

'Baby Doc's', decision to quit the island.' The desire 'to say and not say' something at the same time is lucidly discussed by Dascal (1983).

The important thing to note in each of the foregoing cases is that it is the very blatancy of the non-observance which triggers the search for an implicature.

Grice made clear that there are many occasions on which speakers fail to observe the maxims, even though they have no desire to generate an implicature. These categories are discussed in the next section and seem to cover all possible instances of non-observance.

3.7 Other categories of non-observance of the conversational maxims

In his first paper (1975: 49) Grice listed three ways in which a participant in a talk exchange may fail to fulfil a maxim: the speaker may **flout** a maxim, **violate** a maxim or **opt out** of observing a maxim. He later added a fourth category of non-observance: **infringing** a maxim. Several writers since Grice have argued the need for a fifth category — **suspending** a maxim. Having made all these distinctions, it is extremely irritating to note that Grice himself does not always use the terms consistently and remarkably few commentators seem to make any attempt to use the terms correctly. The distinctions Grice originally made are important for a full understanding of his theory. We have already examined flouting in detail and I shall now take each of the others in turn.

3.7.1 Violating a maxim

Many commentators incorrectly use the term 'violate' for all forms of non-observance of the maxims. But in his first published paper on conversational cooperation (1975), Grice defines 'violation' very specifically as the **unostentatious** non observance of a maxim. If a speaker violates a maxim s/he 'will be liable to mislead' (1975: 49).

Let us take as an example an extract from a fictional interaction between Martin and his wife, Alice.²¹

Example 21

Alice has been refusing to make love to her husband. At first he attributes this to post-natal depression, but then he starts to think she may be having an affair:

'Allice. I've got to ask you this.'

He stopped.

'Ask me then—'

'Will you give me a truthful answer? However much you think it'll hurt me?'

Alice's voice had a little quaver.

'I promise.'

Martin came back to his chair and put his hands on its back and looked at her.

'Is there another man?'

Alice raised her chin and looked at him squarely.

'No,' she said. 'There isn't another man.'

And then Martin gave a long, escaping sigh, and grinned at her and said he thought they had better finish the champagne, didn't she?

It is later established that Alice's assertion that she is not having an affair with another man is true, but not the whole truth (she is, in fact, having an affair with a woman). But there is nothing in the formulation of Alice's response which would allow Martin to deduce that she was withholding information. This unostentatious violation of the maxim of Quantity generates the intentionally misleading implicature that Alice is not having an affair with anyone.

The next example is authentic (naturally-occurring examples are quite difficult to come by because, of course, you do not generally find out that you have been misled):

Example 22

An English athlete, Dianne Modahl, the defending Commonwealth Games 800 metres champion, pulled out of her opening race and returned to England. Caroline Searle, press officer for the England team, said:²²

'She has a family bereavement; her grandmother has died.'

The next day it was announced that Ms Modahl had been sent home following a positive test for drugs. What Ms Searle had said was true, but the implicature (that the reason for Modahl's

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returning home was a bereavement) was false.

Pragmatically misleading (or potentially pragmatically misleading) utterances of this sort are regularly encountered in certain **activity types** (see chapter 7), such as trials, parliamentary speeches and arguments. So regularly do they occur, in fact, that they could be seen as the norm for this type of interaction, and be interpreted in that light by participants. I return to this point in section 3.7.4.

At first blush, it might appear that violating a maxim is the exact opposite of flouting a maxim. In example 21, Alice says something which is 'true' (as far as it goes) in order to imply an untruth. In the case of a flout (as in example 3), the speaker blatantly fails to observe the maxim of Quality at the level of what is said, but nevertheless implies something which is true. All the examples of flouts which Grice himself gives are of this order. However, there is no principled reason to expect that an implicature will be 'true' — speakers can imply a lie as easily as they can say one (as in example 7).

3.7.2 Infringing a maxim

A speaker who, with no intention of generating an implicature and with no intention of deceiving, fails to observe a maxim is said to 'infringe' the maxim. In other words, the non-observance stems from imperfect linguistic performance rather than from any desire on the part of the speakers to generate a conversational implicature. This type of non-observance could occur because the speaker has an imperfect command of the language (a young child or a foreign learner), because the speaker's performance is impaired in some way (nervousness, drunkenness, excitement), because of some cognitive impairment, or simply because the speaker is constitutionally incapable of speaking clearly, to the point, etc.

3.7.3 Opting out of a maxim

A speaker opts out of observing a maxim by indicating unwillingness to cooperate in the way the maxim requires. Examples of opting out occur frequently in public life, when the speaker cannot, perhaps for legal or ethical reasons, reply in the way normally expected. On the other hand, the speaker wishes to avoid generating a false implicature or appearing uncooperative. Examples of such cases could include a priest, counsellor or even

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an investigative journalist refusing to relay information given in confidence, or a police officer refusing to release the name of an accident victim until the victim's relatives have been informed. Here is a typical example from a British M.P.:

Example 23

The Conservative M.P., Teddy Taylor, had been asked a question about talks he had had with Colonel Gaddafi.²³

'Well, honestly, I can't tell you a thing, because what was said to me was told me in confidence'.

Another reason frequently given for 'opting out' is that giving the requested information might hurt a third party (example 24) or put them in danger (example 25):

Example 24

Ruth Rendell, a famous crime novelist, was being interviewed by an equally famous psychiatrist, Professor Anthony Clare. Clare asked Rendell about her husband.²⁴

AC: You married him twice. You've been interviewed many times, but I've never seen a satisfactory explanation for that very interesting fact.

RR: Well [pause] I don't think I can give you one. That is not to say that I don't know it but I do know it but I cannot give it. I don't think that to give it would be a very good idea, particularly for my husband.

Example 25

The first speaker is a caller to a radio chat show. The second speaker is the host, Nick Ross.²⁵

Caller: ... um I lived in uh a country where people sometimes need to flee that country.

Ross: Uh, where was that?

Caller: It's a country in Asia and I don't want to say any more.

When speakers expressly opt out of observing a maxim in this way, they make explicit reference to the way in which speakers normally attend to the maxims, which in turn offers support for Grice's contention that interactants have a strong

expectation that, *ceteris paribus* and unless indication is given to the contrary, the CP and the maxims will be observed.

3.7.4 Suspending a maxim

Several writers have suggested that there are occasions when there is no need to opt out of observing the maxims because there are certain events in which there is no expectation on the part of any participant that they will be fulfilled (hence the non-fulfilment does not generate any implicatures). This category is necessary to respond to criticisms of the type made by Keenan (1976) who proposed as a counter-example to Grice's theory of conversational implicature the fact that in the Malagasy Republic participants in talk exchanges:

... regularly provide less information than is required by their conversational partner, even though they have access to the necessary information.

(Keenan 1976: 70)

Keenan's example does not falsify Grice's theory if it is seen as a case where the maxim of Quantity is suspended. There is no expectation at all on the part of interactants that speakers will provide precise information about their relatives and friends, in case they draw the attention of evil spirits to them. Although the Malagasy speaker may appear to be underinformative at the level of what is said, the uninformativeness is nevertheless systematic, motivated and generates no conversational implicature for members of that community. Here are two further examples, taken from a novel set on a Navajo reservation, which make explicit reference to the suspension of a maxim:

Example 26

*The speaker in this example and the next is the daughter of a murdered man. She is talking to Officer Jim Chee of the Navajo Tribal Police.*²⁶

'Last time you were with that FBI man — asking about the one who got killed,' she said, respecting the Navajo taboo of not speaking the name of the dead. 'You find out who killed that man?'

Example 27

'... they told him he could not be cured,' Bistie's Daughter said in a shaky voice. She cleared her throat, wiped the back of her hand across her eyes. 'That man was strong,' she continued. 'His spirit was strong. He didn't give up on things. He didn't want to die. He didn't hardly say anything at all. I asked him. I said, "My Father, why —"'. She stopped.

Never speak the name of the dead, Chee thought. Never summon the *chindi* to you, even if the name of the ghost is Father.

In examples 26 and 27 the speaker fails on three occasions to observe the maxim of Quantity. On the first occasion she refers vaguely to 'the FBI man', thereby generating the (true) implicature that she does not know his name. Then she refers in a similarly vague fashion to 'the one who got killed' and 'that man'. Normally this would generate exactly the same implicature (that she does not know the name of the man). However, among the Navajo this implicature would not be generated in the case of a person who had died a violent or premature death, because to mention his or her name in these circumstances is taboo. In this case the non-observance of the maxim of Quantity generates no implicatures because all the participants know that it is suspended.

Suspensions of the maxims may be culture-specific (as in Keenan's example and in examples 26 and 27) or specific to particular events. For example, in the acting community in Britain (but not among the population at large) people refrain from uttering the name of Shakespeare's play *Macbeth* because to do so is supposed to bring bad luck. They refer instead to 'The Scottish Play', thereby failing to observe the maxim of Quantity. Similarly (but less obviously, perhaps), as I observed in section 3.7.1, in most cultures the maxim of Quantity appears to be selectively suspended in, for example, courts of law, Committees of Inquiry or indeed in any confrontational situation where it is held to be the job of an 'investigator' to elicit the truth from a witness. The witnesses are not required or expected to volunteer information which may incriminate them, and no inference is drawn on the basis of what they do not say. (This is in direct contrast to the implicatures drawn in example 21. A man could reasonably expect his wife to answer fully — he should not have to wheedle every piece of information out of her, as if they were

in a court of law.) We find similar instances of the suspension of the maxim of Quality in the case of funeral orations and (until recently) in the case of obituaries,²⁷ of the maxim of Manner in the case of poetry, of the maxim of Quantity in the case of telegrams, telexes and some international phone calls and of all three maxims in the case of jokes. It is hard to find any convincing examples in which the maxim of Relation is suspended (see section 4.2.4).

3.8 Testing for implicature

The distinction between what a speaker's words mean and what they imply should by now be clear. In 'Logic and conversation' Grice discussed six 'tests' for distinguishing semantic meaning from implied meaning, and I outline them below as a useful way of summarizing the material covered in chapters 1-3. Grice (1975) listed six distinct properties of implicatures, but I have condensed them into four.

3.8.1 Non-detachability and non-conventionality

Some aspects of meaning are semantic and can be changed or removed by **relexicalization** or **reformulation** (replacing one word or phrase with another closely related one, but lacking the supposedly unpleasant connotation). Here are three examples where one participant overtly relexicalizes:

Example 28

*Speaker A is a newly-widowed woman who finds living with her interfering mother a strain.*²⁸

- A: I wish you wouldn't creep up on me, Mother.
 B: I don't creep, dear. I merely refrain from making gratuitous noise.

Example 29

*John Stanley, M.P., was defending the Government's new policy of questioning social security claimants closely about their availability for work.*²⁹

'Methods of interrogation' was the phrase you used. I think we would call it "questioning".'

Example 30

*A radio interview with Jim Morgan, of the management of Rail-track Southwest, during the eighth week of a signalworkers' strike.*³⁰

Int: Some will obviously, and indeed already have, accused you of trying to bribe staff to cross the picket lines.

J.M.: Well, it's not a bribe to staff to cross picket lines, it's an offer.

In the case of 'creep', 'methods of interrogation' and 'bribe', the unpleasant associations are part of the meaning of the lexical item. Replacing the offending lexical item with a synonym which does not have such negative connotations removes the unpleasantness.³¹ This is not possible with implicature. No matter how much you reword an utterance, the implicature remains. For example, my cats are on the large size. A visitor looked at one of them and said, 'Underfed, isn't he?' implying, thereby, that the animal was fat (when, in fact, he is merely big-boned). The same implicature would be maintained however the utterance had been relexicalized and regardless of whether or not the chosen adjective had positive or negative connotations: Frail/puny/skinny/delicate/light-on-his-feet/slimline, isn't he? — all carry the implicature that the cat is fat.

The distinction between semantic meaning and implicature-generated meaning cannot always be made so clearly. What begins as a conversational implicature may become *the* meaning of a lexical item. This may take place very slowly, as in the case of the word *goodbye*, the use of which has altered over the years while the form has changed to such a degree that its original meaning has become obscured. *Goodbye* is a contraction of *God be with you* and in the Middle Ages was widely used among Christians in a variety of ways and conveying a variety of implicatures, including being used as a salutation on meeting or valediction on parting. By Shakespeare's time it had become restricted to a farewell formula and has remained so ever since, while gradually changing its form:

1558: God be vvy you.³²

1668: To Mr Wren, to bid him 'God be with you'.³³

1818: And so your humble servant and good-b'bye!³⁴

Today, often contracted in British English to *bye-bye* or just

bye, it is used solely as a farewell formula by people of all religions and of none and the vast majority of people are almost certainly completely unaware of its original (religious) meaning.

Sometimes the movement from a phrase conveying a conversational implicature, via conventional implicature to semantic meaning can occur very quickly. During the 1980s the term 'creative accounting' came to mean 'cheating' and now means nothing else, as in the following example:³⁵

Example 31

Because of 'creative accountancy' used by high-spending boroughs, the GLC failed to take into account about £140 million.

The same was true in the following case but on this occasion 'being economical with the truth' came to mean 'lying' within days of being uttered by Sir Robert Armstrong and now it is used to mean nothing else:

Example 32

In November 1986 Mrs Thatcher was trying to prevent the publication in Australia of *Spycatcher*, a book by a former agent of MI5. Sir Robert Armstrong, who at that time was head of the British Civil Service, had admitted that a letter he had written to the Australian High Court might have given a misleading impression:

Judge: How does 'given a misleading impression' differ from lying?

R.A.: Lying is saying that which is untrue. Giving a misleading impression is being economical with the truth.

3.8.2 Implicature changes

Implicatures are the property of utterances, not of sentences and therefore the same words carry different implicatures on different occasions. Consider the sentence: *How old are you?* and how it is used in the three following examples:

Example 33

A young boy is talking to a colleague of his father.

A: It's my birthday today.

B: Many happy returns. How old are you?

A: I'm five.

Example 34

*This example is taken from a novel. Speaker A is talking to his son.*³⁶

A: How old are you, George?

B: I'm eighteen, Father.

A: I know how old you are, you fool.

Example 35

*A psychiatrist is talking to a woman patient.*³⁷

A: What do you do?

B: I'm a nurse, but my husband won't let me work.

A: How old are you?

B: I'm thirty-nine.

In each case the semantic meaning of *How old are you?* is the same, but the implicature is different. In example 33 it is a straightforward request for information; in example 34 the father is implying that the son's behaviour is inappropriate for a person of that age (more precisely, he is implying that it is time his son got a job) and the psychiatrist in example 35 is probably trying to prompt the patient to consider whether, at thirty-nine, she isn't old enough to make up her own mind about whether or not to work.

The following extract from a detective novel³⁸ also illustrates well the point that I am trying to make:

Example 36

The villagers in the story are hiding a fugitive suspected of murder. The conversation is between a villager and a rich incomer.

'What news of Alan Fenny now?'

'None, Mr Harding. Nobody knows anything.'

'I'll bet they don't,' said Thomas ...

[2 lines omitted]

'Food and drink and shelter. He must have those, mustn't he? Somewhere.'

'That's right,' said Gladys. 'But he hasn't been near his mother, that I do know.'

'I'll bet he hasn't,' said Thomas warmly.

In the third and the final lines the speaker uses virtually the same words. On the first occasion the expression was used ironically (the speaker knows full well that the villagers are hiding Alan), on the second occasion it was spoken in all seriousness (the villagers have told Alan that the police are watching his mother's house and he has given it a wide berth).

3.8.3 Calculability

As we have seen, the same words may convey, in different circumstances, very different implicatures. The implicature conveyed in one particular context is not random, however. It is possible to spell out the steps a hearer goes through in order to calculate the intended implicature. These are the steps which I described in section 3.6.2.1, in relation to examples 3 and 13.

3.8.4 Defeasibility

This is the most important difference between semantic meaning and implied meaning. The notion of 'defeasibility' means that an implicature can be cancelled. This allows the speaker to imply something, and then deny that implicature. We saw how this worked in example 24 when Ruth Rendell said 'I don't think I can give you one', then realized that she could have been understood to have implied that she didn't know the reason; she cancels that unwanted implicature by saying 'I do know it'. Here are three more examples in which, for a variety of reasons, an implicature is cancelled:

Example 37

- A: Let's have a drink.
B: It's not one o'clock yet.

An hour or so later:

- B: Let's have a gin and tonic — it's after one o'clock.
A: I didn't say that you could drink after one o'clock. I said that you couldn't drink before.

In this example, speaker A may be held to have implied that B could have a drink after one o'clock. However, in her second contribution she cancels that implicature. Notice that the implicature can be cancelled, without making complete nonsense of the first contribution.

Example 38

A and B are sisters. A is getting ready for a job interview:

- A: Did you get your velvet jacket back from the cleaners?
B: You're **not** borrowing it.
A: I don't want to borrow it. I just wondered if you'd got it back.
B: You just wondered!
A: Well, I haven't got anything decent to wear!

In this case we see that A does deny the implicature of her first question, but not very plausibly. When challenged she backs down and instead offers a justification for her implied request.

Example 39

The following is a newspaper report of a court case:³⁹

At this interruption Mr Findlay for the prosecution asked Churchill if he was denying that he had deliberately set his dog on Police Constable Lloyd. 'Yes, Sir', replied the defendant, 'I do deny it. When PC Lloyd walked into the club, I just said, "Oh look, Rambo, a copper" and the dog sort of made up his own mind.'

Here we have an even more improbable denial of an implicature, but what is important is that it *can* be denied. Nobody can prove that Findlay intended to set his dog on the police officer — he could, as he suggested, have simply been exchanging pleasantries with his pet.

Example 40

A letter to a newspaper shortly before Mrs Thatcher resigned as Prime Minister in November 1990:⁴⁰

For the sake of the country the PM should hold on until the summer.

This is no time of year for street parties.

In this case the writer has deliberately generated a false implicature (that she regrets that Mrs Thatcher may resign), which her second sentence immediately cancels. This sort of 'set 'em up and knock 'em down' technique is regularly used to

generate humour, and is used quite effectively here to make a political point.

As will be seen in chapter 5, the possibility of cancelling or denying an implicature is the most important reason why people choose to use it.

3.9 Conclusion

In this chapter we have explored one approach to explaining how people interpret indirectness. In chapters 5 and 6 we shall consider *why* people use indirectness in the first place — why don't they just say what they mean?

Notes

1. Reported in *The Guardian* 20 July 1994.
2. Mary Wesley (1983) *Harnessing peacocks*. Black Swan, London, p. 57.
3. Mary Wesley (1990) *A sensible life*. Black Swan, London, p. 160.
4. *But* has other, rarer, meanings as in: 'He's not only a fool but a blackguard' and 'You can but try'.
5. William Shakespeare, *All's well that ends well*, Act I, Scene iii.
6. Kaleidoscope Feature ('When I'm bad I'm better'). BBC Radio 4, 27 August 1994.
7. Grice also introduces the concept of **generalized conversational implicature**. This refers to utterances such as: *He ran over a dog*. The use of the indefinite article implies that the dog in question was not his own. The notion of generalized conversational implicature is of peripheral concern here and is also problematical. For good discussions of the issues see Levinson (1983: 126–7) or Green (1989: 94–5).
8. In semantics *imply* is used differently from the way it is used in pragmatics. In semantics it is used of a formal relation between propositions, e.g. 'She lives in London' implies 'She lives in England'.
9. Violet Needham (1948) *The boy in red*. Collins, London, pp. 236–7.

10. This is discussed in greater detail in my forthcoming book, *The dynamics of discourse*.

11. Report in *The Guardian*, July 1994.

12. Note that there is enormous cross-cultural variation.

13. From the film *Splash*. I owe this example to Samantha Oakes.

14. Allason writes under the pen-name of Nigel West. Speaking on BBC Radio 4, *Today*, 13 June 1986. During the years after the war a group of four men, highly placed in British Intelligence, had been exposed as spies. It was always suspected that there was a 'Fifth Man', still unmasked. A few years after this interview Allason was proved wrong: a man called Cairncross was exposed as the 'Fifth Man'.

15. Reported in *The Daily Mail*, 21 July 1994, but the incident took place in January of that year.

16. I am grateful to Dorothy Bond for this example.

17. William Shakespeare, *The taming of the shrew*. Act II, scene 1.

18. BBC Radio 4, 13 June 1986.

19. Alan Bennett (1988) *Talking heads*. BBC Enterprises, London, p. 32.

20. Elizabeth George (1994) *Playing for the ashes*. Bantam Press, London, p. 91.

21. Joanna Trollope (1989) *A village affair*. Black Swan, London, p. 157.

22. The reported events occurred at the Commonwealth Games in Victoria, Canada, 25 August 1994.

23. BBC Radio 4, 9 June 1991.

24. *In the psychiatrist's chair*. BBC Radio 4, 31 July 1994.

25. *Call Nick Ross*, BBC Radio 4, November 1991.

26. Tony Hillerman (1990) *Skinwalkers*. Sphere Books Limited, London, pp. 63 and 144.