

HOW CONVERSATIONAL IMPLICATURE CAN ACCOUNT FOR ORDINARY HUMAN CONVERSATIONAL INTERACTION

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ABSTRACT

Successful communication hinges on the hearer's grasping more than what is said by the speaker. The hearer normally relies on the presumption that the speaker is speaking truthfully, informatively, relevantly and appropriately in manner to make an inference from the utterance. However, what a speaker implicates may be different from what s/he says and from what his/her words imply. This article looks at how the conversational implicature can account for ordinary human conversational interaction.

Keywords : Conversational Implicature, Conversational Interaction

INTRODUCTION

Most of our contemporary theory of language is based on Grice's contributions to the theory of meaning and communication. His three most influential contributions to this field concern the nature of communication itself, the distinction between speaker's meaning and linguistic meaning and the conversational implicature phenomenon. These discoveries are central to the communication theory as a whole. Grice claims that there is a distinctive, rational means by which the effect (of the communication) is achieved – by way of getting the audience or the hearer to recognize the speaker's intention to achieve it. This intention includes that the audience recognize this very intention by taking into account the fact that they are intended to recognize it. In addition, Grice's distinction between speaker's and linguistic meaning reflect the fact that what a speaker means in uttering a sentence usually diverges from what the sentence means. Thus, Grice's theory of meaning '*was an ingenious refinement of the crude idea that communication is a matter of intentionally affecting another person's psychological states*' (Gauker, 1998, p1). Therefore, his assumption of this phenomenon of what he refers as conversational implicature is more than a theory of non-literal meanings. It brings with it an orientation toward the concept of communication in general.

Grice's Cooperative Principle

Before we attempt to look at what is meant by Grice's conversational implicature more clearly, it is necessary to examine Grice's perception of a normal conversational behaviour. Grice observes that conversation normally exhibits some degree of coherence and continuity. This suggests that our conversational behaviour is influenced by a general principle which participants will be expected to observe. In other words, according to Grice, participants in a conversation are assumed to conform to a 'rule' which he terms as the Cooperative Principle. This principle says that :

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 (1975, p7).

his principle carries a variety of submaxims :

1. Quantity :
 - a. Make your contribution as informative as is required for the current purposes of the exchange.
 - b. Do not make your contribution more informative than is required.
2. Quality

Try to make your contribution one that is true.

 - a. Do not say what you believe is false.
 - b. Do not say that for which you lack adequate evidence.
3. Relation

Be relevant
4. Manner

Be perspicuous.

 - a. Avoid obscurity of expression.
 - b. Avoid ambiguity.
 - c. Be brief (avoid unnecessary prolixity)
 - d. Be orderly.

(in Schiffrin, 1994, p195)

Thus, in a conversation, participants are expected to share a knowledge of these rules or maxims, and observe them.

With the Cooperative Principle in the background, Grice defines conversational implicature as :

A man who, by saying that p has implicated that q, may be said to have conversationally implicated that q, provided that :

1. *he is presumed to be observing the conversational maxims, at least the Cooperative Principle;*
2. *the supposition that he is aware that, or thinks that, q is required in order to make his saying or making as if to say p (or doing so in those terms) consistent with this presumption; and*
3. *the speaker thinks (and would expect the hearer to think that the speaker thinks) that is within the competence of the hearer to work out, or grasp intuitively, that the supposition mentioned in (2) is required.*

(1989, p30-31)

In more simpler terms, this conversational implicature can be referred to as the assumptions required by a hearer in interpreting the speaker's message in accord with the supposition that the cooperative principle and the maxims are being observed on a given occasion. In other words, what a speaker implicates is different what he says and from what his words imply. The listener, on the other hand, relies on the presumption that the speaker is speaking truthfully, informatively, relevantly and appropriately in manner, to make an inference from the utterance. Thus, as Grice theorized earlier, this concept of communication supports the concept of the relation between thought and language, of which, '*thought content has a kind of priority over linguistic meaning*' (Gauker, 1994, p1). Hence, as Gauker further describes (on Grice's conversational implicature),

'where there is a conversational implicature that q, there exists in the speaker the thought that q, and the presence of this thought establishes the cooperativeness of what the speaker explicitly says, and the speaker thinks the hearer can recognize this' (1994, p2).

This conversational implicature really play an important role in our ordinary conversational interaction. Let us look at Grice's own example before looking at other original examples from our daily or ordinary conversation.

In this example, the following exchange takes place between A, who is standing by an immobilized car, and B who approaches him:

A : I am out of petrol.

B : There is a gas station around the corner.

Grice explains that '*B would be infringing the maxim "Be relevant" unless he thinks or thinks it possible, that the [gas station] is open, and has [gas] to sell; so he implicates that the [gas station] is, or at least may be open, etc.*' (1989, p32).

Here, we can make a conclusion that this communication is successful as *A* is being truthful about his situation, and *B* understands his intended meaning, thus being relevant in his answer to the situation. *A*, therefore, achieves his intention and also concludes that he can get petrol at the gas station by supposing that *B* is conforming to the Cooperative Principle. However, *A*'s intention can only be effected if *B* thinks that by saying he is out of petrol, *A* is implying that he needs some, and actually is asking where can he get the supply. *B* only gives a relevant answer when he knows for sure that there is a petrol station nearby and *A* would be able to get the petrol there.

Another example below shows a successful interaction based on what the second speaker implicates from what is being said by the first speaker :

A : I have a headache.

B : I have some aspirin.

In this situation, if *A* is observing the Cooperative Principle and being truthful about his condition, it definitely shows that he achieves the intended effect. *B*'s answer is definitely relevant resulting from his inference from what *A* has said. At this point it is important for *A* being cooperative and follow the quality maxim in terms of being truthful as what *B* answers largely depends on what he (*B*) thinks as relevant to the occasion. By offering the aspirin, *B* really thinks that *A* is speaking the truth.

Conversational Implicature in human conversational interaction

The following conversation may take place in a financial department meeting :

Chairman : Do you agree with the budget proposal?

Secretary : No.

Here, both speaker and hearer are observing the Cooperative Principle. The intention of the speaker is clear. As a result the hearer has no difficulty in understanding and

gives relevant response to that. By saying a simple 'No', he is also observing the maxims of quantity, quality and manner as well.

However, as claimed by other linguists and philosophers, the main concern of implicature is not from the observation of the maxims, but from the violation. The speaker sometimes intentionally flouts any of the maxims in order not to say directly what he intends to say. This illustrates a general phenomenon that a speaker can say one thing but manage to mean something else. On this, the hearer has an 'extra job' to work out what the speaker is trying to convey.

An example given by Grice illustrates this point :

A : How's the food?

B : It was edible.

Upon B's answer, A can infer that the food was not at its best. It is clear here that A is violating the maxim of quantity. It can be assumed that he does not want to tell the truth condition about the food, thus, gives a sort of an evasive answer. It is up to the hearer to interpret on what he means by it.

Similarly, an example from a discussion in a financial department :

Chairman : What do you think of the budget proposal?

Treasurer : It could be improvised.

Just as the above example, the treasurer is clearly flouting the maxim of quantity. He does not want to say that the budget is 'bad', thus, leaves it to the hearer(s) to infer what he means by '*It could be improvised.*'

As a human being, there are occasions that what the speaker is saying might not be literally clear. This might be due to his ego, or he simply does not want the hearer to know the real truth. Thus, as mentioned earlier, one or more of the maxims may be flouted. As a result, the hearer has to implicate what the speaker intends to convey. The following conversation in a book-shop attracts my attention in connecting Grice's conversational implicature to our normal conversation:

A : (upon checking on a price tag on a book he intends to buy) My stipend will not be in until next week.

B : You can borrow my money first, if you want.

Here, A is flouting the fourth maxim; the maxim of manner, by being obscure and ambiguous. This may be due to his ego, in admitting that he does not have the money at that moment, and would like to borrow some money from B. On the other hand, he might be truthful about getting the stipend next week, and will be able to buy the book then. Since he is being ambiguous, B is left to no choice except to implicate what he thinks A is implying. Hence, he offers to lend his money as he believes that A would like to borrow his money, but, does not want to say so directly, and therefore, is just beating around the bush! However, if B thinks that A is merely making a statement to inform about his financial situation, B may give another relevant answer like :

B : *You can buy it when you get the money, then.*

Thus, we can draw a conclusion here that in order to come to the right inference(s), the hearer must understand the illocutionary act of the utterance. He has to understand the different acts to enable him to infer what is implied by the speaker.

Another interesting example that always occurs in our ordinary conversation is an exchange between my 6-year old neighbour's son and his cousins. During their quarrel, he often says:

"My dad is a policeman."

It is amazing how small children use implicature in their conversation. Although he flouts the maxim of manner, by not being direct of what he means by saying that his father is a policeman, it never fails to frighten his other cousins, who implicate from his statement, that they might be caught or punished by the police-father if they do something terrible to him. So here even in an innocent exchange like this, as Grice has theorized, conversational implicature does play a role in understanding or interpreting the speaker's meaning.

There are many other instances where the maxims are being violated in a conversation. For example, sometimes when I go shopping with my husband, these exchanges will take place:

Exchange A

I : *That's a nice dress.*

Husband : *Yes.*

Exchange B

I : *That's a nice pair of shoes.*

Husband : *Do you want to buy them?*

Exchange C :

I : *That's a beautiful necklace.*

Husband : *Let's move on.*

In all the exchanges, I am not being direct, thus flouting the maxim of manner by being ambiguous. I do not directly say that I would like to buy the dress, shoes and necklace. Instead by saying how nice they look, I am hoping that my husband would understand my intention. It is obvious that in *Exchange A*, the conversation is not successful as my husband, the hearer, thinks that I am just commenting on the dress. So, assuming that I am observing the cooperative principle, thinking that I am being truthful, he agrees on it, thus, gives a relevant reply to what I have just said. Here, he does not understand the illocutionary act of my utterance. In *Exchange B*, my husband can implicate what I am trying to convey, thus, gives a reply that he thinks will be relevant to the comment that I have made about the shoes. Thus, he implicates that I would like to buy them as they look nice. In *Exchange C*, my husband can well implicate what I am saying. And here, both of us are violating the maxims. I am not being direct, while, he, implicating what I am saying, purposely not being relevant to the comment. By urging us to move on, it seems as if he is avoiding the topic, thus, is not being cooperative at all.

However, there are some loose threads in this theory. What Grice has not mentioned in his theory of the conversational implicature is the role of context in any exchange. A hearer can arrive at a conclusion of what he interprets as the speaker is saying largely depends on the context. Consider this utterance for example :

A : *This will take some time.*

For a hearer to understand *what* will take some time, he needs a context. Thus, *this* in the above utterance is different if it is being said in a garage than in a tailor shop. In the garage, *this* may refer to the process of repairing a car, while in a tailor shop, *this* is probably referring to the process of making a dress.

Let us consider the previous given exchange in a different context between two friends, where A is asking B to go out somewhere with him:

A : Let's go and watch a movie.

B : I have a headache.

A : I have some aspirin.

In this conversation, B is clearly flouting the quality maxim by not being truthful that he actually does not want to go. He gives the reason as having a headache with the intention that A would understand this as a refusal. However, A, obviously, cannot infer what is being said by B. thus, he responds as what he thinks is relevant to the occasion as he believes that B is conforming to the cooperative principle, that he is being truthful about his condition. Thus, this shows that context can influence the implicature between speakers in a conversation in terms of what they think as relevant response to the occasion.

A shared knowledge or background information also plays an important role in arriving at the correct conclusion or inference of an utterance. Consider the exchange below between an office colleagues :

A : En. Aziz asked me to retype this stupid letter. For the third time!

B : Well, you know him.

B's reaction to A's complain is based upon their shared knowledge about their boss. A can well implicate what B says about En. Aziz because they have a mutual knowledge of how he is like. For an outsider, we may assume that En. Aziz is a fussy or a thorough person regarding the fact that the same letter A has to type for the third time.

Intonation also plays a role in implicature. It may not be obvious from the context what the speaker is not saying. Thus, the hearer must work the meaning out themselves. For example, the tone in : "*You are clever*", may give a warning to the hearer that this is not a compliment as it ordinarily would mean. Similarly, the response in the following exchange :

A : I bought this dress at RM400.

B : Oh yeah!

can mean either B does not believe what A says, or he may want to sound ignorant, or to a certain extent, disgust with what A has claimed about the price of the dress.

Very common that indirect phrases of the speaker often fail to be implicated correctly by the hearer. Motley and Reader's (in Mulac, et al, 1995, p365) empirical assessment of communication breakdown in the context of unwanted escalation of sexual intimacy between men and women illustrates this. They showed that phrases with the intent of stopping male sexual advances such as :

I have a headache.

I am not sure we're ready for this.

I am having my period.

often fail to be implicated by men as a refusal. Clearly the quality and manner maxims are violated, thus the hearer, fail to recognize these utterances as 'no' and therefore, fail to give a relevant response to it.

Sometimes, maxims can be flouted in terms of vocabulary use, thus, hearer may implicate wrongly of the speaker's intention. If we look at this exchange between a student (who comes to class late) and the lecturer :

Lecturer : *Good afternoon.* (It is, in fact, still morning)

Student : *Sorry, I am late.*

Although the quality maxim is deliberately flouted, the student can implicate that the lecturer is actually being cynical, thus, realizes his wrong-doing, and, therefore, apologizes. He can make the correct inference because of the context that it is still morning, and it is impossible for the lecturer not to know that this is so.

However, sometimes, the communication intention fails when the hearer does not realize the intention of the speaker. The following exchange clearly shows this (again, an example of a conversation with another late comer):

Lecturer : *Good afternoon*

Student : *It is still morning, Puan.*

Here, the lecturer is, again, flouting the quality maxims, whereas the student is observing it. However, her intention of being cynical does not succeed because the student fails to realize the illocutionary act of her utterance.

Similarly, with the rampant cases of absenteeism, some lecturers, who are being fed-up with the situation, usually would say something like :

“You don’t have to come if you think you have known these subjects well!”

Some students fail to see the implication of what is being said, thus, continue to be absent from class. They fail to understand the illocutionary force behind what is being said.

Culture is also being neglected in this theory. Although, Grice mentions the convention implicature, culture does play an important role in a conversation. The following shows how culture exerts its influence in a conversation:

A : That’s a beautiful necklace.

B : Please take it.

We might consider the exchange below as unsuccessful as we think the hearer fails to understand the illocutionary act of what the speaker is saying. However, this is considered as an expected response of a compliment in Pakehan culture in Australia. Thus, by responding as B has done, it is considered as a norm of a conversation, thus, makes it a successful implicature.

Take our own culture, for example. If somebody says,

“That’s a nice shirt”,

Malaysians will most probably say,

“It’s an old one.” or “I bought it at Pasar Malam.”

Of course the answer is inappropriate but, our society is such that people do not normally react positively to compliments and nobody is in fact saying that it is not the right response.

Similarly, when we meet people for the first time, we would normally say:

“How do you do?”

If we are to follow or observe the maxims, by assuming that the speaker is being truthful in asking how are we, the appropriate answer would be the truth, that we are fine, or we have a headache, where in fact the question is only a greeting or just a

normal conversational behaviour. Thus, we need to know the culture first, before we can implicate that the speaker is not interested in our condition, that it is just a conversation smoother for people who meet for the first time.

Similarly, I once said to my students :

Lecturer : I might be off to Pulau Tioman for a holiday soon. Touch wood.

Students : Puan, why did you do say that (touch wood) and do that?

Thus, it shows that cultural knowledge has its influence on a hearer's understanding on what is being said. Lacking off the cultural knowledge, disables the students to implicate what the speaker is saying, thus, may fail to give an appropriate and relevant response.

Last but not least, another aspect that is often ignored is the use of metaphor or simile in a speech. Out of the context, it may be difficult for a hearer to understand what the speaker is trying to say. I once said metaphorically to a friend and the response was so funny as she did not understand what I was trying to say:

I : I could eat a horse!

Lily : Boleh ke makan kuda? (Can horses be eaten?)

Here, it is understood that the hearer does not understand that I am trying to say that I am famished, that metaphorically speaking, if I were given a horse, I could have eaten it up.

CONCLUSION

Having looked at all the examples, as discussed, it is recognized that successful communication hinges on the hearer's grasping more than what is said. Thus, we can assume that conversational implicature can exist in successful communication only if the hearers consider that the speakers are speaking in conformity to the cooperative principle. The speakers also intend the hearers to implicate what they say, and therefore, anticipate the inference or conclusions that they (the hearers) will draw. However, several other aspects play important roles in a conversational implicature such as the use of intonation, speakers' and hearer's background and culture.

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