

# Discussion of Grice (1975) and Levinson (2000, Chapter 1)

Roger Levy, for LIGN247

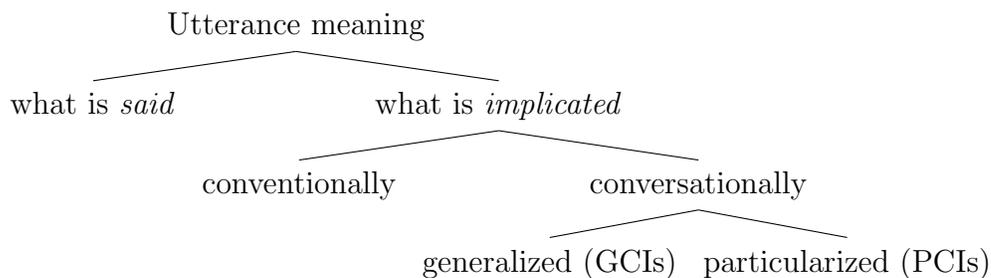
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## 1 Grice

### Warnings and notes:

- There is a strong tradition of “close reading” of Grice not only in philosophy but also in linguistics...
- ... but Grice is often inscrutable!

Grice’s typology of utterance meaning (after Levinson, 2000):



### 1.1 What is *said*

... I intend what someone has said to be closely related to the conventional meaning of the words (the sentence) he has uttered.

When Grice says this, he does not mean that what is *said* is restricted to “literal” meaning in a narrow sense. His example:

He is in the grip of a vice.

Grice seems to explicitly allow that the idiomatic meaning (“*x* was unable to rid himself of a certain kind of bad character trait”) is part of what is *said*.

## 1.2 Conventional implicature

Grice writes, “In some cases the conventional meaning of the words used will determine what is implicated, besides helping to determine what is said”. His example:

He is an Englishman; he is, therefore, brave.

Grice seems to be arguing that the critical speaker commitment that it is by virtue of being an Englishman that  $x$  is brave is not actually *said*, but rather implicated. My reading of Grice here is that Grice would say that this meaning is *said* in the following utterance:

He is an Englishman, and by virtue of being an Englishman, he is brave, because all Englishmen are brave.

but in Grice’s example, the cause-consequence relation between the two clauses has to be inferred. Grice calls (in passing!) this case *conventional implicature*.

The idea of conventional implicature has spawned its own sub-literature. If you’re interested in exploring this literature, I’d recommend you start with Potts (2005) and work backwards.

## 1.3 Conversational implicature

**The Cooperative Principle (CP).** Grice envisions this as a principle by which *rational* agents will engage in conversation, because all participants in the conversation stand to gain if they all adhere to the principle. The rough version:

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.

**The maxims.** Grice breaks down the CP into four maxims:

- MAXIM OF QUANTITY: say enough, neither too little nor too much.

Example: if I ask you “What do you do for a living?”, I expect you to tell me your profession. The following two responses would be inappropriate:

I have a job.

Every morning I get out of bed around 7:30, brush my teeth, typically have a coffee and muffin for breakfast, then drive to work. I work at box factory; my job is primarily management of inventory and supplies but I also run odd jobs when necessary. . .

- MAXIM OF QUALITY: be truthful, and don’t be speculative.

Example: if I ask you “is the convenience store open?”, I expect you not to answer “yes” unless you *know* that it is open.

- MAXIM OF RELOCATION: be relevant! (Even Grice admits that this is extremely broad and difficult to pin down more specifically.)

Example: if I ask you “is Jamie dating anyone these days?”, I expect your response to be an answer to the question!

- **MAXIM OF MANNER:** be brief, clear, orderly, and unambiguous—overall, be perspicuous. Grice’s only really concrete example is one that involves flouting Manner:

Miss X produced a series of sounds that corresponded closely with the score of “Home Sweet Home”.

which implicates something non-typical (probably defective, for reasons that may be worth further discussion) about how Miss X sang.

**How one can fail to satisfy the maxims.** The maxims are principles of cooperative conversation, and a speaker may fail to adhere to the principles for a number of reasons. Grice gives the following cases:

- A speaker may *violate* a maxim without making it clear that she is doing so (e.g., she may violate Quality and outright lie, or violate another maxim and potentially mislead the listener).
- A speaker may *opt out*, making clear that she isn’t following one or more maxims and thus not being cooperative in some respect (e.g., maintaining silence).
- Two maxims may clash in a particular situation and the speaker may be forced to choose between the two. **Commentary:** a hugely important strain in pragmatics research is the idea that clash between maxims is intrinsic and ubiquitous. For example, Manner and Quantity may be thought of as intrinsically clashing.
- A speaker may *flout* a maxim. This differs from opting out in that in Grice’s view, flouting a maxim is still adhering to the CP; the maxim can be seen as a resource that is *exploited* (Grice’s term) to achieve a particular communicative effect.

**Conversational implicatures as arising from the maxims.** Grice’s criteria for determining that speaker  $X$ , by saying  $p$  has implicated  $q$ :

- we have prior reason to believe that  $X$  is adhering to the maxims or at least the CP;
- the “said” content of  $p$  isn’t enough to maintain that belief;
- but if we were to additionally suppose that the speaker is committing to  $q$ , the belief could be maintained;
- the speaker can trust the listener to infer  $q$  from what the listener already knows, plus  $p$ . **Commentary:** the contemporary notion of *common ground* crucially enters here.

**Generalized versus particularized conversational implicatures (GCIs vs PCIs).**  
Grice’s description:

Sometimes one can say that the use of a certain form of words in an utterance would normally (in the absence of special circumstances) carry such-and-such an implicature or type of implicature.

For Grice (and for Levinson), these implicatures are GCIs. Other cases are PCIs. Grice’s example involves uses of the indefinite determiner:

- X is meeting *a woman* this evening→the woman X is meeting does not bear a pre-existing “special” relationship (wife, sister, . . . ) to X
- X went into *a house* yesterday and found a tortoise inside the front door→the house was not X’s own

Grice is proposing that the construction “a X” carries a GCI that the instance of X bears a relatively remote relation with the individual under discussion, though he admits counter-examples (“I broke a finger”). I recommend reading Horn (1984) for much more discussion of these examples. **Commentary:** this instance of a GCI is different than cases like *some* in that one has to have a lot of auxiliary things in place—an individual under discussion that could potentially bear some kind of possessive-like relation to various Xs. **Commentary:** the potential instances of GCIs that people talk a lot tend to be driven by specific lexical items or simple constructions, but there’s nothing in the definition that requires this—a complete sentence could have a GCI. Or could it? What should our expectations be in this respect?

## 2 Levinson

### 2.1 Distinctive properties of conversational implicatures

Levinson’s augmented list of distinctive properties of conversational implicatures:

- Cancellability/defeasibility—additional information (e.g., explicit denial, or relevant features of context) can eliminate the implicature
- Nondetachability—utterances that *say* the same thing should *implicate* the same thing, “except for Manner implicatures”. **Commentary:** nondetachability is a property that’s under particular scrutiny these days, e.g., see Lauer (2013). And if you don’t buy into the Manner component of the typology of maxims, then how do we handle the exception?
- Calculability—the reasoning steps required to get to the inference should be transparent
- Nonconventionality—conversational implicatures are, by definition, not *said*
- Reinforceability—you should be able to explicitly affirm a conversational implicature (“John ate some cookies. And he didn’t eat all of them.”)

- Universality—conversational implicatures are derived from “fundamental considerations of rationality” and should thus be more or less universal

## 2.2 PCIs vs GCIs for Levinson

Levinson is really all about defending GCIs as a “real category”. For Levinson, a conversational implicature is:

- a GCI if it’s understood from an utterance unless special circumstances defeat it;
- otherwise, it’s a PCI.

Key example:

A: What time is it?  
 B: Some of the guests are already leaving.  
 PCI: It must be late.  
 GCI: Not all of the guests are already leaving.

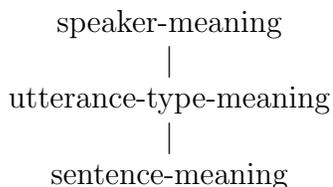
A: Where’s John?  
 B: Some of the guests are already leaving.  
 PCI: Perhaps John has already left.  
 GCI: Not all of the guests are already leaving.

## 2.3 The theoretical attraction of GCIs

Levinson points out Grice’s appeal to “a modified Occam’s razor to the effect that ‘senses are not to be multiplied beyond necessity’”. The idea here is: what if we just assume that *some* is ambiguous between  $\forall$  and  $\exists \rightarrow \forall$ ? We gain theoretical parsimony by assuming no ambiguity and that the latter meaning is derivative from the former through highly general principles of rational, cooperative conversation. **Commentary:** implicitly, there seems to be an assumption here that GCIs are generally triggered by a lexical item or some other very localized bit of an utterance, which we could even talk about as potentially having multiple senses.

## 2.4 A three-layer theory of communication and Levinson’s heuristics

Levinson’s three-layer theory:



Levinson proposes that GCIs are crucially involved in the computation of utterance-type-meaning from sentence-meaning. They are thus a *generative theory of idiomaticity*. Levinson also firmly believes that GCIs are computed *by default*.

**Levinson’s heuristics** For Levinson, what replaces Grice’s maxims are three heuristics that allow rapid, efficient computation of GCIs. These are:

- **The Q-Heuristic:** what isn’t said, isn’t (c.f. Grice’s Quantity, part 1). *some* → *not all*.
- **The I-Heuristic:** what is expressed simply is stereotypically true (c.f. Grice’s Quantity, part 2). *If you mow the lawn, I’ll give you \$5.* → *If you don’t mow the lawn, I won’t give you \$5.*
- **The M-Heuristic:** what’s said in an abnormal way isn’t normal (c.f. Grice’s example of flouting Manner). *The corners of Sue’s lips turned slightly upward.* → *Sue didn’t exactly smile.*

**Commentary:** Levinson’s heuristics play a potentially different theoretical role than Grice’s maxims for the respective authors. Grice wanted to argue that *any* rational conversational participant would inevitably adhere to the maxims. Levinson wants to argue that the heuristics are used and trusted because employing a wider and/or less stable variety of inferences wouldn’t be feasible for real-time conversation. What’s the relationship between these theoretical pictures?

**Commentary:** is a wider range of real-time inferences really as hard as Levinson suggests it is? Lots of psycholinguistic evidence suggests that inferencing can be rich, variable, and rapid in the time-scale of hundreds of milliseconds (e.g., Tanenhaus et al., 1995).

## References

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