Evaluating Paul Grice's Theory of Conversational Implicature

In everyday conversations, we often imply rather than directly say what we mean. In fact, it would be inefficient and awkward–perhaps even impossible–to conduct our conversations by taking utterances at face value. Paul Grice was the first person to highlight and analyze this ubiquitous feature of our everyday language, terming it 'implicature'. In this paper, I first discuss Grice's definitions and theory of conversational implicature. Next, I present some counterarguments and problematize Grice's theory. Finally, I discuss some interesting applications and conclude with whether Grice provides a robust, satisfactory theory of conversational implicature and future topics to investigate.

Grice's definition of conversational implicature is closely connected to what we typically think of as implying. Implicature is the meaning that we intend to convey that goes beyond what we strictly *say,* where what is *said* is defined as "closely related to the conventional meaning of the worlds (the sentence) he has uttered" (44[1]). An example Grice offers is a professor asked to write a letter of recommendation for a philosophy student (52). If the professor only writes a brief sentence saying, "This student has a strong command of English and shows up regularly to class", then there is an implicature that is conveyed without explicitly saying: that the student has no other commendable trait as a philosopher and is no good for whatever position they are applying for. The implicature is highly dependent on the context of the utterance. If the professor was not asked to write a traditional letter of recommendation but to make a comment on the student's English skills and class attendance, then the above sentence would not have any implicature. Implicature is different from implying as implicatures do not necessarily logically follow from what is *said*—i.e., the sentence does not actually rule out the possibility that the student is, in fact, brilliant.

[1] All citations from *Logic and Conversation* H.P Grice, University College London. https://www.ucl.ac.uk/ls/studypacks/Grice-Logic.pdf

Furthermore, the implicature is not dependent on the conventional content of the utterance. For example, when asked to write a letter of recommendation, the professor could say "This student has great fashion and is amazing at chess" and achieve the same implicature that the student has nothing praiseworthy as a philosopher.

Then, Grice, as a rationalist, believes that there must be a rational link between the said and the implicature. He argues that standard conversational practices used to understand implicatures are not just an "empirical fact" i.e., it is not arbitrarily this way simply because it has *always* been this way. Rather, he argues that conversational practices are "reasonable" for us to follow (48). Thus, Grice introduces a set of logical tools that allow us to conduct philosophical analysis on this 'link' between the set and the implicature and derive the implicature. This logical tool is the Cooperative Principle and its four maxims.

Grice notes that all typical conversations can fall under the Cooperative Principle (CP), which states that since talking is a type of rational and purposeful behavior, a conversation can be seen as a rational and cooperative exchange of information. This conversation has a topic, whether implicit/explicit and shifting/stable and at any moment in the conversation, there is an everchanging set of possible conversational responses (45). CP specifically states that "Make your contribution such as it is required, at the stage at which it occurs, by the accepted purpose or direction of the talk exchange in which you are engaged" (45). Here, it must be noted that CP is not normative nor descriptive; Grice is not making an argument that we *should* follow CP, or even that everyone typically follows CP. Rather, he is saying that for a conversation to even function, we must (perhaps subconsciously) assume that all participants in the conversation follow CP. For example, although any utterance could be potentially false, we usually assume that the person we are talking to is not lying. Otherwise, all conversations would be pointless.

There are four maxims in CP, some of which can be further subdivided into more specific conversational rules. They are *Quantity*, *Quality*, *Relation*, and *Manner*. *Quantity* can be broken into a) Contribute as much information as needed and b) Contribute no more information than needed. The maxim of *Quality* means you should make your contribution true, meaning a) Do not say what you believe is not true b) Do not say what you have no "adequate evidence" for. The third maxim of *Relation* is simply defined by Grice as "Be relevant"[2]. Finally, the maxim of *Manner* designates how something is said (rather than what is said, like the previous maxims) and includes the supermaxim "Be perspicuous" and includes many sub-maxims, such as "avoid obscurity of expression", "avoid ambiguity", "be brief", and "be orderly" (56). Grice notes that these four maxims are not necessarily equally important. For example, failing to fulfill *Manner* by being a little verbose is not as bad as violating *Quality* by lying.

Conversational implicature then relates to CP and its maxims through failures to fulfill the four maxims: these failures direct our attention to the presence of some non-literal meaning. There are four categories of violations. First is *Violation,* where the speaker quietly violates the maxim, often with the intent to deceive or mislead. The second is *Opt-Out,* where the speaker indicates that they are violating a maxim. For example, Bob might say "I heard there's a sale at Starbucks, but I'm not sure if it's true" to opt-out out of quality. The third is *Clash*, where the context causes two maxims to stand in opposition, and it becomes impossible to fulfill. For example, suppose someone asks you "How many cats does Emily have?", and while you are certain that she has at least one, you are not sure if she has two or three. If you say, "At least one", you would not be fulfilling quantity, and if you say "Three" you would not be fulfilling quality. Finally, there is *Flout* where the speaker neither violates

[2] Grice admits that the question of how to determine relevance is tricky and writes that he will save this for future works.

nor opts-out from a maxim, and there is no clash. The speaker blatantly fails to fulfill a maxim i.e., he fails to fulfill a maxim in an intentionally obvious manner. Grice argues that this manner of violation characteristically results in a conversational implicature. For example, suppose that your roommate has asked what how's the temperature today day. If you say, "It's boiling out there!" your you do not mean that it is literally the temperature of boiling 212°. You have flouted the maxim of Quality, and in doing so your friend understands the implicature is simply that it is very hot.

From the above example, Grice then describes a general pattern for deriving a conversational implicature. This goes as follows: if we are having a conversation and I say *P* to implicate *Q*, then you should reason as follows: "She has said *P,* which would break one of the conversational maxims and indicate that she is not following CP unless *Q* is true. However, given the context, there is no reason for me to believe that she is not following CP. Hence, she has implicated Q." (50). The exact maxim that is violated helps determine the meaning of the implicature. Grice provides many examples of applications of this reasoning. One such example is A says, "Smith doesn't seem to have a girlfriend these days" to which B responds, "He has been paying a lot of visits to New York lately." According to Grice, B has flouted the maxim of Relation and as such implicates that Smith has a girlfriend or at least some form of romantic interest in New York.

I now turn my discussion to an evaluation of Grice's theory of conversational implicature. One issue with Grice's theory is that it can only account for cases where the implicating utterance *clearly* violates one of the four conversational maxims, and many implicatures happen without such clear violations. Thus, it cannot account for a more subtle class of implicature where the implicating utterance itself makes sense in the conversational context and is *not* violating any maxims. For example, say that a Starbucks barista has arrived

early to open the store. The manager arrives 30 minutes later and sees that coffee beans have been delivered. When the manager enters the store, they exchange the following utterances:

Starbucks Manager: *The coffee beans just arrived and are outside the backdoor.*

Starbucks Barista: *Okay! I'll grab them and load them into the machine.*

The manager's utterance does fail any conversational maxims; it could simply be informative. However, the barista deduces the implicated request that they should grab the coffee bean. Upon inspecting the coffee machine, the manager might ask *Did you clean the machine?* Again, this question fulfills the four conversational maxims and does not seem to be a violation of CP (it could simply be a request for information). Yet there is the implicature that the machine might've not been properly cleaned. Another example might be that during the first course of the semester, the professor introduces students to a new course webpage and says, "This link is where you can submit your homework". Again, this utterance fulfills all four maxims, yet it implicates that students *should* (not just *can*) upload their homework here. Thus, it appears that CP need not be broken for implicatures.

A second problem with Grice's theory of conversational implicature is that while it ascertains the existence of an implicature, it does not provide a satisfactory answer to *how* the specific meaning is determined. Let us revisit Grice's example where A says, "Smith doesn't seem to have a girlfriend these days" and B responds, "He has been paying a lot of visits to New York lately." We can use CP and the four maxims to realize that B would be failing the maxim of Relevant unless he was implicating something, but just what that *something* is, is left open. If A assumes CP, then from B's response all that A knows is that B's statement somehow is relevant and responds to A's initial comment. A could reasonably believe that B is making his comment in agreement to A, and B implicates that the reason that Smith does not have a girlfriend is he's been clubbing and messing around with many girls in New

York[3]. Or perhaps Smith has been too busy with business trips in New York. Or perhaps Smith's previous family lives in New York and he is thinking of moving back in with his parents—there are many possibilities.

One might object in defence of Grice that in addition to CP and its maxims, Grice does write that "the context, linguistic or otherwise, of the utterance", "other items of background knowledge", and the fact that all above relevant information is known by all participants in the conversation are necessary to calculate the implicature. Perhaps information included in the context/background of this hypothetical scenario could allow A to calculate that B implicates that Smith has a girlfriend or romantic interest in New York. To this, I reply with two things 1) We can also easily imagine scenarios where even with background information and context, the exact meaning of the implicature is still unclear 2) Grice only briefly mentions context/background information. He does not provide a rational basis or logical toolset for how analyzing how to calculate implicature from context/background information. Thus, there remains a gap in Grice's theory.

The third problem with Grice's theory of conversational implicature is that it might falsely suggest that there is an implicature when there is none. One example might involve sudden changes of topic due to urgency. For example, while we are talking about something not entirely urgent (say, the Best Buy Black Friday sale), I might suddenly remember something more urgent (say, that our Uber is coming, or that something is due) and shift the conversation topic prematurely. In this case, I am flaunting the maxim of Relation, but not implicating anything. Another example involves multiple speakers when one says an utterance that violates a maxim to one listener but flouts it to another. For example, suppose that we are co-workers, and our supervisor has just implemented a new management system that we both strongly hate, and we talk and joke about how much we hate it all the time. One

[3] This is actually what I thought was implicated when I first read the example.

day, the manager walks into our office and asks me “How do you like the new management system?” and I respond “Oh, I love it! I think it’s great…” and go on to enthusiastically give reasons about why I love it. I might not say this in a sarcastic manner/with a sarcastic intent since I am only saying this to get on the good side of the manager or not hurt their feelings (or some other reason). Although you are aware that I am blatantly failing to fulfill the maxim of Quality (thus I am flouting it to you), and we might share a laugh about it after the manager leaves, I am not implicating anything.

Finally, after discussing some potential problems with Grice’s theory of conversational implicature, I discuss some relevant interesting topics.

One topic is the application to other languages: Grice’s conversational implicature theory surprisingly works successfully in languages with distinctly different conventions and grammatical rules. For example, in Chinese it is common to omit the indexical ‘I’, ‘you’ and ‘we’ in phrases such as “I’m hungry”, “How was your day” or “Where are we going today”. If we assume CP, then for ‘Hungry(饿了)’ to observe CP, the utterance could only refer to the speaker (since both the speaker and the listener know that the speaker can only talk about his/her own hunger level). Thus, even though we never omit indexicals in these contexts in English, Grice’s theory can still be applied. Another example is Japanese, a language that depends heavily on context and implicatures. The word ちょと(chotto) means ‘a little’, but it can also be used to reject requests. For example, if A asked B to play tennis on Saturday but B happens to be busy then, B would apologetically say ‘chotto…’ (‘It’s a little…’) and trail off. This politely implicates that B cannot make it. We can analyze this as flouting the maxim of Quantity (since B could obviously be providing more information about his ability attend tennis), and the implicature must be negative since if it is positive then B would not hesitate

in directly saying it. Hence, there is an implicature and A can fill in the blank that B implicates something like 'It's a little inconvenient so I cannot make it'[4].

Another related topic is implicatures and semantic shift—when the conventional meaning of words (when used within a certain context) shift due to its frequent association with an implicature. For example, although couple means 'two', if A says to B "Give me a couple of days to get X to you.", this does not violate any maxims of CP, but B would still be wrong to call A after two days and say, "Two days have passed, where is X?". This is because the way 'couple' has been used has transformed its meaning to not always mean 'a few' instead of strictly 'two'. A similar example is "Give me a second", where a second conventionally means a brief amount of time. Interestingly, "Give me a second" can be analyzed accurately using Grice's theory, while "Give me a few days cannot." This is because we know to give someone a second is impossible, while a couple of days may seem a reasonable timeframe. As such, perhaps we can think of different implicatures having different 'semantic distances' from what is said, and the larger this distance is, the more likely Grice's theory be used to can correctly analyze and identify an implicature.

In conclusion, in this essay, I have provided an overview and explanation of Grice's theory of conversational implicature based on *Logic and Conversation.* I have shown that although Grice's conversational implicature and the framework of CP and maxims can usually successfully determine the existence of an implicature, there are cases where it either fails to calculate a precise implicature, fails to detect an implicature at all, or falsely detects an implicature. As such, while the Gricean theory is a valuable analytical framework to understand how certain implicatures may arise, it should be modified to account for corner cases before it can be considered a robust theory accounting for all conversational implicatures. One example of a modification might be to account for the fact that

[4] However, it should also be noted that reason why B cannot make it cannot be confidently discerned.

conversational implicatures do 'fail' in daily life, in the sense that sometimes others only hear the surface-level meaning[5]. This modification might be achieved through interdisciplinary investigations with the psychology of language. Finally, it would be interesting to consider the role of implicature in the development of language. Perhaps motions or objects were used to implicate a meaning, and repetitive implicatures resulted in a change in conventional meaning and thus a semantic link between the object and the meaning—much like the semantic shift of 'couple'.

[5] A funny example is a few days ago after my roommate's friend had dinner at my apartment, she used "it's getting a little late" to implicate that the friend should leave, but the friend missed the implicature and so my roommate went to shower and left him alone in the living room to force him to leave. What exactly caused the implicature failure here?