

## Lecture 7: Conversational Implicatures

### 1. Definition

Conversational implicature is a kind of inference that is important in our understanding of meaning. Conversational implicatures are pragmatic inferences: they are not tied to the particular words and phrases in an utterance but arise instead from contextual factors and the understanding that conventions are observed in conversation. The theory of conversational implicatures is attributed to Paul Herbert Grice, who observed that in conversations what is meant often goes beyond what is said and that this additional meaning is inferred and predictable. As an illustration of what Grice was talking about, consider the sentence in (1).

#### Example 1

"Generally speaking, a conversational implicature is an interpretive procedure that operates to figure out what is going on...Assume a husband and wife are getting ready to go out for the evening:

Husband: How much longer will you be?

Wife: Mix yourself a drink.

To interpret the utterance in Sentence 9, the husband must go through a series of inferences based on principles that he knows the other speaker is using...The conventional response to the husband's question would be a direct answer where the wife indicated some time frame in which she would be ready. This would be a conventional implicature with a literal answer to a literal question. But the husband assumes that she heard his question, that she believes that he was genuinely asking how long she would be, and that she is capable of indicating when she would be ready.

#### Example 2

A: Is Karl a good philosopher?

B: He's got a beautiful handwriting.

[Karl is not a good philosopher.]

#### Example 3

A: Are you going to the party tonight?

B: I don't like parties.

[The implicature is that B won't go to the party tonight.]

## 2. General and Particularised Implicatures

According to [Grice \(1975\)](#), in implicatures, social rules are in play that describe the characteristics of the ideal communicative exchange and determine the expectations of rational speakers about the linguistic behavior of the other speakers. When these rules appear to be violated, it is necessary to make inferences (conversational implicatures) in order to guarantee the fulfillment of these maxims. Among the conversational implicatures, we can distinguish between generalized and particularized implicatures.

Generalized conversational implicatures (GCI) are inferences that refer to the non-explicit meaning that occurs by default in any type of context ([Grice, 1975](#)). It is information that is inferred in a prototypical way, as long as there is no specific information that denies or contradicts it. By contrast, particularized conversational implicatures (PCI), also called *ad-hoc* implicatures, are closely linked to specific or particular contexts; that is, the success of these inferences is linked to knowledge about very specific contextual information. PCI and GCI have one defining characteristic, compared to other non-explicit meanings such as entailments or conventional implicatures. They are cancellable; that is, if the context changes or is enriched or modified, conversational implicatures can disappear. In order to clarify these concepts, examples (1) and (2) are proposed, where a PCI and a GCI appear, respectively:

(1) (Speaker B, who is short, does not like to go out with tall women, and speaker A knows this).

-Speaker A: Do you want Ana's telephone number so you can go out with her?

-Speaker B: Ana is quite tall.

Particularised conversational implicature >> Speaker B does not want speaker A to give him Ana's telephone number to go out with her.

(2) Juan has three children.

Generalized conversational implicature >> Juan has exactly three children, not more or less.

In the first example, the prior knowledge that speaker B does not like tall women is what allows us to reach PCI, but if this prior context changed (for example, if B liked tall women), the inferred PCI could change. However, in example (2), we do not need any specific prior information to reach GCI. By default, any speaker would tend to infer that Juan has exactly three children and no more, and as long as no additional information is provided to contradict this (for example, *Well, and he has a fourth child who was adopted 5 years ago*), the GCI is maintained by default.

Grice's theoretical paradigm was later continued and partially modified by authors such as [Levinson \(2000\)](#) in the Theory of Generalized Conversational Implicatures. This theory

defends the existence of a linguistically coded meaning and the distinction between three heuristics that make it possible to interpret the different GCI: the Q heuristic, the I heuristic, and the M heuristic.

The Q heuristic, “What isn't said, isn't,” is based on Grice's premise “Make your contribution as informative as required.” It establishes that what is not referred to does not occur. This heuristic is also called scalar implicature, based on the idea that there are elements that conform an informative scale ranging from the weakest element (e.g., *some*) to the strongest (e.g., *all*). Therefore, if the speaker decides to use the weakest element on the scale, it is because he/she considers that the strongest element is not true (therefore, from *some*, *not all* can be inferred). Thus, based on the sentence “Some of the guests came to Maria's party,” it can be inferred that “not all of the guests that Maria expected came.” This is an example of GCI legitimized by the Q Heuristic (or scalar implicature).

The I Heuristic, “What is simply described is stereotypically exemplified,” is based on Grice's premise “Do not make your contribution more informative than is required.” It establishes that, by default, it is not necessary to say what can be assumed. Thus, from the sentence “Pedro and Maria bought a flat,” it would have to be inferred that “Pedro and Maria bought one flat together.” This is an example of GCI legitimized by the I Heuristic.

The M Heuristic, “What's said in an abnormal way, isn't normal” or “a marked message indicates a marked situation,” is based on Grice's premises “Avoid obscurity of expression” and “Be brief (avoid unnecessary prolixity).” It establishes that, if someone is expressing something in a not very simple or marked way, it is because s/he is describing a situation that is not very typical, frequent, or prototypical. Thus, the sentence “Antonio stopped the car” leads to the inference that “Antonio did it in a stereotypical way: with his foot on the brake pedal.” However, the sentence “Antonio made the car stop” leads to inferring that “Antonio stopped it in an unconventional way.” This latter case would be an example of GCI legitimized by the M Heuristic.

Two theoretical proposals explain the way implicatures are processed ([Degen and Tanenhaus, 2015](#)): (1) the Literal-First hypothesis, which argues that the inferred meaning has to subsequently be added to the literal meaning; and (2) the Constraint-Based framework, which denies this sequential nature of the processing.

The former proposal (literal-first hypothesis) includes two lines of research. The first ([Levinson, 2000](#); [Chierchia, 2004](#)) assumes that processing GCI does not involve a considerable additional processing cost. GCI are computed immediately and with no effort, given that they are inferences that occur from below; thus, unlike PCI, in GCI, the contextual information would not be relevant to their resolution. The second line of research, however, considers that all implicatures (GCI and PCI) require some type of additional time and cognitive resources i.e., much thinking ([Huang et al., 2010](#)).

It should be pointed out that, to the extent that the present study is pragmatic, the pragmatic aspect was difficult to delimit within Linguistics itself. Thus, for example, [Grice \(1975\)](#) interprets his maxims as social rules. [Sperber and Wilson \(1986\)](#) reduce the pragmatic aspect to principles of cognitive processing. [Levinson \(2000\)](#) addresses GCI and considers them to be a clearly linguistic element (neither social nor cognitive). Other authors, such as [López-García \(1989\)](#) or [Escandell-Vidal \(2011\)](#), defend postures of consensus. [López-García \(1989\)](#) defends the idea that Pragmatics is a borderline discipline between Internal Linguistics (Syntax, Morphology) and External Linguistics (Sociolinguistics, Psycholinguistics). In addition, [Escandell-Vidal \(2011\)](#) talks about a cognitive Pragmatics (which does not study the sociocultural rules of a society) and a social Pragmatics (which would be characterized by just the opposite, and would study events such as courtesy, indirect speaking acts in a social context, etc.). Our theoretical position comes closer to the position of these two latter authors, and we believe it is advisable to distinguish between a more linguistic Pragmatics (more linked to formal knowledge, that is, morphology, syntax, and lexicon) and another more external Pragmatics (where social and cognitive skills are necessary).

## Sources

<https://www.bu.edu/linguistics/UG/course/lx502/docs/lx502-implicatures.pdf>

<https://www.thoughtco.com/conversational-implicature-speech-acts-1689922#:~:text=In%20pragmatics%2C%20conversational%20implicature%20is,is%20an%20explicitly%20communicated%20assumption.>

<https://www.frontiersin.org/articles/10.3389/fpsyg.2018.00272/full>