

Writing Letters in the Age of Grice

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Abstract. This article aims to investigate the notion of implicature and its connections with speaker's intentions, communicative responsibility and normativity. Some scholars stress the normative character of conversational implicatures more than their psychological dimension. In a normative perspective, conversational implicatures don't correspond to what the speaker *intends* to implicate, but should be interpreted as enriching or correcting inferences licensed by the text. My paper aims to show that the idea of an implicature that the speaker does not intend to convey is not persuasive. In Grice's theory conversational implicatures are speaker-meant: this means that inferences derived by the addressee but not intended by the speaker should not count as conversational implicatures. On the contrary, I will claim that propositions intended by the speaker and not recognised by the addressee should count as implicatures, if the speaker has made her communicative intention available to her audience.

1 Introduction

This article aims to investigate the Gricean notion of implicature and its connections with speaker's intentions, communicative responsibility and normativity. According to Grice, implicatures are part of what a speaker communicates, hence part of speaker meaning – and speaker meaning is a matter of speaker intentions. Some scholars stress the normative character of conversational implicatures more than their psychological dimension (Gauker 2001, Green 2002, Saul 2001, 2002a, Sbisà 2007). In a normative perspective, conversational implicatures don't correspond to what the speaker *intends* to implicate (or to what the addressee successfully infers): conversational implicatures should be interpreted as enriching or correcting inferences licensed by the text. Implicatures have a normative status as integration or amendment of an utterance, justified by an appropriate argumentative path: a conversational implicature isn't necessarily a proposition believed by the speaker, but a proposition that *should* be accepted by the speaker.

My paper aims to show that the idea of an implicature that the speaker does not intend to convey is not persuasive. In Grice's theory conversational implicatures are speaker-meant – conscious or even "designed".¹ This means that inferences derived by the addressee but not intended by the speaker should not count as conversational

¹ Grice 1975, 1989, p. 34.

implicatures. On the contrary, I will claim that propositions intended by S and not recognised by A should count as implicatures, if S has made her communicative intention available to her audience.

2. Grice: what is said and what is implicated

As is well known, Grice distinguishes between "what is said" and "what is implicated" – between the proposition expressed by an utterance (the truth-conditions of the sentence uttered) and the implicit meaning of the utterance, "what is implicated" by a speaker using a sentence in a given context – an inference licensed in context, and which cannot be identified with logical implication, logical consequence or entailment (inferences derived solely from semantic content).²

According to Grice, if someone asks S how Tom is getting on in his job, and S utters

(1) Tom likes his colleagues and hasn't been to prison yet,
she is only implying – and not saying – that Tom is the sort of person likely to yield to the temptation provided by his occupation.³

Therefore, Grice's main task is to draw a distinction "within the total signification of a remark: a distinction between what the speaker has *said* (in a certain favored, and maybe in some degree artificial, sense of 'said'), and what he has *implicated* (e.g. implied, indicated, suggested), taking into account the fact that what he has implicated may be either conventionally implicated (implicated by virtue of the meaning of some word or phrase which he has used) or nonconventionally implicated (in which case the specification of the implicature falls outside the specification of the conventional meaning of the words used)".⁴ In other words, Grice tries to fully characterise

A. what an expression E means;

B. what a speaker S explicitly says (in Grice's "favored", technical sense) using E in a given occasion;⁵

C. what S implicitly conveys (implicates, implies, indicates, suggests) using E in that given occasion.

Both B. and C. amount to *speaker meaning*. Hence, an implicature is a non-truth-conditional aspect of speaker meaning – part of what is meant when S utters E in context C, without being part of what is said by S with E.

The gap between expression meaning (A.) and speaker's meaning (B. + C.), and between saying (B.) and implying (C.) is filled by exploiting a set of expectations which both speaker S and addressee A share. Those expectations are based on an assumption: language use is a form of rational and cooperative behaviour,

² Cf. Grice 1989.

³ Grice 1975, 1989, p. 24.

⁴ Grice 1967, 1989, p. 118.

⁵ According to Grice, what is said (i.e. B.) is "closely related to the conventional meaning of the... sentence... uttered" (i.e. A.) and must correspond to "the elements of the [sentence], their order, and their syntactic character". It is closely related but not identical to what the sentence means, because the sentence may contain ambiguities or indexicals: Grice 1969, 1989, p. 87.

characterised by a high level of coordination.⁶ Conversation, then, is a rational, cooperative, goal-oriented activity – governed by a Cooperative Principle.⁷ The Cooperative Principle is specified by four categories, called Quantity, Quality, Relation and Manner, under which fall more specific maxims. In order to understand the speaker's meaning, A is guided by certain expectations concerning S's behaviour: namely the expectation that S's utterance will satisfy certain standards – being informative (Quantity Maxims), sincere (Quality Maxims), relevant (Relation Maxim) and clear (Manner Maxims).⁸

3 Implicatures

Sometimes what S says fails to be plausible, informative, relevant or appropriate. If the violation is overt, manifest and blatant, A, when she has reason to think that S is no longer cooperative, may infer additional propositions completing or revising what S says. According to Grice, then, in our linguistic interactions a speaker may often communicate much more than what she says explicitly. The proposition S communicates by uttering a particular sentence in a particular context without saying it Grice dubs *implicature*: this proposition is not part of the truth-conditional content of the sentence uttered – it does not contribute to its truth-conditions. The general idea is that A's expectations may be exploited by S in order to generate further communicative effects. Uttering a sentence is an action that A takes as meaningful: she may then infer S's communicative intention (what is implicated) by taking into account S's utterance (what is said) and contextual factors that A (supposedly) shares with S.

In "Logic and conversation", Grice offers a definition of conversational implicature:

A man who, by (in, when) saying (or making as if to say) that p has implicated that q , may be said to have conversationally implicated that q , provided that a) he is to be presumed to be observing the conversational maxims, or at least the Cooperative Principle; b) 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 c) the speaker thinks (and would expect the hearer to think that the speaker thinks) that it is within the competence of the hearer to work out, or grasp intuitively, that the supposition mentioned in b) is required.⁹

⁶ Grice 1975, 1989, p. 26: "Our talk exchanges do not normally consist of a succession of disconnected remarks, and would not be rational if they did. They are characteristically, to some degree at least, cooperative efforts; and each participant recognizes in them, to some extent, a common purpose or set of purposes, or at least a mutually accepted direction".

⁷ Grice (1975, 1989, p. 26: "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".

⁸ Cf. Grice 1975, 1989, pp. 26-27.

⁹ Grice 1975, 1989, pp. 30-31.

Let's summarize the definition.¹⁰ S says that *p* and implicates that *q* if:¹¹

- a) S is to be presumed to be observing the Cooperative Principle;
- b) the supposition that S is aware that, or thinks that, *q* is required in order to make her saying consistent with this presumption;
- c) S thinks that it is within the competence of A to work out that the supposition mentioned in (b) is required.

An example will help clarify the definition: the reference letter in "Logic and Conversation". Grice writes: "A is writing a testimonial about a pupil who is a candidate for a philosophy job, and his letter reads as follows: 'Dear Sir, Mr. X's command of English is excellent, and his attendance at tutorials has been regular. Yours, etc.'"¹² For sake of simplicity I will use the utterance

(2) Mr. X's command of English is excellent.

By uttering (2), S says that *Mr. X's command of English is excellent* and implicates that *Mr X is no good at philosophy* if:

a) S is to be presumed to be observing the Cooperative Principle: as Grice puts it: "if [S] wished to be uncooperative, why write at all?";

b) the supposition that S is aware that, or thinks that, *Mr X is no good at philosophy* is required in order to make her saying consistent with this presumption: "[S] knows that more information than this is wanted. [she] must, therefore, be wishing to impart information that [she] is reluctant to write down";¹³

c) S thinks that it is within the competence of the philosophy search committee to work out that the supposition mentioned in b) is required⁴ Contextualizing justification

4. Near-implicatures

Jennifer Saul (Saul 2002a) argues against a common understanding of Grice according to which speaker meaning divides exhaustively into what is said and what is implicated: "there are many things which speakers mean that they neither say nor implicate".¹⁴ She distinguishes between utterer-implicatures (intended by the speaker, but not recognized by the addressee), audience-implicatures (recognized by the addressee but not intended by the speaker) and conversational implicatures. In what follows I would like to examine the status of implicatures and "near-implicatures" (utterer and audience implicatures), with a more general aim in mind: investigating the normative dimension of language use. This is especially urgent in a Gricean

¹⁰ In my paper I will focus on the normative/psychological debate and will not address many interesting points raised by Grice's definition; in particular I will not deal with the distinction between "saying" and "making as if to say". On this and related points, see Bianchi 2009 and 2011.

¹¹ According to Saul "only if": Saul 2002a, p. 231. For a different point of view, see Neale 1992, pp. 527-529.

¹² Grice 1975, 1989, p. 33.

¹³ Grice 1975, 1989, p. 33.

¹⁴ Saul 2002a, p. 229.

perspective, where meaning is reduced to a complex array of audience-oriented intentions: in this perspective, restrictions and constraints are posited in order to prevent speakers from *saying* just anything, simply by intending it. In a similar vein constraints must be posited in order to prevent speakers from conversationally *implicating* just anything, simply by intending it.¹⁵

In order to show that speaker meaning doesn't divide exhaustively into what is said and what is implicated, Saul presents some variations of the Gricean reference letter.¹⁶

Case I. A student of mine, Fred, is a poor philosopher but a good typist. He is applying for a philosophy job and I am asked to write a reference letter. My letter reads as follows: "Dear Sir or Madam, Fred is a good typist, and his attendance at tutorials has been regular. Yours, CB". For sake of simplicity I will use the utterance

(3) Fred is a good typist.

By uttering (3), I say that *Fred is a good typist* and implicate that *Fred is no good at philosophy* if:

a) I am to be presumed to be observing the Cooperative Principle;

b) the supposition that I think that *Fred is no good at philosophy* is required in order to make my saying consistent with the presumption indicated in a): I know that more information than this is wanted. I must, therefore, wish to impart information that I am reluctant to write down;

c) I think that it is within the competence of the philosophy search committee to work out that the supposition mentioned in b) is required.

Let's now examine a variation of Case I.

Case II. Suppose that, unbeknownst to me, Fred is applying for a job as a typist. In this scenario, by uttering (3), I say that *Fred is a good typist* but I do not implicate that *Fred is no good at philosophy*. Condition b) isn't satisfied: *q* (namely that *Fred is no good at philosophy*) isn't required in order to make my saying consistent with the presumption that I am being cooperative. The audience (Fred's prospective employers) may legitimately keep the assumption that I am observing the Cooperative Principle without assuming that I think that *q*: according to Saul, "The implicature was blocked because a speaker cannot conversationally implicate something which the audience is not required to assume that she thinks".¹⁷

Let's now consider another example of near-implicature, involving a different condition.

Case III. A student of mine, Cedric, is a poor philosopher but a good typist. He is applying for a philosophy job and I am asked to write a reference letter. My letter reads as follows: "Dear Sir or Madam, Cedric is a good typist, and his attendance at tutorials has been regular. Yours, CB". For sake of simplicity I will use the utterance

(4) Cedric is a good typist.

¹⁵ Cf. Saul 2002a, p. 229.

¹⁶ The five cases are taken, with variations, from Saul 2002a.

¹⁷ Cf. Saul 2002a, p. 231: "The implicature was blocked because a speaker cannot conversationally implicate something which the audience is not required to assume that she thinks". In this example, as in other examples, there is a crucial distinction to be made: the one between the intended addressee (the addressee intended by the speaker) and the actual audience. In order to adhere to Saul's arguments I will not make use of the distinction in what follows.

Suppose now that the philosophy search committee thinks (falsely) that I always write uncooperative reference letters (perhaps because I consider the practice of writing reference letters itself inappropriate). In this scenario by uttering (4), I say that *Cedric is a good typist* but I do not implicate that *Cedric is no good at philosophy*. Condition a) isn't satisfied: the philosophy search committee doesn't presume that I am observing the Cooperative Principle, and therefore derives no proposition completing or revising what I said. They simply take (4) as an uncooperative remark.

Cases II and III show that speaker meaning doesn't divide exhaustively into what is said and what is implicated. There are propositions that S means but doesn't implicate: Cases II and III are examples of utterer-implicatures, intended by the speaker, but not recognized by the addressee.

Moreover, Saul individuates another category of near-implicatures: audience-implicatures, recognized by the addressee but not intended by the speaker. Let's examine Saul's example.

Case IV. A student of mine, Felix, is a good philosopher and a good typist. I think that he is applying for a job as a typist; my letter reads as follows: "Dear Sir or Madam, Felix is a good typist, and his attendance at tutorials has been regular. Yours, CB". For sake of simplicity I will use the utterance

(5) Felix is a good typist.

Suppose that, unbeknownst to me, Felix is applying for a philosophy job. In this scenario we may imagine that the philosophy search committee would derive from my utterance of (5) the proposition *q* (*Felix is no good at philosophy*): (5) isn't as informative as is required for the current purposes of the exchange, therefore in overt violation of the Quantity Maxim. However, according to Saul, in Case IV *q* doesn't qualify as conversational implicature: condition c) isn't satisfied. I am indeed presumed to be observing the Cooperative Principle by the philosophy search committee (condition a)); also, the supposition that I think that *Felix is no good at philosophy* is required in order to make my saying consistent with this presumption (condition b)). But Saul argues that we cannot say that I think that it is within the competence of the philosophy search committee to work out that the proposition that *Felix is no good at philosophy* is required, because I do not intend to communicate that *Felix is no good at philosophy*, and I do not even believe that *Felix is no good at philosophy*: "The audience, which is actually a philosophy appointments committee, takes me to have conversationally implicated that Felix is a poor philosopher. They are, of course, wrong: clause c) of Grice's characterisation was not satisfied as I had no idea that they would, or even could, work out from my utterance that I think that Felix is a poor philosopher, and I would not have made my utterance if I'd realised the situation. This claim, then, fails to be conversationally implicated".¹⁸

According to Saul, then, speaker meaning doesn't divide exhaustively into what is said and what is implicated: we must distinguish between utterer-implicatures (intended by the speaker, but not recognized by the addressee), audience-implicatures (recognized by the addressee but not intended by the speaker) and conversational implicatures.

¹⁸ Saul 2002a, p. 242.

5. The normative perspective

Speaker meaning is conceived by Grice as a complex array of audience-oriented intentions, whose distinctive feature is that their fulfilment is obtained by means of their recognition.¹⁹ According to Grice, then, being meant by S is a *necessary* condition of what is said. Now, what about implicatures? Is being meant by S a *necessary* condition of what is implicated?

Not for Saul. As I have said, Saul (along with other scholars such as Gauker, Green, and Sbisà) stresses the normative character of conversational implicatures more than their psychological dimension.²⁰ In this perspective, conversational implicatures correspond neither to what the speaker intends to implicate nor to what the addressee successfully infers: conversational implicatures should be interpreted as enriching or correcting inferences licensed by the text. This means not only that the addressee is capable of working out the implicature, but also that she *should* have worked it out – that she may rightfully attribute to the speaker the intention of conveying it.²¹ Implicatures therefore have a normative status as integration or correction of an utterance, justified by an appropriate argumentative path.²²

In my opinion, the idea of an implicature that the speaker does not intend to convey is not completely persuasive. In Grice's theory conversational implicatures are speaker-meant – conscious or even "designed".²³ In this section, I examine some arguments against the idea that propositions derived by A but not meant by S should count as conversational implicatures.

1. Saul denies that being meant by S is a *necessary* condition of what is implicated, because it doesn't explicitly appear in conditions a)-c). We may concede that, and even that the meant-condition doesn't *follow* from conditions a)-c).²⁴ However, the meant-condition appears elsewhere, especially in the Gricean description of the inferential calculus allowing A to derive a conversational implicature – where the supposition that S thinks that *q* is required:

¹⁹ Cf. Bach and Harnish 1979, p. 15: "its fulfilment consists in its recognition". Bach and Harnish's theory is a development of Grice's, and of his intention-based and inferential view of communication. To many, however, their position is too strong.

²⁰ Cf. Gauker 2001, Green 200), Saul 2002a and 2002b, Sbisà 2007.

²¹ Cf. Saul 2002a, p. 244: "There are, then, cases in which we can reasonably say that the audience *should* have worked out the conversational implicature, even if they failed to do so"; Sbisà 2007, p. 122, p. 126 and p. 192.

²² According to Marina Sbisà, a conversational implicature isn't necessarily a proposition believed by the speaker, but a proposition that should be accepted by the speaker. This means that the speaker may be wrong about an implicature: even if she does not intend to convey a particular implicature, there are cases in which this should in any case be worked out by the addressee. In Sbisà's framework, implicatures are normative virtual objects. The alleged implicature does not count as conveyed meaning only if to attribute that communicative intention to the speaker would be absurd or contradictory: but if the text licenses it, the derivation of a particular implicature will be legitimate, even if S has no intention of conveying it.

²³ Grice 1975, 1989, p. 34.

²⁴ Cf. Davis 2007, § 2: "conditions [a)-c)] say nothing about what S intends". For a different opinion, see Neale 1992, p. 528.

He has said that *p*; there is no reason to suppose that he is not observing the maxims, or at least the Cooperative Principle; he could not be doing this unless he thought that *q*; he knows (and knows that I know that he knows) that I can see that the supposition that he thinks that *q* is required; he has done nothing to stop me thinking that *q*; he intends me to think, or is at least willing to allow me to think, that *q*; and so he has implicated that *q*.²⁵

2. Another philological point, underlined both by Neale 1992 and Davis 2007: the meant-condition appears in "The causal theory of perception": "a speaker implies something only if it was something he 'intended to get across'".²⁶ True, the passage is omitted in Grice 1989, but only because the view presented is "substantially the same"; as Grice puts it, "This section [3] is here omitted, since the material which it presents is substantially the same as that discussed in Essay 2 ["Logic and Conversation"]".²⁷ In spite of this, Saul chooses to ignore the passage, because of its "odd" status.²⁸

3. However, the crucial point is another. The conditions a)-c) are meant to set apart conversational implicatures from other kinds of implicatures (i.e. conventional ones). The definition states that "A man who, by saying that *p* has implicated that *q*, may be said to have conversationally implicated that *q*, provided that [the three conditions are satisfied]". We must look elsewhere for the general definition of implicature, in the opening of "Logic and Conversation" where Grice defines implicating as "mean without saying".

Wayne Davis holds the same view, criticises Grice on this very point, and suggests an alternative definition: implicating must be conceived as "meaning something by saying something else".²⁹ Davis' proposal avoids Saul's objections about lapsus, malapropisms, or poor translations – where S intends to say that *p* but accidentally utters a sentence which conventionally means that *q*. According to Saul, we cannot claim that S, uttering

(6) We're all cremated equal

has implicated that

(7) We're all created equal.

But if we conceive implicating as "mean without saying", then we are committed to hold that S, uttering (6), has implicated (7) (a proposition meant, but not said, by S). The alternative definition proposed by Davis underlines the *indirect* character of implicatures: in Case I, *by* saying that Fred is a good typist, S intends to communicate that Fred is a poor philosopher. Things work differently as far as malapropisms or lapsus are concerned: intuitively we wouldn't claim that S, by saying that (6), intended to communicate that (7).

4. Last point: in the normative perspective advocated by Saul, Case IV should count as a conversational implicature, even if unmeant by S. In that context, A may

²⁵ Grice 1975, 1989, p. 31. Cf. Davis 2007, § 2: "Grice does mention intention at the appropriate place when he is setting out the 'Calculability Assumption' of his theory"

²⁶ Grice 1961, 1965 p. 448.

²⁷ Grice 1961, 1989, p. 229.

²⁸ Cf. Saul 2002a, pp. 238-239.

²⁹ Davis 1998, 2007.

seem right in ascribing the conversational implicature *q* (*Felix is no good at philosophy*) to S. In that particular communicative situation (the reference letter for a philosophy job written by a professor of philosophy for a student she knows very well), what is said isn't as informative as required for the current purposes of the exchange, and is hence in overt violation of the Quantity Maxim: therefore the committee seems fully justified in deriving that particular implicature. However, in Case IV Saul describes *q* as a case of near-implicature – as if reluctant to ascribe to S unmeant implicatures.

6. Making implicatures available

In closing, I address an aspect symmetrical to the one dealt with in § 5. I said that being meant by S is a necessary condition of what is implicated; let's now examine the question of whether being recognised by A is a necessary condition of what is implicated. More generally, are conversational implicatures propositions merely intended by the speaker and recognized by the addressee?

With Saul, I claim that this kind of restriction upon A is not necessary: some implicatures fail to be recognised by A. Let's consider another of Saul's variations of the reference letter.

Case V. A student of mine, Wesley, is a poor philosopher. He is applying for a philosophy job and I am asked to write a reference letter. My letter reads as follows: "Dear Sir or Madam, Wesley's main virtues as a philosopher are punctuality, an attractive choice of fonts, and an encyclopaedic knowledge of illegal pharmaceuticals. Yours, CB". For sake of simplicity I will use the utterance

(8) Wesley has an encyclopaedic knowledge of illegal pharmaceuticals.

Suppose now that the philosophy search committee reads my letter too quickly, retains the information that Wesley has encyclopaedic knowledge and hires him. In this context, even if the committee didn't recognise my implicature, we must acknowledge that I said *p* and implicated *q* (*Wesley is no good at philosophy*). The three conditions are indeed satisfied:

- a) I am to be presumed to be observing the Cooperative Principle;
- b) the supposition that I think that *Wesley is no good at philosophy* is required in order to make my saying consistent with the presumption indicated in a);
- c) I think that it is within the competence of the philosophy search committee to work out that the supposition mentioned in b) is required.

In this scenario not only is the supposition that I think that *Wesley is no good at philosophy* required in order to make my utterance of (8) consistent with my being collaborative, but also I think that it is within the competence of the philosophy search committee to work out that this supposition is required.

This point introduces a normative element into my own intentional perspective. Being meant by S is a necessary condition of what is implicated; nonetheless, it isn't a *sufficient* condition. Being meant is a necessary condition of implicatures only if S's intention is non-arbitrary – that is connected with a behaviour that enables the addressee to identify it. S's intention must be "reasonable" – i.e. something that A in normal circumstances is able to work out using external facts (where, when and by

whom the utterance is produced), linguistic co-text (what has been said so far), and background knowledge.³⁰ If, in Case V, I have made my implicature available to A – having thus fulfilled my communicative responsibilities – then I have implicated *q*.

In conclusion, conversational implicatures are more than merely intended by the speaker and recognized by the addressee: implicating (con conversationally) amounts to making available to the addressee the implicit message S wants to communicate. Of course, having fulfilled my communicative responsibilities isn't a guarantee of a successful communication: in Case V, I have implicated that *q* but I haven't *communicated* that *q*.³¹ This, however, comes as no surprise, as it holds also for what is said. To say something is to satisfy one's communicative responsibilities, even if this fails to guarantee communication. If I utter

(9) George is Hellenic

I mean and say

(10) George is Greek;

but If A doesn't know that "Hellenic" means "Greek", I fail to communicate it. S's having a complex array of audience-oriented intentions, and making it public and available to A, does not secure communication.³²

7. Conclusion

The task of this article was to critically examine the notion of implicature in a Gricean perspective, along with its connection with the speaker's intentions, communicative responsibility and normativity. In the normative view held by Saul, a conversational implicature isn't necessarily a proposition meant by the speaker, but a proposition that *should* be accepted by the speaker. My paper aims to show that the idea of an implicature that the speaker does not intend to convey is not persuasive. In Grice's theory conversational implicatures are speaker-meant. This means that inferences derived by the addressee but not intended by the speaker should not count as conversational implicatures. On the contrary, I claim that propositions intended by S and not recognized by A should count as implicatures, if S has made her communicative intention available to her audience. In this latter case, we are facing a communicative failure: the implicature exists (an ontological matter) but is not recognized (an epistemological matter).³³

³⁰ Roberts 1997, p. 196. Cf. Donnellan 1968.

³¹ Saul 2002a, p. 245: "conversationally implicating something... fails to guarantee audience uptake but does mean that the speaker has fulfilled her communicative responsibilities with regard to what she wants to communicate... she may not have communicated her intended message, but she has *made it available*".

³² Cf. Predelli 2002, pp. 315-316.

³³ Cf. Davis 2010.

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