expected implicatures are accepted. The implicatures that result from the violation of maxims ensure that some maxims are not trivially implied by the use of language.

Trivial implicatures are also theoretically relevant due to independent reasons. The trivial implicature that the speaker believes in what he says was one of the first uses of the notion of contextual implication that influenced Grice so much, and it was one of the main distinctions in the attempt to solve Moore's paradox. Moreover, it seems that trivial implicatures should be relevant to Grice's discussion because it is the only way to provide a systematic taxonomy of all and every implicature associated with each operator of natural language. Grice recognised the existence of implicatures related to 'if, then', 'or' and 'but', but what about the trivial implicatures associated with 'and' and 'not'?

Probably one of the reasons for this preferential treatment was Grice's project to defend the application of classical logic in the face of its counter-intuitive aspects in natural language. If we treat conditionals used in ordinary language as having the same truth conditions of the material conditional of classical logic, they will be only false if the

antecedent of a conditional is true and the consequent is false. Otherwise, the conditionals are true. These truth conditions have counter-intuitive aspects when applied to ordinary language. For instance, a conditional such as 'if the moon is made of cheese,  $2 + 2 = 4$ ' is true simply because the antecedent is false or because the consequent is true.

Grice's explanation of this paradox was to maintain that 'if, then' particles convey a conversational generalised implicature of indirectness according to which the speaker has indirect reasons to accept the conditional he asserted. Thus, the conditional 'if the moon is made of cheese,  $2 + 2 = 4$ ' seemed false, argued Grice, because it was conversationally inappropriate, and it was conversationally inappropriate because it conveyed a false implicature of indirectness. After all, the speaker didn't have indirect evidence to assert the conditional. The fact that this was a conversational implicature (pragmatic phenomenon) which could be cancelled, argued Grice, meant that the ordinary intuition contrary to the paradoxes of the material conditional were unfounded. The use of 'or' would convey a similar implicature according to which the speaker doesn't which disjunct is true, and the use of 'but' would convey the already known implicature of contrast between both conjuncts.

But if the use of the terms 'if, then', 'or' and 'but' convey the generalised conversational implicatures and conventional implicatures, respectively, why don't 'and' and 'not' convey any implicatures? The implicature which could be attributed to the use of 'and' is that the speaker accepts the two conjuncts. But this explanation was conveniently left out by Grice, since it didn't help him in his task to explain away the

counter-intuitive aspects of the material conjunction. For instance, classical logic allow us to infer from ‘John gave a lecture and died’ to ‘John died and gave a lecture’. Intuitively, the conclusion is false, since the dead can’t give any lectures. But since the obvious candidate for implicature of a conjunction would not help Grice in explaining away these counter-intuitive aspects, they were left out.

The use of ‘not’ also does not convey an implicature. The reason is probably because the implicature would be trivial, i.e., the speaker does not accept the proposition that is being denied in the assertion.

These known facts suggest that Grice only postulate implicatures to emphasise the preservation of the cooperative assumption in paradoxical cases, or to explain away the counter-intuitive aspects of particles such as ‘if, then’ and ‘or’. But this approach seems capricious. Grice should offer a systematic taxonomy of all and every implicature associated with each natural language operator, but the only way to achieve this task would require the inclusion of trivial implicatures associated with ‘and’, ‘not’ and so on.

## 7. NON-COGNITIVE GOALS

One could argue that the examples of irony, metaphors and other non-literal expressions are not entirely cooperative or cognitive oriented, since they reveal linguistic goals that go beyond the mere exchange of

information. Of course, Grice was careful to recognise that there are other maxims in conversational that need to be recognised:

There are, of course, all sorts of other maxims (aesthetic, social, or moral in character), such as ‘Be polite’, that are also normally observed by participants in talk exchanges, and these may also generate nonconventional implicatures. The conversational maxims, however, and the conversational implicatures connected with them, are specially connected (I hope) with the particular purposes that talk (and so, talk exchange) is adapted to serve and is primarily employed to serve. I have stated my maxims as if this purpose were a maximally effective exchange of information; this specification is, of course, too narrow, and the scheme needs to be generalized to allow for such general purposes as influencing or directing the actions of others<sup>47</sup>.

So Grice was aware of the limitations of his framework<sup>48</sup>. It is worth noting, however, that his theory of conversation cannot accommodate most of his own examples of particularised conversational implicatures, since they can’t be generated without non-cognitive goals. This is important because these examples are usually presented in textbooks and entries on the subject as if they were representative of how insightful and powerful is Grice’s theory of conversation. To add insult to injury, particularised conversational implicatures are usually assumed as the paradigmatic examples of implicatures and they are the only examples that require non-cognitive goals.

Let’s take for instance the testimonial case, which is presented by Grice as a

---

<sup>47</sup> Grice (1975: 47).

<sup>48</sup> The literature about the non-cognitive uses of language is abundant. The importance of politeness in conversation became an area of research of its own in linguistics after the foundation work of Lakoff (1973) and later developments by Brown & Levinson (1978). There is also interesting work in sociology about the use of discreet communication (subtle, cryptic, or ambiguous) to prevent the message from becoming common knowledge. The work of Chwe (2011) and Simler & Hanson (2017: 61–68) are examples of this line of research. Another interesting phenomenon is the propensity to lie when the truth sounds bad, which is known as social desirability bias. This hypothesis was first proposed in psychology by Edwards (1953) in his study about personality traits. See also Fisher & Katz (2000).

paradigmatic example of flouting of the first maxim of Quantity:

‘Dear Sir, Mr X’s command of English is excellent, and his attendance at tutorials has been regular. Yours, etc.’ The information given is grossly inadequate; the writer appears to be seriously in breach of the first maxim of Quantity, enjoining the utterer to give as much information as is appropriate. However, the receiver of the letter is able to deduce that the writer, as the candidate’s tutor, must know more than this about the candidate. There must be some reason why the writer is reluctant to offer the extra information that would be helpful. The most obvious reason is that the writer does not want explicitly to comment on Mr X’s philosophical ability, because it is not possible to do so without writing something socially unpleasant. The writer is therefore taken conversationally to implicate that Mr X is no good at philosophy; the letter is cooperative not at the level of what is literally said, but at the level of what is implicated. In examples such as this a maxim is deliberately and ostentatiously flouted in order to give rise to a conversational implicature; such examples involve exploitation<sup>49</sup>.

This example can be interpreted in at least two ways. Grice’s own interpretation is that the speaker flouts the maxim of quantity on purpose in order to convey an implicature. In other words, what the speaker really means is the implicature. This interpretation, however, only makes sense if we assume that what the speaker uttered should be interpreted non-literally. This seems a farfetched assumption that we shouldn’t concede without further argumentation. The speaker has nothing to gain by saying mean-spirited things about Mr. X in a non-literal way.

Another way of looking at this example is that the speaker is indeed uncooperative, but that is because he has other goals besides efficiency in transference of information. The

speaker does not want to turn down the request to provide a recommendation letter, because he does not want to be rude with Mr. X, but at the same time he doesn’t want to say things in an insincere way or for which he lacks the evidence for, since he is observing the super-maxim of quality. Thus, he will provide a recommendation letter that contain truths that are ultimately unhelpful, since his conversational efficiency is compromised by his need to be polite. This interpretation seems more promising than Grice’s.

Of course, it could be argued that the implicature is still informative, and that the hearer would probably have guessed that the hearer would connect the dots and conclude that the student is not bright. However, the reason for the uncooperative assertion was not the conveyed implicature, but the fact that the speaker was trying to be polite. In fact, this politeness consideration is a premise that is required to draw the implicature and goes beyond conversational efficiency requirements. In this case, this example should be interpreted not as a figure of speech, but as a polite and uninteresting utterance. The hearer will draw an inference about the lack of Mr. X credentials from that.

The examples in which Grice believes the first maxim of Quality is flouted (irony, metaphor, meiosis, and hyperbole) all involve a detour from purely cognitive goals in conversation<sup>50</sup>. This is so self-evident that doesn’t require additional argumentation. Now, consider Grice’s example of an implicature conveyed by a violation of the maxim of relation:

At a genteel tea party, A says *Mrs. X is an old bag*. There is a moment of appalled silence, and then B says *The weather has been quite delightful*

---

<sup>49</sup> Grice (1975: 52).

<sup>50</sup> Grice (1975: 53).

*this summer, hasn't it?* B has blatantly refused to make what HE says relevant to A's preceding remark. He thereby implicates that A's remark should not be discussed and, perhaps more specifically, that A has committed a social gaffe<sup>51</sup>.

What happens in this case is that the speaker is violating the maxim of relation in order to correct a rudeness and be polite. It is implicated from his utterance that A has committed a social gaffe, but this inference can't be drawn from the conversational maxims alone. You need to include politeness considerations in the mix in order to draw the implicature.

Grice's examples in which various maxims falling under the super-maxim 'be perspicuous' are flouted can also be interpreted in different ways. Take his example in which there is a violation of the requirement to avoid obscurity:

Suppose that A and B are having a conversation in the presence of a third party, for example, a child, then A might be deliberately obscure, though not too obscure, in the hope that B would understand and the third party not. Furthermore, if A expects B to see that A is being deliberately obscure, it seems reasonable to suppose that A is implicating that the contents of his communication should not be imparted to the third party<sup>52</sup>.

It's safe to say that any prudential considerations A and B might have to prevent the child to follow the conversation are not dictated by cognitive concerns. Grice didn't notice the obvious: what is governing the conversation when the maxim is being flouted is not an additional cognitive concern.

Finally, we must consider Grice's example in which a implicature is conveyed because the speaker is not brief:

Compare the remarks:

- (a) Miss X sang 'Home sweet home.'
- (b) Miss X produced a series of sounds that corresponded closely with the score of 'Home sweet home'<sup>53</sup>.

The reviewer is being sarcastic because Miss X's performance is awful. He knows the hearer will connect the dots and infer the proper implicatum, but Grice's own maxims are not enough to allow this implicature. We need additional and different maxims that go beyond efficiency in conversation.

## 8. EXPLICIT 'CANCELLATION' OF IMPLICATURES ARE APOLOGIES

If conversational implicatures are non-cancellable pragmatic implications, how would we be able to explain the apparent examples of explicit cancellation? I will discuss two hypothesis. The first is that apparent examples of explicit cancellation are attempts to avoid misunderstandings by means of elucidation of assumptions. This proposal face insurmountable difficulties that will lead us to a second, and more promising, hypothesis, namely, that apparent examples of explicit cancellations are apologies. It goes without saying that any occurrences of the words 'cancellation' or 'cancelled' from here onwards should not be taken literally, since implicatures are non-cancellable. The point is to figure it out what is the actual process that is taking place in *apparent cases of explicit cancellation*.

Let's start with the first hypothesis in which the apparent examples of explicit cancellation are interpreted as cases in which

---

<sup>51</sup> Grice (1975: 54).

<sup>52</sup> Grice (1975: 55).

<sup>53</sup> Grice (1975: 55–56).

the speaker wants to avoid misunderstandings by elucidating his assumptions. Suppose that a teacher is questioned about whether a given student is a good philosopher, and he replies saying 'He is very dedicated'. What he literally said is that the student is very dedicated, but what was implicated by his assertion is that the student is not very smart. This implicature, however, would be 'cancelled' if the teacher added later: 'but I would not want to insinuate that the student is only hard working, since he is also very intelligent'. What occurred in this case is an attempt to avoid a misunderstanding. The teacher answers saying that the student is very dedicated probably because he would like to enumerate the qualities of the student, his work ethic in this case. However, he knows that if he only have said that this would give the wrong impression that the student is not talented. That's why he makes a point of emphasising that he didn't mean to suggest that he is only a hard working guy, but also happens to be very bright. The speaker does not want to give the impression that the hearer can infer something negative from what it was said.

This would suggest that no implicature is cancelled in the true sense of the term, since no implicature was conveyed from the beginning. The speaker only added a proviso to prevent the hearer from believing in a implicature that never existed in the first place. The explicit cancellation must not be understood as its negation, since in this case we would be denying what was never implicated. Instead, the explicit cancellation of an implicature is the negation of a implicatum that was never conveyed in the context.

In an attempt to avoid a misunderstanding, the speaker, even if he is sincere in his intentions, can fail to convince his audience that he didn't accept the potential implicatum. In this case the attempt to avoid a misunderstanding was unsuccessful. The failure may be caused by reasons that are independent of the sincerity of the speaker. For instance, one possibility is that the speaker fails to convince the speaker due to characteristics of that particular context or spurious motivations of the hearer. Inversely, the speaker may implicate P, denied that he had implicated P and still convince his hearer due to completely unrelated reasons (the speaker can be very charismatic, etc.). The cancellation in this qualified sense will be successful or not due to a myriad of reasons that vary according to the interlocutors involved.

It is undeniable though that in most cases any attempt to prevent the implicature will be seen as insincere given the conversational context and the choice of words made by the speaker. This is particularly obvious in the allegedly cases of conventional implicatures. For instance, suppose I say 'She is poor, but honest', but then try to cancel the implicature adding 'of course, that does not mean that I believe that poor people in general tend to be dishonest, since there is no obvious connection'. This attempt to deny that there is a contrast after asserting the conjunction will be perceived as dishonest or unconvincing. There are no means to deny that there is a misunderstanding, for there is no misunderstanding. See the charge below<sup>54</sup>:

---

<sup>54</sup> <http://www.basicinstructions.net/basic-instructions/2015/11/19/how-to-backpedal.html>



Of course, in the example above the speaker is being openly rude and trying to taking back what he had just said, while in a case of cancellation of implicatures the speaker would try to suggest that he didn't say or assumed something. That being said, the attempt to cancel other implicatures would still come out as just as implausible. In fact, it

is such a needless complicated and risky move in a conversation that its very existence would require an explanation. That's why we need a different hypothesis. A better way to explain this strange phenomenon is that these apparent examples of explicit cancellation are apologies. The speaker pretends to deny his intended meaning (or assumptions) in an insincere manner in order to prevent social stigma and preserve face. The important thing about an apology in such cases is that they work as an expression of regretful acknowledgment of an offence. The potential cancellation cases then can be explained as an expression of good manners.

## 9. CONCLUDING REMARKS

The main criticisms of this paper is that particularised conversational implicatures are not intentional acts, conversational implicatures are non-cancellable, generalised and conventional implicatures are beyond reproach and trivial implicatures are genuine implicatures. If those theses are true, the contemporary landscape on the subject will have to move in a completely different direction.

## REFERENCES

- Abell, C. 2005. Pictorial Implicature. *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism*, 63(1), 55–66.
- Archer, A. 2016. Are Acts of Supererogation Always Praiseworthy? *Theoria*, 82(3), 238–255.
- Bach, K. 1994. Conversational implicature. *Mind & Language*, 9(2), 124–162.
- Bach, K. 1999. The Myth of Conventional Implicature, *Linguistics and Philosophy*, 22(4), 327–366.
- Bach, K. 2006a. Implicature vs. Explicature: What's the difference? *Granada workshop on "Explicit Communication,"* in honor of Robyn Carston, May 31-June 2.



- Bach, K. 2006b. The Top 10 Misconceptions about Implicature. In: Birner, B.; Ward, G. (Org.). *Drawing the Boundaries of Meaning: Neo-Gricean studies in pragmatics and semantics in honor of Laurence R. Horn*, Amsterdam / Philadelphia: John Benjamins Publishing Company.
- Blome-Tillmann, M. 2008. Conversational Implicature and the Cancellability Test. *Analysis*, 68(2), 156–60.
- Borge, S. (2009). Conversational implicatures and cancellability. *Acta Analytica*, 24, 149–154.
- Brown, P., Levinson, S. 1978. Politeness: universals in language usage. In Goody, E. (ed.), *Questions and Politeness: Strategies in Social Interaction*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. 56–324.
- Burton-Roberts, N. 1984. Modality and implicature. *Linguistics and Philosophy*, 7(2), 181–206.
- Carston, R. 2002. *Thoughts and Utterances*. Oxford: Blackwell.
- Chapman, S. 2005. *Paul Grice: philosopher and linguist*. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Chwe, M. 2001. *Rational Ritual: Culture, Coordination, and Common Knowledge*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.
- Cole, P., Morgan, J. (eds). 1975. *Syntax and Semantics 3: Speech Acts*. New York: Academic Press.
- Cole, P. (ed.). 1978. *Syntax and Semantics 9: Pragmatics*. New York: Academic Press.
- Dahlman, R. 2013. Conversational implicatures are still cancellable. *Acta Analytica*, 28(3): 321–327.
- Davis, W. 1998. *Implicature. Intention, Convention, and Principle in the Failure of Gricean Theory*. Cambridge University Press, Cambridge.
- Edwards, A. 1953. The relationship between the judged desirability of a trait and the probability that the trait will be endorsed. *Journal of Applied Psychology*, 37(2): 90–93.
- Finlay, S. 2005. Value and implicature. *Philosophers' Imprint*, 5(4), 1–20.
- Fisher, R., Katz, J. 2000. Social-Desirability Bias and the Validity of Self-Reported Values. *Psychology & Marketing*, 17(2): 105–120.
- Grice, P. 1961. The Causal Theory of Perception. *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society*, Supplementary Volume 35, 121–52.
- Grice, P. 1967. *Indicative conditionals*, in Paul Grice (1989): 58–85.
- Grice, P. 1975. *Logic and conversation*, in Peter Cole and J. L. Morgan (eds) (1975): 41–58.
- Grice, P. 1978. *Further notes on logic and conversation*, in Peter Cole (ed.) (1978): 113–27.
- Grice, P. 1989. *Studies in the Way of Words*. Harvard: Harvard University Press.
- Hazlett, A. 2012. Factive Presupposition and the Truth Condition on Knowledge. *Acta Analytica*, 27(4), 461–78.

- Horn, L. 1997. Presupposition and Implicature. *The Handbook of Contemporary Semantic Theory*. Shalom Lappin (ed). Blackwell Publishing.
- Jackson, F. 1987. *Conditionals*. Oxford: Basil Blackwell.
- Joshi, A. 1982. Mutual Beliefs in Question Answer Systems. In: Neilson Smith. (ed.).
- Lakoff, R. 1973. The logic of politeness; or minding your p's and q's'. In *Papers from the Ninth Regional Meeting of the Chicago Linguistic Society*. Chicago: Chicago Linguistic Society. 292–305.
- Levinson, S. 2000. *Presumptive Meanings. The Theory of Generalised Conversational Implicature*. MIT Press, Cambridge, Mass.
- Moore, G. 1942, A reply to my critics, in *The Philosophy of G. E. Moore*, edited by P. A. Schilpp. Evanston, IL: Northwestern University.
- Nowell-Smith, P. H. 1954. *Ethics*. Harmondsworth: Penguin.
- O'Connor, D. J. 1948. Pragmatic paradoxes, *Mind*, 57, 358–9.
- Poggi, F. 2011. Law and Conversational Implicatures. *International Journal for the Semiotics of Law*, 24(1), 21–40.
- Simler, K; Hanson, R. 2017. *The Elephant in the Brain: Hidden Motives in Everyday Life*. Oxford University Press. Kindle Edition.
- Smith, N. (ed.). 1982. *Mutual Knowledge*. London: Academic Press.
- Sperber, D., Wilson, D. 1986. *Relevance*. Oxford: Blackwell.
- Urmson, J. 1952. Parenthetical verbs. *Mind*, 66(244), 480–96.
- Weiner, M. 2006. Are All Conversational Implicatures Cancellable? *Analysis*, 66(2), 127–30.
- Williamson, T. 2000. *Knowledge and Its Limits*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.