H.P. Grice and the Great Pragmatics Predicament

Fenner Tanswell

H. P. Grice is widely accredited with the discovery of implicature, that which is not literally said by a sentence but is nonetheless conveyed when used in a conversational context, creating a theory which has had a tremendous influence on the study of pragmatics. However, in this essay I shall be arguing that beyond the very intuitive notion that implicature exists, the system that Grice constructs to explain and predict it in *Logic and Conversation[1]* is incomplete in several devastating ways, which eventually leads to the need for its extensive refinement and additional elements to form a complete whole. It is often commented that Grice's system is too vague to commit him to anything, however, Grice does make several definite claims and it is my aim to show that these cannot properly or fully characterise how implicature work.

I shall now first discuss how the different elements of Grice's project are used to construct a theory explaining implicature and its use in language. Grice's system of implicature focuses particularly on what he labels conversational implicature, characterised chiefly by his Cooperative Principle and its four associated maxims, which is a "subclass of non-conventional implicature"[2]. The Co-operative Principle is the following rough guide Grice lays out: "Make your conversational contribution such as is required, at the stage at which it occurs, by the accepted purpose or direction of the talk exchange in which you are engaged"[3]. Grice believes that fundamental to our ability to create implicature in conversations is the fact that they are not a disjoint series of sentences, but mutually inter-related contributions to a collective effort. He argues that we can distinguish these cooperative linguistic transactions by the fact that participants have a common immediate aim to appropriately exchange the correct information, that contributions are dependent on other participants and responsive to their input and that both parties expect the conversation to continue in a suitable manner unless both parties are agreeable that it should terminate.

The assumption that the Cooperative Principle is being observed can then be combined with his more specific maxims to deduce what is being implicated in a sentence. These maxims are Quantity, Quality, Relation and Manner and are described thus:

Quantity: Use the correct level of informativeness when speaking, namely:
1) Make your contribution as informative as is required (for the current purposes of the exchange).
2) Do not make your contribution more informative than is required.[4]

Quality: Try to make your contribution one that is true, namely:
1) Do not say what you believe to be false.
2) Do not say that for which you lack adequate evidence.

Relation: Be relevant.

Manner: Be perspicuous, namely:
1) Avoid obscure expressions.
2) Avoid ambiguity.
3) Be brief (avoid unnecessary prolixity).
4) Be orderly.

---

1 Putnam, H. P., "Logic and Conversation" in A. P. Martinich (ed.) <u>The Philosophy of Language</u> pp. 171-181.
2 Ibid., pp. 173.
3   Ibid
4 This second part of the maxim of Quantity is not held to be as certain by Grice, who suspects that the same effect is assured by the maxim of Relation.

Another vital component of Grice's scheme is the ability of either participant to fail to fulfil a maxim. This can occur when a person violates a maxim quietly either intentionally to mislead or unwittingly; when a person makes it clear that they are opting out, such as in the case of secret-keeping; when a clash of maxims occurs forcing the person to violate one; or finally they may intentionally flout a maxim by blatantly failing to fulfil it.

Now Grice can define formally that a person A saying p has conversationally implicated q if and only if:

1) A can be presumed to be following the Cooperative Principle.
2) In order for p to be consistent with (1), it must further be supposed that A is aware that, or thinks that q.
3) A thinks that it is within the capacities of the listener to correctly deduce or intuitively grasp that (2) is required.

Furthermore, Grice employs what we shall refer to as the Calculability Condition, "the presence of conversational implicatures must be capable of being worked out; for even if it can be intuitively grasped, unless the intuition is replaceable by an argument, the implicature (if present at all) will not count as a conversational implicature; it will be a conventional implicature"[5].

Conversational implicature in its simplest terms then is just an acknowledgement that in conversation not everything needs explicit statement to be understood by both parties. A basic example of conversational implicature may be:

Anne: I'm thirsty.
Brian: There's some milk in the fridge.

Analysed just on what is explicit in Brian's utterance, it would be concluded that it is unrelated to Anne's. However, if it can be assumed for condition (1) that Brian is obeying the Cooperative Principle then we can see that in order for Brian's input to be consistent with it we must suppose that Brian is conversationally implicating something so (2) holds. By the maxim of Relation, we can suppose that Brian following the Cooperative Principle implies that his statement is relevant, therefore Anne can conclude that Brian means and is implicating that the milk in the fridge would quench her thirst, that it hasn't gone off, that she is allowed to drink it and all things which seem naturally implied by Brian's statement. These all seem obvious so clearly condition (3) holds, as Brian could reasonably expect Anne to work all of these implicatures out.

Grice also argues that conversational implicature can be generated by the flouting of a maxim of conversation. This occurs when it can still be assumed that the person you are talking to is obeying the Cooperative Principle but yet they blatantly flout one of the maxims, so for condition (1) to be consistent with what has been said it can be further assumed that their flouting of the maxim was being employed in order to conversationally implicate something. We shall briefly give examples of how this may be done for each maxim. The classic Gricean example of flouting the maxim of Quantity is that of the philosophy professor being asked to provide a reference for a bad student and writes "the student has excellent handwriting and regularly attended lectures", thereby providing insufficient information to satisfy the maxim of Quantity, thus implicating that there nothing better to say about the student without breaching the social convention of not writing negative references. An example of a breach of the maxim of Quality is sarcasm, where someone says something blatantly untrue with the implicatum that the opposite is in fact true, like "joining scientology is a really good idea" or "Britney Spears has produced some excellent music". An example of breaking the maxim of relation may be when the subject is changed suddenly, with the implicature that a taboo has been broached or that a person that was being talked about has just

---

5 Ibid., pp. 174.

entered the room. Breaking the maxim of Manner could be exemplified when adults are speaking in the presence of a child, if they speak in intentionally obscure language, then it may implicate that what they are saying is not intended for the child to understand.

We have thus laid out Grice's theory and seen how he believes that conversational implicature is generated. I shall now argue that despite the apparent plausibility of this system and the seemingly successful examples of its application, there are several key reasons that Grice's schema fails to hold generally. Firstly, the problem of differentiation shows examples of what is calculable as implicature according to Grice's schema but intuitively isn't. Secondly, the mutual knowledge assumption does not avoid this sufficiently. Thirdly, despite the crucial role Grice gives to the Calculability condition, there is no need for conversational implicature to obey it. Fourthly, the Cooperative Principle needs to be simply assumed to be being followed, but this assumption may plausibly fail. Lastly, the Cooperative Principle is an arbitrary way of distinguishing conversational implicature from similar phenomena which can be created without it, suggesting that it is not the reason for the generation of this type of implicatures.

The most widespread criticism of Grice's system is advanced by W. Davis, who argues that "for nearly every implicature correctly predicted by Gricean theory, others are falsely predicted"[6] and that conversely "implicatures exist that cannot be derived from conversational principles"[7]. Davis' criticism focuses mainly on the failure of the maxim of Quantity to be sufficient to explain implicatures which Grice's system would need the maxim to calculate. Consider, for example, Antti saying "Some papers at the Reading Party were good". By the maxim of Quantity, operating a Gricean calculation on this, it would be reasoned that if Antti can be assumed to be following the Cooperative Principle then he will be trying to be as informative as is appropriate for the current purposes of the conversation, so if it had been the case that all of the papers were good he would have said so, therefore we can take Antti to have implicated the denial of the stronger statement "All papers at the Reading Party were good". However, the problem of apparent plausibility applies here because although it appears that the reasoning is sound and that Grice's theory has adequately explained and predicted the implicature, we can easily consider other cases where like reasoning is applied to like cases but yet the derived prediction of implicature would be false. For instance, take the following sentences:

All but one of the papers at the Reading Party were good.
Three of the papers at the Reading Party were good.
The papers by the German students at the Reading Party were good.
Half of the papers at the Reading Party were good.

All of these are stronger statements and more informative than "Some papers at the Reading Party were good", but the fact that Antti used this sentence does not imply the denial of any of these other sentences in the same way that it implicates the denial of "All papers at the Reading Party were good". However, the reasoning is the same so by Grice's system these implicatures should also hold. It would be spurious to try to argue against this from any of the other maxims: it can't be said that these alternatives would have been over-informative so the implicature doesn't hold for them, since they are just as appropriate to the conversation as what Antti did say. It equally can't be said to be breaking the maxim of Manner for not being brief, since none of these sentences are particularly lengthy or complex. It seems we can conclude that Grice's theory over-predicts implicatures so we can accuse Grice of post hoc reasoning in the cases where the implicature of a weaker statement to the negation of a stronger statement is invoked because Grice would use the cases in which this is successful to support his claim without discussion of the cases which fail to hold. It could be argued

---

6Davis, W., "Implicature: intention, convention, and principle in the failure of Gricean theory", pp. 33.
7   Ibid.

that attributing successful implicatures to the maxim of Quantity is therefore incorrect because if the maxim was in general operation it would lead to far more incorrect implicatures being predicted.

We could consider the maxim of Quality to suffer the same problems: Grice attributes sarcasm, irony, metaphor, understatements, exaggeration and hyperbole all to flouting the maxim of Quality and thereby using implicature to create these phenomena. However, having already seen the problems for the maxim of Quantity, it seems unlikely that the same reasoning will hold in all cases that Grice's theory would predict it for. Our original example of flouting the maxim of Quality was sarcasm in which something blatantly untrue was used to imply the opposite, but it is straightforward to find examples where this doesn't hold. For example, if I say to my sister "Your face is absolutely hideous", this is obviously not true but doesn't implicate the opposite, instead it suggests I am trying to annoy her. Grice might respond to this that he acknowledges there may be "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 non-conventional implicatures"[8]. Then it could be argued that when talking to my sister I was flouting the maxim of Politeness to annoy her. However, this response is inadequate since clearly what I am saying is also violating the maxim of Quality as already stated, so Grice's theory provides no clear reason to apply one maxim rather than the other when calculating the implicature. The only way that it is decided that in one case I was being sarcastic while in the other I was annoying my sister is because we intuitively decide which is which, not because Grice's system has any way of doing this. In fact, it seems that the Calculability Condition needs an extension such that it is not just required that there is a way of working out the implicature by argument, but also that there is only one applicable deduction in each case[9].

It has been replied to the general problems of differentiation that these can be overcome by contexts and mutual knowledge, which are included by Grice in his system. However, I will now argue that this is insufficient to make Grice's system a comprehensive theory of implicature. For example, the argument could run that in my earlier example of Antti implicating which papers were good at the reading party, it could be the case that if there was mutual knowledge between him and his listener that Antti hates Germans then he could have been implicating that it wasn't the case that the papers by the German students were good[10]. However, we could now ask how the listener is to conclude whether Antti was just implicating the negation of all papers being good, or whether he meant any one of the others: the mutual knowledge that Antti hates German students could give his listener another viable option for what Antti might be implicating but it does not in any way convince us that the listener will figure it out correctly. Mutual knowledge does seem to be essential for implicature to be created: without the mutual knowledge of particular facts, certain interpretations of what is being implicated by the speaker will seem less viable. However, it does not seem that this rescues the theory because it still does not avoid the need for post hoc reasoning where the correct implicatum is needed to be known before an adequate description of its calculation can be given, so it seems that Grice's project is incomplete on this point. Mutual knowledge does not directly imply that contextual implicatures will be deducible.

The next objection we have to offer against Grice's system is directed at the Calculability Condition. There is a curious gap in Grice's argument between speaker-meaning and listener-interpretation. It may be argued that conversational implicature is predominantly an act by the speaker: that although it is standard for it to be used in a Cooperative effort there is no strict need for it to be worked out. For example, someone smug may, in a conversation fully abiding by the Cooperative Principle, subtly implicate things that they are nearly certain the listener won't pick up

8 Grice, pp. 174.
9 There is the problem here that a sentence may be used for different things in different contexts ergo there shouldn't be a unique deduction clause. However, it does seem that for a sentence in one context there should be only one argument to apply to it in order to calculate the correct implicatum. Yet, literature and poetry often make use of these ambiguities in language, so maybe our new restriction would have to be in some way limited.
10 This response was raised by Antti himself at the reading party!

on just to feel self-satisfied and witty. It does not strike us that what would count as conversational implicature if the listener was more intelligent fails to be in this case because this isn't the case. The problem for Grice then resides in the fact that his calculation schema is directed at the listener, while instead, as H. H. Clark puts it "paradoxically, he expressed the maxims as exhortations to speakers"[11]. If the listener is incapable of grasping the implicature, and furthermore by Grice's condition replacing that intuition by a reasoned argument from the Cooperative Principle and the maxims, then Grice claims that it is not conversational implicature but conventional implicature. Yet it seems that what counts as conversational and conventional implicature should not be determined by the listener's ability to interpret, so Grice has been lead to an unappealing result. Also, there are many situations where listeners pick up on implicatures that the speaker may not have been initially aware of, such as accidental puns and innuendo, which would be inconsistent with Grice's scheme if required to be conversational implicature. Yet the only other person we could allow to be the judge of calculability is the speaker herself which cannot be acceptable or else thinking you were conversationally implicating something would be the same as actually implicating it. For example, a speaker who is distracted may leave out a vital part of the sentence in which he would have been using conversational implicature, thus believes he is implicating something while actually not doing so.

It could be argued then that the Calculability Condition in these problem cases should not be about either the listener's or speaker's capability to calculate, but rather that of some kind of objective impartial observer. However, it would be undesirable to introduce the need for an impartial observer, since it unclear as to the calculating power that this observer should be endowed with. For instance, if we take the example of a listener picking up on additional implicatures from before, but suppose that for the same sentence the listener does not pick up on this accidental innuendo: if the impartial observer is capable of working this out then there is conversational implicature that neither the speaker nor the listener are aware of, which seems flawed. The best suggestion along the same lines is the suggestion that it is not an actual observer so the condition could be phrased as "what a reasonable person could work out". This seems the best option we have considered, but is beyond the scope of Grice's own position and may give rise to further dangers in introducing a modal notion to characterise implicatures.

A further objection to Grice is that condition (1) is unashamedly phrased as a necessary presumption for any conversational implicature to occur. Yet it doesn't seem to be so unusual for at least some part of the Cooperative Principle to fail: for instance, someone may not be making their conversational contribution as is required in order to mislead or withhold information, or they may not accept the same direction or purpose as you do. This does not seem to be so extreme as to be a sceptical argument, since it actually strikes me as fairly commonplace that people are lying, holding back, talking at crossed purposes or past each other. To simply presume that this isn't occurring in order for the theory to work seems optimistic at best, naïve and unlikely to hold true. Also, it then seems that despite a failure in one of these ways, the cooperative elements required for conversational implicatures to hold may still occur, so it may be the case that Grice's definition of conversational implicature and how it is generated may need refining. How to do this within his system, however, is not entirely clear.

In fact, there may be more to this story. I shall now contend that the phenomena that Grice is trying to characterise within his system actually occur outside of its scope too, showing that Grice has over restricted his theory and that it thereby cannot be a full embodiment of the phenomena he is attempting to explain. More specifically, whichever way you interpret the Cooperative Principle it cuts out too many of the cases in which implicatures that intuitively belong in Grice's schema are present. I shall look at examples of the cross-examination of witnesses and interrogations. In both examples it is actually reasonable to expect uncooperativeness as described in the previous

---

11 Clark, H. H., "Using Language", pp. 142.

paragraph. In the case of cross-examination, consider a witness who is trying to avoid incriminating himself being examined by a lawyer:

Lawyer: What were you doing on the night of the 13th?
Witness: I was at a party until eight. I had work in the morning.

Although it is clear that the witness may be being vague deliberately to avoid incrimination, so has intentionally not explicitly stated that he went home for work in the morning, it also seems clear that there is implicature to the effect that the witness wants us to think that. However, the Cooperative Principle could be argued to not be in effect: the witness is definitely not accepting the same purpose as the lawyer as one wants to incriminate the other while the other is actively trying to avoid this happening. Furthermore, the witness clearly didn't make his contribution as is required by the lawyer's purpose for the conversation. It could be responded by Grice that in his theory conversational implicature is only a subclass of non-conventional implicature, and that this type of situation is in a separate subclass. However, this response doesn't seem to hold because here the method of generating implicature seems to be the same as in a situation Grice would describe as conversational implicature- the lack of Cooperative Principle has changed the context but not really affected the implicature itself, why then must it be moved to a different subclass of implicature? Grice's requirement for the Cooperative Principle to hold seems an arbitrary categorisation of implicature types.

A further response to our example could be that although the witness and the lawyer had differing motivations in the cross-examination, they both accepted some general direction of the talk like "the completion of the cross-examination in a just manner" which was furthermore the accepted purpose due to there being a court full of people as witness to this being completed. This exposes an ambiguity in the Cooperative Principle: who exactly is meant to be "accepting" the purpose of the talk? Is it the speaker, the listener the statement is aimed at, the extended crowd of all those listening or some combination of all of these? Although Grice would clearly prefer the latter option, our example has already demonstrated that this needn't hold since implicature was generated despite a lack of cooperation. To consider an even less clear example, I shall examine a torture scenario, where once again there is an attempt to extract information from a subject. This time there is no crowd to coerce the witness into an unwilling cooperation. In fact, even Grice's most general statement that "at each stage, some conversational moves would be excluded as conversationally unsuitable" doesn't seem to flow since a subject being tortured may come out with all kinds of gibberish at any stage, but yet this doesn't mean that the subject couldn't alternate between that and sentences which do conversationally implicate. The Cooperative Principle thus seems untenable as a condition for conversational implicature to hold to necessarily, especially if it to include all of the conversational phenomena which seem appropriate to include as the same type of implicature. Once again, the Cooperative Principle appears to be an arbitrary categorisation of implicature types.

In conclusion, we have shown that there are several crucial problems for the claims Grice makes. Firstly, the problem of differentiation shows that although there may be maxims at work, the ones that Grice makes explicit only capture a part of how these implicatures are created. Furthermore, there is a clear need for an explanation of how we do figure out implicatures correctly according to Grice's schema. Secondly, we showed that although theoretically mutual knowledge and context should play an important role in implicatures, the way they are invoked by Grice does not seem to capture their importance. Thirdly, the Calculability Condition is clearly one that cannot be sustained: not only is it unclear precisely who should be able to create the "reasoned argument" Grice requires, but it also seems perfectly plausible for the actual use of language to be of such complexity for this condition not to hold despite our ability to intuitively figure out implicatures. Finally, the Cooperative Principle is something that Grice strongly commits himself to, but yet does

not seem to be the crucial element for distinguishing non-conventional implicatures. So it can be concluded that although there are parts of Grice's theory which do capture aspects of how implicatures work, overall the theory is incomplete and several of the commitments that Grice thinks conversational implicatures do have to make do not hold up to closer scrutiny.

Bibliography

Clark, H. H., *Using Language*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996.

Davis, W., *Implicature: intention, convention, and principle in the failure of Gricean theory*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998.

Grice, H. P., 1975 "Logic and Conversation" in A. P. Martinich (ed.) *The Philosophy of Language*, 5th Edition, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008, pp. 171-181.