CONVERSATIONAL IMPLICATURE AND IMPLICITURE

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Abstract: *This thesis describes a variety of methods combining approaches to context modeling with conversational implicature and impliciture and having models of both speaker and listener also provides a way to reduce the search space by sampling likely subsets of possible utterances and meanings.*

Key words: *implicature, impliciture, conversation, speech act, utterance, illocutionary act, communication, speaker, listener.*

When a person says something that has multiple possible interpretations, which interpretation stands out as the most likely intended meaning often depends on context outside the utterance itself: salient objects in the environment, utterances the speaker could have chosen but didn't, common-sense knowledge, etc. Systematically predicting these contextual effects is a major unsolved problem in computational natural language understanding.

Such symmetry is a natural consequence of people's participation in conversation as speakers and listeners, and it has other cognitive benefits, such as the ability to leverage mechanisms for producing language to improve the ability to understand it, and vice versa. For example, a listener can understand speech masked by distortions if it matches the listener's prediction of the speaker's intent (Warren, 1970).

Grice proposed that conversation is regulated by a PRINCIPLE OF COOPERATION between speaker and hearer to achieve the purposes at stake in their conversation:

Make your conversational contribution such as is required, at the stage at which it occurs, by the accepted purpose or direction of the talk in which you are engaged.

To implement this principle, rational speakers choose what to say in light of the following MAXIMS:

Relation: Be relevant.

Quantity: Be only as informative as required for current conversational purposes.

Quality: Say only what you believe to be true and adequately supported.

Manner: Be perspicuous. That is, be brief and orderly and avoid obscurity and ambiguity.

Grice is saying that language users assume that the speakers are following these maxims to articulate a conversational strategy for cooperatively conveying information.

Thus, hearers will assume that speakers are following these maxims, and will interpret what speakers say, under this assumption.

This will allow hearers to infer things beyond what is actually said, deriving a certain conversational implicature.

A speaker can mean just what he says, or he can mean something more or something else entirely. Grice's (1975) theory of conversational implicature aims to explain how. A few of his examples illustrate nonliterality, e.g., "He was a little intoxicated," but most of them are cases of stating one thing by way of stating another, e.g., "There is a garage around the corner," used to tell someone where to get gas, and "Mr. X's command of English is excellent, and his attendance has been regular," used to state (indirectly) that Mr. X is not well-qualified. These are all examples in which what is meant is not determined by what is said. Grice proposed a Cooperative Principle[and several maxims which he named, in homage to Kant, Quantity, Quality, Relation, and Manner (Kant's Modality). As he formulates them, they enjoin one to speak truthfully, informatively, relevantly, perspicuously, and otherwise appropriately. His account of implicature explains how ostensible violations of them can still lead to communicative success.

These maxims or presumptions do not concern what to convey at a given stage of a conversation (unless information of a very specific sort is required, say in answer to a question, there will always be many good ways to contribute a conversation). Rather, they frame how as a listener you are to figure out what the speaker is trying to convey, given the sentence he is uttering and what he is saying in uttering it. Your job is to determine, given that, what he could have been trying to convey. Why did he say 'believe' rather than 'know', 'is' rather than 'seems', 'soon' rather than 'in an hour', 'warm' rather than 'hot', 'has the ability to' rather than 'can'?

Conventional implicature: Implications on the basis of the conventional meanings of the words occurring in a sentence.

1. John is English, but he is cowardly.
2. John is English, and he is cowardly.

3.   John's being cowardly is somehow surprising in light of his being English.

Truth-conditionally, (1-2) have the same meaning. But only (1) implies something along the lines of (3).

Although Grice presents them as guidelines for how to communicate successfully, I think they are better construed as presumptions made in the course of the strategic inference involved in communication (they should not be construed, as they often are, as sociological generalizations). The listener presumes that the speaker is being cooperative and is speaking truthfully, informatively, relevantly, perspicuously, and otherwise appropriately. If an utterance superficially appears not to be conform to this presumption, the listener looks for a way of taking the utterance so that it does conform. He does so partly on the supposition that he is intended to. The speaker takes advantage of this in choosing his words to make evident his communicative intention. Because of their potential clashes, these maxims or presumptions should not be viewed as comprising a decision procedure. Rather, they provide different dimensions of considerations that the speaker may reasonably be taken as intending the hearer to take into account in figuring out the speaker's communicative intention. Exploiting these presumptions, a speaker can say one thing and manage to mean something else, as with "Nature abhors a vacuum," or means something more, as with "Is there a doctor in the house?". The listener relies on these presumptions to make a contextually driven inference from what the speaker says to what he means.

Conversational implicature: Implications derived on the basis of conversational principles and assumptions, relying on more than the linguistic meaning of words in a sentence.

We will mainly focus on conversational implicatures in this section.

Implicatures are defeasible/cancelable.

Sometimes, the context (or the speaker himself) may provide a new information that effects the calculation of a conversational implicature, canceling it.

a.   John has a car.
b.   John has a car. Perhaps, even two.

a.   Mary got married and got pregnant
b.   Mary got married and got pregnant, but not in that order.

Characteristics of Conversational Implicature (cont.)

Implicatures are nondetachable.

Expressions with the same linguistic meaning should generate the same implicatures relative to a fixed context.

a. Can you lend me $15 for a few days?

b. Are you able to lend me $15 for a few days?

c. Please lend me $15 for a few days.

However, there are examples that seem to contradict the nondetachability of implicatures.

a. Can you pass the salt?

b. Are you able to pass the salt? Please pass the salt.

a. It is possible that a woman will be president some day.

b. It is not impossible that a woman will be president some day.

These examples show that although different linguistic forms can express the same literal content, they don't always result in the same implicatures. The exact form in which that content is expressed is often a significant factor in deriving a certain implicature.

Grice showed the impression that the distinction between what is said and what is implicated is exhaustive (he counted irony, metaphor, and other kinds of figurative

utterances as cases of implicature), but there is a common phenomenon that he seems to have overlooked. Consider that there are many sentences whose standard uses are not

strictly determined by their meanings but are not oblique (implicature-producing) or figurative uses either. For instance, if one's spouse says "I will be home later" she is

likely to mean that she will be home later that night, not at some time in the future. Or suppose your child comes crying to you with an injury and you say to him assuringly, "You're not going to die." You don't mean that he will never die but merely that he won't die from that injury. In both cases you do not mean precisely what you are saying but something more specific. In such cases what person means is what may be called an expansion of what one says, in that adding more words ('tonight' or 'from that injury', in the examples) would have made what was meant fully explicit. In other cases, such as 'Jack is ready' and 'Jill is late', the sentence does not express a complete proposition.

There must be something which Jack is being claimed to be ready for and something which Jill is being claimed to be late to. In these cases what

one means is a completion of what one says. In both sorts of case, no particular word or phrase is being used

nonliterally and there is no indirection. Both exemplify conversational impliciture, since part of what is meant is communicated not explicitly but implicitly, by way of expansion or completion. In impliciture the speaker means something that goes beyond sentence

meaning (ambiguity and indexicality aside) without necessarily implicating anything or using any expressions.

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