

Moderate Pragmatic Invariantism and Contextual Implicature Cancellation

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Abstract

Moderate Pragmatic Invariantism (MPI) has been criticized in the literature for postulating implicatures that are not straightforwardly cancellable. Defenders of MPI have responded that the data are not as clear-cut as one might wish. This paper grants the defenders of MPI, for the sake of argument, that the implicatures in question are cancellable and then turns this admission against them. In particular, the paper offers Bank Case variants in which the conversational implicatures postulated by MPI are *contextually suspended*—and thus cancelled. Since our intuitions do not vary between the original Bank Case and these novel types of cases, the explanation offered by MPI must be mistaken. Our varying truth-value intuitions in the Bank Cases cannot be accounted for by means of conversational implicatures.

1 Moderate Pragmatic Invariantism

According to *Moderate Pragmatic Invariantism* (MPI), an utterance of the form of ‘ x knows p ’ semantically expresses (1) and pragmatically implicates (2):¹

(1) x can rule out every *epistemically relevant* alternative to p .

(2) x can rule out every *conversationally salient* alternative to p .

¹See, for instance, Patrick Rysiew’s (2001, 2007). Jessica Brown (2006: 424), another prominent defender of MPI formulates the view slightly differently—namely, in terms of degrees of epistemic strength.

MPI thus defined has been promised to provide us with one of the most simple and powerful explanations of a vexing philosophical problem: our seemingly conflicting intuitions in examples such as Keith DeRose’s (1992) *Bank Case* or Stewart Cohen’s (1999) *Airport Case*. But the view has also attracted criticism, for, as Cohen (1999: 60) has pointed out, the implicature postulated by the defenders of MPI cannot be cancelled in a straightforward way. The standard response to this challenge has been to argue that implicature cancellations can sometimes, as Jessica Brown (2006: 428) puts it, be ‘uncomfortable’, and especially so in cases in which we ‘tend to confuse what’s literally said by an utterance with what it pragmatically conveys.’ I shall grant the defender of MPI that the implicature in question is cancellable and aim to turn this very feature of conversational implicatures—their cancellability—against them.²

To get a closer grasp of MPI’s purported solution to the Bank Case problem let us consider the second, or ‘High Stakes’, version of the Bank Case here. Imagine Hannah and Sarah have the following conversation:

(3) *High Stakes*:

H: I’ve been at the bank two weeks ago on a Saturday, and it was open.

S: Banks sometimes do change their hours.

H: You’re right. I don’t know that the bank will be open on Saturday.

According to our intuitions (which are corroborated by a significant amount of empirical data (see, for instance, Grindrod et al. forthcoming)), Hannah speaks truly in her last utterance in (3). How does MPI aim to account for

²For further important criticism of MPI see (Blome-Tillmann 2013), and especially more recent work by Alexander Dinges (2018) and Dirk Kindermann (2016, forthcoming). While all of these theorists criticize the theoretical underpinnings of MPI, I shall expose a more direct and fundamental shortcoming of the view here.

this datum?³

As has been pointed out frequently in the literature (see, for instance, DeRose 1999, 11; 2002: 191; MacFarlane 2005), MPI as defined above must be extended to cover the data from (3), since (1) and (2) leave it unanswered why, according to MPI, it would be pragmatically appropriate to *deny* ‘knowledge’ in *High Stakes*. To this end, Patrick Rysiew (2001, 2007) and Jessica Brown (2006), two of the main defenders of MPI, have added to their view that an utterance of the form ‘*x* doesn’t know *p*’ pragmatically implicates the negation of (1). Thus, Hannah’s last utterance in (3) semantically expresses the falsehood (4) but conversationally implicates the truth (5):

- (4) Hannah cannot rule out every *epistemically relevant* alternative to the bank being open on Saturday.
- (5) Hannah cannot rule out every *conversationally salient* alternative to the bank being open on Saturday.

According to the defenders of MPI, our intuitions in (3) track the truth-value of the implicature (5) rather than the truth-value of what is semantically expressed or said—that is, (4).

The resulting view has been criticized for being *ad hoc*, but it is, in fact, rather plausible. Consider, for illustration, some recognized cases of implicature, where the bracketed sentence expresses the conversationally implicated content:

³According to MPI, the error-possibility that the bank has changed its hours is merely conversationally, but not epistemically relevant, and MPI is, as a consequence, committed to the view that Hannah’s knowledge denial in (3) semantically expresses a falsehood.

(6) A: Is Karl a good philosopher?

B: He's got a beautiful handwriting.

[Karl is not a good philosopher.]

(7) A: Are you going to the party tonight?

B: I don't like parties.

[B won't go to the party tonight.]

(8) H: I've been at the bank two weeks ago on a Saturday, and it was open.

S: Banks do change their hours.

H: You're right. I don't know that the bank will be open on Saturday.

[H can't rule out that the bank has changed its hours recently.]

The bracketed contents in (6)-(8) are, intuitively, conveyed by the relevant utterances or suggested in some other way, but they are not part of what is said. These intuitions are hard to deny. Moreover, it can easily be illustrated that all of these inferences are smoothly cancellable, and thus clearly non-semantic:

(6') He's got a beautiful handwriting; and he's a great philosopher, too.

(7') I don't like parties, but I'll go to this one.

(8') I don't know that the bank will be open on Saturday, but I can rule out that it has changed its hours recently.

Thus, Hannah's utterance in (3) very plausibly carries the implicature in (8), and it is very plausibly cancellable, too—just like the non-controversial implicatures in (6) and (7). On the face of it, MPI's explanation of High Stakes is

very promising indeed.⁴

2 Contextual Suspension of Implicatures

An important property of conversational implicatures arising from an utterance of a certain form of words is that they do not arise in every context in which that form of words is uttered (see Blome-Tillmann 2008; Grice 1975 [1989]). In particular, conversational implicatures that are otherwise present usually disappear in contexts in which the implicated content is already part of the common ground:

(6'') A: Is Karl a good philosopher?

B: No, he isn't. But he's got a beautiful handwriting.

(7'') A: Are you going to the party tonight?

B: No, I won't go. I don't like parties.

As (6'') and (7'') illustrate, if we explicitly assert the otherwise implicated content, and thereby add it to the common ground before the utterance in question is made, the original implicature is blocked or *suspended*. This phenomenon is not further surprising, for if the otherwise implicated content has just been asserted, and thus been added to the common ground, conveying it

⁴However, it is important to note here that the fact that the implicature in (8) is smoothly cancellable doesn't get the defender of MPI off the hook with respect to their claim that *positive* knowledge attributions ('I know that the bank will be open tomorrow') conversationally implicate that the speaker can rule out all conversationally salient alternatives (that the bank has changed its hours). As Cohen (1999: 60) has emphasized, this alleged implicature is not smoothly cancellable (# 'I know that the bank will be open tomorrow, but I can't rule out that the bank has changed its hours recently') and thus remains controversial. **Constructions of this kind are, after all, so-called *concessive knowledge attributions* or 'CKAs', the acceptability of which is a matter of serious dispute.**

again by means of an implicature would be redundant and unnecessary.⁵

Interestingly, the very phenomenon just described can also be observed with respect to (8):

(8'') H: I've been at the bank two weeks ago on a Saturday, and it was open.

S: Banks do change their hours.

H: You're right. I can't rule that out. I don't know that the bank will be open on Saturday.

Hannah's 'knowledge'-denial in (8'') intuitively doesn't convey that she cannot rule out that the bank has changed its hours. That is so because, in (8''), the proposition that Hannah cannot rule out that the bank has changed its hours recently is explicitly stated, and thus has been added to the common ground *before* Hannah utters her 'knowledge'-denial. Thus, (8'') relates to (8) just as (6'') relates to (6), and (7'') to (7). The implicature at issue behaves in exactly the same way as other examples of recognized implicature.⁶

Is this good news for the defenders of MPI? It is decisively bad news. The crucial point about (8'') is that Hannah's (allegedly false) knowledge denial *doesn't* carry the (true) implicature that Hannah cannot rule out that the bank has changed its hours. But if it doesn't carry that (true) implicature, then MPI's explanation of our truth-value intuitions isn't available with respect to (8''). Remember that, with respect to (8), our intuitions were meant to

⁵It would, in fact, violate Grice's (1975 [1989]) *Maxim of Manner*: 'be perspicuous'.

⁶It might be objected here that a subclass of conversational implicatures—namely, those that are entailed by what is said—are not cancellable, and thus also not contextually suspendable. This datum, however, cannot help the defenders of MPI, since the implicature postulated by MPI is, as illustrated by (8'), smoothly cancellable and therefore not semantic. The implicature is what I have elsewhere (Blome-Tillmann 2013) called a 'mere' conversational implicature.

track the truth-value of the implicature (true) rather than the truth-value of what is said (false). In (8'') there is no implicature that could take over this role, so our intuitions about the 'knowledge'-attribution in (8'') must track the truth-value of what is said. But what is said is, according to MPI, false.

To drive the point home let me spell out the original High Stakes case and amend it along the lines suggested in (8''). Here is *High Stakes** (adapted from (Stanley 2005: 3-4)):

*High Stakes**

Hannah and her wife Sarah are driving home on a Friday afternoon. They plan to stop at the bank on the way home to deposit their paycheques. Since they have an impending bill coming due, and very little in their account, it is very important that they deposit their paycheques by Saturday. Hannah notes that she was at the bank two weeks before on a Saturday morning, and it was open. But, as Sarah points out, banks do change their hours. Hannah says, 'I guess you're right. I can't rule out that they've changed their hours in the meantime. So I don't know that the bank will be open tomorrow.'

Intuitively, Hannah's 'knowledge'-denial in *High Stakes** doesn't convey the proposition that she cannot rule out that the bank has changed its hours. For if it did, then her 'knowledge'-denial should appear redundant or repetitive—it should implicate the very same proposition that has just been explicitly stated. But in uttering her 'knowledge'-denial Hannah doesn't communicate again essentially the same information as she did with her previous assertion.

Could Hannah's 'knowledge'-denial nevertheless carry the implicature at issue, even though it does not seem that way at first sight? There are cases in which a proposition is explicitly stated and then, in a follow-up speech act, immediately implicated. Here are two examples:

(9) You're very special to me. You're the cream in my coffee!

(10) I've been waiting for a very long time. In fact, I've been waiting for ages!

These speech acts have a clear air of redundancy.⁷ By asserting the second sentence in (9) the speaker figuratively conveys what she has already explicitly stated—that the addressee is very special to her. And by asserting the second sentence in (10) the speaker figuratively conveys what she has already explicitly stated—that she has been waiting for a very long time. Since Hannah's utterance in *High Stakes** isn't repetitive or redundant in the same manner as (9) and (10) are, I conclude that Hannah's 'knowledge'-denial in *High Stakes** doesn't conversationally implicate or convey in any other sense that Hannah cannot rule out that the bank has changed its hours. As a consequence, MPI's explanation of the bank case data fails.^{8, 9}

⁷Note also that they are all cases in which Grice's (1975 [1989]) *First Maxim of Quality* is violated, not his maxim of *Relation*.

⁸The reinforceability of conversational implicatures cannot help the defender of MPI either. In reinforcement cases speakers 'add explicitly what is anyway implicated with less sense of redundancy than would be the case if one repeated the coded content.' (Levinson 2000: 15; consider Sadock's (1978: 294) classical example of reinforcement: 'Maggie ate some of the cheddar... But she didn't eat all of it.') Now, cases of reinforcement are not redundant because the explicit assertion is made *after* the utterance carrying the implicature. The reinforcement then doesn't appear redundant because it serves to remove potential uncertainty or indeterminacy as to whether the speaker intended to commit to the implicated content (it *reinforces*). In the above cases of suspension, however, the explicit assertion is made *before* the utterance that would otherwise carry the implicature. It is thus already undeniable that the speaker intends to convey the relevant content, and there is, accordingly, no need for the implicature. As a consequence, the lack of redundancy in cases of suspension cannot be explained in terms of the elimination of potential uncertainty about the speaker's communicative commitments.

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