

Horn, “Implicature”

Implicatures are the part of what a speaker means that goes beyond what the speaker literally says.

Implicatures are not part of sentence meaning, because sometimes a speaker can use a sentence to implicate something and other times use the same sentence to implicate nothing.

Consider the sentence:

“She has good handwriting.”

Suppose this is the only thing I write on your job application. If you are applying to be a professor of philosophy, I am implicating that you are not a good candidate. If you are applying to be a calligrapher, I am not implicating that.

Implicatures are also not what the hearer learns, beyond the literal meaning, from what the speaker says.

Suppose I say: “Stop walking so slowly! Get out of my way!”

You may learn that I am a very disagreeable person. But I am not implicating that, because I am not using your knowledge that I am a cooperative conversational partner to get you to believe that I am disagreeable.

Cancelability

An implicature is said to be cancelable if you can deny the implicature right after saying something that seems to implicate it.

[Suppose again you’re applying to be a professor of philosophy and I write on your recommendation:] “She has good handwriting—and in addition, she’s a great philosopher.”

Detachability

An implicature is detachable if you can rephrase what you just said in such a way that the new sentence has the same literal meaning, but doesn’t have the implicature.

For instance, in the handwriting case, the implicature is NOT detachable:

“She has good handwriting”
“Her handwriting is good”
“I’m impressed by her handwriting”
Etc.

All of these sentences have the same implicature, namely, that she’s no good for the job.

Conventional Implicatures

Horn identifies conventional implicatures with ones that are detachable and non-cancelable.

“Even Ken knows that’s stupid”
Implicates: Ken is the least likely person (among some relevant group of people) to know that the action in question is stupid.

You can’t cancel the implicature:

??“Even Ken knows that’s stupid, but it’s not unusual or surprising that he does.”

But you can detach it:

“Ken knows that’s stupid too.”

(Here you have to think that “Even Ken knows that’s stupid” and “Ken knows that’s stupid too” both have the same literal meaning.)

Horn points out that often it’s denied that conventional implicatures exist, and the issue is highly debated.

Conversational Implicatures

Conversational implicatures, again, are those implicatures that arise from the speaker exploiting the conversational maxims to get the hearer to recognize something not contained in the literal meaning of what she said.

Particularized conversational implicatures

An implicature is particularized if it only arises in a special context. For example:

A: Is Sue pretty?

B: She has a wonderful personality.

A: Oh, so she's not pretty.

Here, B implicates that Sue is not pretty, because he's not observing Quantity and Relation: he was required to give information about Sue's attractiveness, but he instead gave information about her personality.

A: I'm looking for someone to go on a date with.

B: Take Sue, she has a wonderful personality.

Here, B doesn't implicate that Sue is not pretty, because his utterance doesn't violate/ flout or otherwise exploit any of the maxims. It's true, relevant, orderly, and a sufficient reason to go out on a date with someone (that is, it satisfies Quantity).

Generalized conversational implicature

An implicature is generalized if only in special circumstances does it not occur.

A: I'm looking for a woman to go on a date with.

B: Take Sue, she's pretty.

A: Oh, so she's not beautiful.

Remember that Quantity requires you to be as informative as the purposes of the conversation require. Since B is contributing information on Sue's attractiveness, he should state the greatest degree of attractiveness that she has. Since he didn't say 'beautiful' which is a greater degree than merely 'pretty', she must be pretty but not beautiful.

In special circumstances, however, this implicature is not present:

A: No one here is pretty.

B: Sue is pretty!

Here, the point of B's utterance is to give evidence against A's claim. Thus, he satisfies the quantity requirement by saying that Sue is pretty, and this is compatible with him also thinking that she's more than just pretty, she's beautiful.

3. Scalar Implicature and Constraints on Lexicalization

Lots of things can be put on scales of "less" to "more":

Numbers: $1 < 2 < 3 \dots$

Quantifiers: some < many < most < all

Frequency: sometimes < often < usually < always

Likelihood: possible < likely < certain

Obligatoriness: permitted < expected < required

Logical Operators: or < and

Temperature: lukewarm < warm < hot

Goodness: OK < good < excellent

Notice that the things “higher up” on each scale are compatible with the things “lower down” on the scale.

If I ask: “Do you have 2 dollars?” You can answer “yes” truthfully, even if you have 100 dollars. Having 100 dollars is compatible with having 2 dollars.

If I ask “Did many of the students pass the exam?” You can answer “yes” truthfully, even if you know that all of the students passed. All of them passing is compatible with many of them passing.

Likewise for all the rest. (Try it with all the rest. “Did you have an OK summer?” “Yes, I had an excellent summer” etc.)

However, normally when we use something “lower down” on the scale—although it is compatible with the things “higher up”—we implicate that the “higher up” things are not true:

“John has 2 kids” → “John doesn’t have 3 kids or more”

“Some students failed the exam” → “Not all the students failed the exam”

“The mail usually comes on time” → “The mail doesn’t always come on time”

“It’s possible that 7/11 has champagne” → “It’s not likely that you can get champagne at 7/11”

“You’re permitted to leave” → “You’re not required to leave, you can stay”

“You can have tea or cake” → “You can’t have tea and cake”

These are called “Scalar Implicatures” (because they involve scales of things from less to more).

Recall what the Maxim of Quantity says:

Quantity:

1. Make your contribution as informative as is required
2. Do not say more than is required

(Just focus on submaxim 1.)

Now consider this conversation:

A: Does John have any kids?

B: Yes, John has 2 kids

A can reason as follows: It's compatible with what B said that John has more than 2 kids. However, B knows how many kids John has. If John had more than 2 kids, what he said would be less informative than is required, and B would have violated Quantity. However, B is cooperative, so it must be that John has 2 kids *and no more.*)

Since these scalar implicatures are always present except in special circumstances (like when I ask: "Do you have 3 dollars?"), they are generalized implicatures.

An alternate proposal would be that there are no implicatures here, but that words like "some" "two" "possible" and so forth are ambiguous. Sometimes they mean "some and perhaps all" "two and perhaps more" "possible and perhaps necessary" and other times they mean "some but not all" "exactly two" and "possible but not necessary".

Grice ruled out this proposal with his Modified Occam's Razor: "Do not multiply senses beyond necessity."

Another consideration is just this: positing an ambiguity would not help. Because in each case, the hearer would still have to figure out which member of the ambiguous pair of words was being used. Is the speaker using the "2" that means "at least 2 and maybe more" or the "2" that means "exactly 2"? Well, he's being cooperative and...

Finally, if words W in English is ambiguous between two senses S1 and S2, we should expect other languages to have different words for sense S1 and sense S2. But all languages exhibit the phenomenon of scalar implicatures.

Constraints on lexicalization

Consider the following data:

all, some, no, not all

always, sometimes, never, not always

A and B [all true], A or B [some true], (neither) A nor B [none true], A or not B [not all true]

both of them, one of them, neither of them, not both of them

There are single words for ‘all’ ‘always’ ‘and’ and ‘both’ but you need to use multiple words to get the meaning ‘not all’ ‘not always’ ‘or not’ and ‘not both’. Why is that?

First notice:

“Some As are B” implicates “Not all As are B”

“X happens sometimes” implicates “X does not happen always”

“A or B” implicates “not both A and B are true”

“One of them is here” implicates “Not both of them is here”

So the explanation is: we don’t need a word for “not all” because “some” already implicates “not all”.

Neo-Gricean accounts of the maxims

Here’s Horn’s position:

First, Quality is a special maxim that is not like the other ones. If we think our conversational partners are opting out of Quality, the entire enterprise of implicature can’t get off the ground. There’s something fundamental about the idea that you should speak the truth.

The other maxims and their associated submaxims can be simplified into two maxims: Q and R.

Q and R

Q Principle: “Say as much as you can that’s true except for what R tells you not to say”

Quantity 1. Make your contribution as informative as is required.

Manner 1. Avoid obscurity.

Manner 2. Avoid ambiguity.

R Principle: “Say no more than you have to except for what Q tells you to say”

Quantity 2. Do not make your contribution more informative than is required.

Relation. Be relevant.

Manner 3. Be brief.

Manner 4. Be orderly.

Essential “minimax” idea: maximize information that’s asked for while minimizing information that isn’t.

Markedness and implicature

Here’s some pairs:

1. Are you able to open the window?

1’. Can you open the window?

2. He got the machine to stop.

2’. He stopped the machine.

3. I am going to marry you.

3’. I will marry you.

4. My brother went to the church.

4’. My brother went to church.

5. It’s not impossible that you’ll solve the problem.

5’. It’s possible that you’ll solve the problem.

(Here, violating manner indicates the absence of a generalized implicature, usually lexically associated with certain words.)