THE CO-OPERATIVE PRINCIPLE AND IMPLICATURE

We look at a third type of infereneing, implicature, and at how speakers co-operate in a conversation to achieve a shared meaning for utterances.
EXERCISE 4.1

• What might the second speaker ‘mean’ in each of the following dialogues? Write a pragmatic paraphrase in each case, and think about how you inferred this meaning.

(a) Virginia: Do you like my new hat?
   Mary: It’s pink!
(b) Maggie: Coffee?
   James: It would keep me awake all night.
(c) Linda: Have you finished the student evaluation forms and the reading lists?
   Jean: I’ve done the reading lists.
(d) Phil: Are you going to Steve’s barbecue?
   Terry: Well, Steve’s got those dogs now.
(e) Annie: Was the dessert any good?
   Mike: Annie, cherry pie is cherry pie.
EXERCISE 4.1

(a) Virginia: Do you like my new hat?
   Mary: It’s pink!
   ‘I don’t like your hat.’

(b) Maggie: Coffee?
    James: It would keep me awake all night.
    ‘I won’t have some coffee.’

(c) Linda: Have you finished the student evaluation forms and the reading lists?
    Jean: I’ve done the reading lists.
    ‘I haven’t done the evaluation forms.’

(d) Phil: Are you going to Steve’s barbecue?
    Terry: Well, Steve’s got those dogs now.
    ‘I don’t think I’m going to Steve’s barbecue.’

(e) Annie: Was the dessert any good?
    Mike: Annie, cherry pie is cherry pie.
    ‘No, the dessert was pretty boring.’
Conversational implicatures

• There appear to be many ways of saying ‘No’. Yet no or not did not appear in any of the original responses. You may have also found that you drew a somewhat different inference for some of these utterances. For example, not everyone infers that the speaker in (a) does not like the hat or that the speaker in (e) was not very keen on the dessert. These kinds of inferences or CONVERSATIONAL IMPLICATURES, to use their technical term, seem to be less ‘straightforward’ than those based on entailment or presupposition.
EXERCISE 4.2

• Let’s look at Mary’s, James’s, Jean’s, Terry’s and Mike’s responses in Exercise 4.1—this time, with a different utterance from the first speaker. The content of the second speaker’s utterance remains the same, but does the meaning remain the same? Write a pragmatic paraphrase for the second speaker’s response in each dialogue.

(a) Virginia: Try the roast pork?
   Mary: It’s pink!

(b) Maggie: We went to see The Omen last night but it wasn’t very scary.
   James: It would keep me awake all night.

(c) Linda: You look very pleased with yourself.
   Jean: I’ve done the reading lists.

(d) Phil: His garden looks awful
   Terry: Well, Steve’s got those dogs now.

(e) Annie: I thought the pie would cheer you up.
   Mike: Annie, cherry pie is cherry pie.
EXERCISE 4.2

• Comment Some typical pragmatic paraphrases are:
  (a) ‘I’m not having the roast pork.’
  (b) ‘I think The Omen is scary.’
  (c) ‘I am pleased with myself, because I’ve done the reading lists.’
  (d) ‘Steve’s dogs have wrecked the garden.’
  (e) ‘It takes more than cherry pie to cheer me up.’

As you can see, the context provided by the previous utterance can lead to quite a different implicature in each case.
EXERCISE 4.3

• Now we return to the original dialogues, (a), (b), and (e) in Exercise 4.1. How do you think the first speaker would interpret the second speaker’s response if you had the following extra information?

• Pink is Mary’s favourite colour and Virginia knows this.
• James has to stay up all night to study for an exam and Maggie knows this.
• Mike loves cherry pie. As far as he’s concerned, no one can ruin a cherry pie, and Annie knows this.
EXERCISE 4.3

- Comment: Most people would now interpret the responses in (a), (b) and (e) to mean ‘yes’. As you can see, drawing the appropriate implicature can require a considerable amount of shared knowledge between the speaker and the hearer.
The co-operative principle Maxims

Just how we achieve this level of meaning was an issue tackled by the philosopher, Paul Grice. Grice proposed that all speakers, regardless of their cultural background, adhere to a basic principle governing conversation which he termed THE CO-OPERATIVE PRINCIPLE. That is, we assume that in a conversation the participants will co-operate with each other when making their contributions. Grice then broke this principle down into four basic MAXIMS which go towards making a speaker’s contribution to the conversation ‘cooperative’: Relevance, Quality, Quantity, and Clarity.
The co-operative principle Maxims

1 RELEVANCE: Make sure that whatever you say is relevant to the conversation at hand.

2 QUALITY: Do not say what you believe to be false. Do not say that for which you lack adequate evidence.

3 QUANTITY: Make your contribution sufficiently informative for the current purposes of the conversation. Do not make your contribution more informative than is necessary.

4 CLARITY: Do not make your contribution obscure, ambiguous or difficult to understand.
Violating/Flouting

• Grice pointed out that these maxims are not always observed, but he makes a distinction between ‘quietly’ VIOLATING a maxim and openly FLOUTING a maxim.

• Violations are ‘quiet’ in the sense that it is not obvious at the time of the utterance that the speaker has deliberately lied, supplied insufficient information, or been ambiguous, irrelevant or hard to understand.

• In Grice’s analysis, these violations might hamper communication but they do not lead to implicatures. What leads to implicatures is a situation where the speaker flouts a maxim. That is, it is obvious to the hearer at the time of the utterance that the speaker has deliberately and quite openly failed to observe one or more maxims. To see how Grice’s analysis might work in practice, try the next exercise.
Suppose you were considering X for a job that needed good writing skills. You have written to his English teacher asking her to assess his performance in this area. You receive the following reply:

‘X has regularly and punctually attended all my classes. All his assignments were handed in on time and very neatly presented. I greatly enjoyed having X in my class.’

(a) What maxim does the teacher seem to flout?
(b) What implicature would you draw about X’s writing skills?
(c) Why do you think the teacher phrased her response this way?
Comment

- Clash (a) The teacher’s response appears to flout the maxim of quantity. There is insufficient information about X’s writing skills, yet we would assume that as his English teacher, she would have this information, (b)

- Most people infer that X’s writing skills are not very good even though at no point is this explicitly stated. This is a classic example of ‘damning with faint praise’, (c) Grice observed that in conversations, we are sometimes faced with a CLASH between maxims.

- Here the teacher knows that she should give an informative answer to the question (quantity). She also knows that she should only say what is truthful (quality). The teacher does not want to state baldly that the student’s performance was not very good. (For example, she might think that X will see the reference letter.)
Comment

• At the same time she does not want to lie. So, she makes her response in such a way that the reader can infer this without her having to state it. According to Grice, the implicature is made possible by the fact that we normally assume that speakers do not really abandon the co-operative principle.

• Following Grice’s reasoning, the inference is worked out like this:
  1 Since I have good reason to believe that she has information about X’s writing skills, the speaker has deliberately failed to observe (flouted) the maxim ‘Be informative’.

  2 But I have no reason to believe that she has really opted out of the co-operative principle. So, she is only being apparently uninformative.
Comment

3 If I draw the inference that X hasn’t got very good writing skills, then the speaker is being co-operative. She knows that I am capable of working this out.

4 Therefore, she has implied (or ‘implicated’ to use Grice’s term) that the student’s writing skills are not very good.

As you can see, this sort of inferencing occurs in stages. In the first stage, the hearer recognizes the apparent irrelevancy, inadequacy, lack of clarity, etc. This in turn triggers the implicature.
EXERCISE 4.5

Speech therapist: So you like ice-cream. What are your favourite flavours?

Child with a pragmatic disorder: Hamburger…fish and chips (Adapted from Bishop, 1997, p. 183)

Which maxim has the child failed to observe? Would you consider this a case of flouting or violation of that maxim?
Comment

• The child, who has not realized that favourite flavours should be interpreted as ‘favourite flavours of ice-cream’ rather than ‘favourite flavours in general’, has failed to observe the maxim of relevance.

• He generally has difficulty taking the context into account when making his contribution in a conversation. Because his irrelevance is not deliberate, we would view this as a violation rather than a flouting of the maxim.

• Had I only labelled the speakers ‘A’ and ‘B’, would you have interpreted B’s utterance as a joke? Humour based on taking liberties with the cooperative principle is a frequent feature in comic writing. The Marx Brothers, for example, are famous for their anarchic approach to conversation.
Comment

• (The ship’s captain is looking for stowaways, one of whom is Groucho.)

Groucho: Yeah? What do they look like?

Captain: One goes around with a black mustache.

Groucho: Well, you couldn’t expect a mustache to go around by itself. Don’t you think a mustache ever gets lonely. Captain?

(Anobile, 1972, p. 57)
(Groucho has just become the new head of Huxley College.)

Professor: My dear Professor, I’m sure the students would appreciate a brief outline of your plans for the future.

Groucho: What?

Professor: I said the students would appreciate a brief outline of your plans for the future.

Groucho: You just said that. That’s the trouble around here. Talk, talk, talk! Oh sometimes I think I must go mad. Where will it all end?

(Anobile, 1972, p. 101)
SUMMARY

• Unlike presuppositions and entailments, implicatures are inferences that cannot be made from isolated utterances. They are dependent on the context of the utterance and shared knowledge between the speaker and the hearer.

• Grice has proposed a way of analysing implicatures based on the co-operative principle and its maxims of relevance, quality, quantity and clarity.

• In Grice’s analysis, the speaker’s flouting of a maxim combined with the