Giving conversational implicatures the status they need and deserve   **Matthijs Westera**

1. Introduction   **ILLC, University of Amsterdam, m.westera@uva.nl**

We subscribe to the Gricean (1989) view that communication is about conveying intentions; that *speaker meaning* is what matters, *sentence meaning* being a mere instrument to convey it. This central role of speaker meaning calls for a reliable procedure to obtain the speaker meaning of an utterance; it requires what we call a STRONG view of conversational implicatures, according to which they are reliable meaning carriers, on a par perhaps with semantic entailments.

However, the STRONG view is challenged by at least three ideas, which to our awareness are almost universally accepted: (i) that conversational implicatures are *explicitly* and *contextually cancellable* (Grice, 1989)*;* (ii) that the generally weaker judgements found in experiments regarding supposed implicatures are a consequence of their inherent weakness; and (iii) that a *default* assumption of *speaker competence* is necessary for scalar implicatures (adopted by every 'Gricean' account of scalar implicatures since Mill (1867)). These seem to support what we call a WEAK view, according to which conversational implicatures are weaker than semantic entailments, defeasible *abductions* to the best explanation rather than solid *deductions*, reflecting only the hearer's imperfect guess at what the speaker may have meant (for a recent such characterisation, see Geurts, 2011).

In earlier work we have argued against (iii), the necessity of a competence assumption, based on (1), where the implicature occurs despite the questioner explicitly not assuming competence:

(1) I'm probably asking the wrong person – you may not know this – but among John, Bill, Mary and Sue, who came to the party?

– John, Bill and Sue came.   *(Implicated: Mary didn't.)*

In the present paper we subject (i), explicit and contextual cancellability, and (ii), experiments, to scrutiny, and conclude in favour of the STRONG view.

2. Explicit cancellability

Explicit cancellability is taken to be illustrated by the following textbook examples:

(2) John was there, or Mary, or both.   *(Cancelled: not both.)*

(3) Some of the students came to the party. Indeed, *all* of the students came. *(Cancelled: not all.)*

(4) John is seeing a woman. (Oh, but) I don't mean to imply it's a romantic meeting.

Following Geurts (2011), we argue that these examples have been misinterpreted. In (2), the last disjunct makes an actual contribution to the sentence meaning (Van Rooij and Schulz, 2005), as might the rising tone on the second disjunct. Of course different sentence meanings will yield different implicatures just as they might yield different semantic entailments; and this is no reason to suppose that the former are in any sense weaker than the latter.

In (3), as Geurts observes, the "indeed" continuation is felicitous only if the "not all"-implicature *wasn't there to begin with*, e.g., it is felicitous in response to (5), but not in response to (6).

(5) Did some of the *students* come to the party?   – Yes, some […]. Indeed, *all* […].

(6) Did s*ome* or *all* of the students come to the party?   – *Some* […].   # Indeed, *all* […].

The felicity of (3) out-of-the-blue is therefore the result of *contextual underspecification*: the "indeed" continuation retroactively disambiguates the context to (5) rather than (6). The same pattern can be observed for (4), where contextual underspecification is to blame for the unintended possible inference that the seeing was romantic. Thus, (3) and (4) are disguised cases of *contextual cancellation*, to which we turn next. In the paper, we show that Grice's motivation for explicit cancellability already betrays its relationship with contextual cancellation. For now, let us conclude that the supposed explicit cancellability is a dubious motivation for the WEAK view.

3. Contextual cancellability

What counts as cooperative behaviour is context-dependent, e.g., the Maxim of Quantity depends on a conversational goal. This seems to compromise the reliability of conversational implicatures. Crucially, however, it only does so insofar as the relevant contextual features may be unknown to the hearer. Grice already reasoned that a mutual assumption of cooperativity, and hence mutual knowledge of what that entails, i.e., the relevant features of the context, is a precondition for conversational implicature. If a speaker wants to conversationally implicate something, she must therefore ensure that the required mutual knowledge obtains. Indeed, language provides tools that enable exactly that. Consider (7):

(7) Of John, Bill, Mary, and Sue, *John* and *Mary* came\.   *(Implicated: Bill and Sue didn't.)*

Focal stress on "John" and "Mary" reveals that a "wh"-question is addressed (e.g., Roberts, 1996), the partitive clause ("of ...") reveals the relevant alternatives, and the final falling pitch "\" indicates the utterance's compliance with the maxims (Westera, 2013). In uttering (7), a speaker actively provides the contextual features necessary for the implicature (and consequently, there is no context in which (7), pronounced thusly, lacks the implicature). In sum, contextual cancellability doesn't compromise the reliability of conversational implicatures, precisely because a speaker is *required* to ensure their reliability by sufficiently fixing the context. Hence, neither the implicatures' supposed explicit cancellability nor their actual contextual cancellability lends support to the WEAK view.

4. Experimental pragmatics

The foregoing points to a common cause for the mixed results in experimental pragmatics: the context is insufficiently fixed. The question under discussion, domain of quantification, focus, or the final intonation contour, and usually all of these at once, are left unspecified (or specified in an ineffective way, e.g., Zondervan (2010) tries to elicit the "not both" implicature of disjunction through disjunction-wide focus, instead of focus on "or" or on the individual disjuncts). Rather than supporting the WEAK view that pragmatic reasoning is inherently defeasible, these experiments reveal merely that *reasoning from unknown premises* (in this case: an underspecified context) is defeasible. But this, of course, is not surprising – it is the very definition of "defeasible".

Our considerations align with, and theoretically ground, the conclusion reached by Van Tiel et al (submitted), who aim to test the validity of such context-free experiments. Comparing different quantifiers, modals, adjectives and adverbs, they find a great variety in how readily participants compute a scalar implicature. For instance, "sometimes" is more often taken to imply "not always" than "pretty" is taken to imply "not beautiful". The authors explain this as follows: the difference between "sometimes" and "always" is *generally relevant*, while the difference between "pretty" and "beautiful" is not. The authors admit that their notion of "general relevance" and its role in pragmatics is left rather vague. But we can ground it in the foregoing discussion: if participants are left to *guess* what the context is like for a given sentence, of course they will do so based on the *typical usage* of that sentence – for what else is there to go on? The experiments thus reveal *what* we *generally* talk about, but they tell us very little about *how* we manage to talk about them.

We conclude that the WEAK view is based on several misunderstandings, that cloud the actual and necessary reliability of conversational implicatures as they occur in everyday conversation.

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