

Handout 22

Implicatures and maxims: Grice

CONVENTIONAL IMPLICATURE. Sometimes I do not say that something is the case, though that fact (that something is the case) can be deduced merely from the semantic meaning of words. Grice gives here the following example (modified to be rid of distracting indexicals):

(22-1) Churchill is an Englishman; Churchill is, therefore, brave.

The presence of 'therefore' suggests an inference. But it is truncated: the speaker suppressed one premiss, namely:

(22-2) All Englishmen are brave.

The kind of inference where one of the premisses is omitted, sometimes deliberately, is called 'enthymeme'. In the present case especially, you may think that it is in fact insinuated: one does wish to commit himself neither to a jingoistic and possibly offensive claim (22-2), nor to an argument based on that premiss. One only wishes to hint at the premiss.

In any event, Grice's claim here is *different*. It is not that the premiss (22-2) is implicated. It is rather that the very inference from 'x is an Englishman' to 'x is brave' is an implicature. I have not said that bravery follows from Englishmanhood. I have said perhaps that bravery follows from something, but what that something is was left out of the semantic content.

Still, in this instance the implicature is determined by the conventional meaning of 'therefore', rather than by the peculiarities of the occasion. Every competent English speaker is likely to understand (or even should understand) that bravery follows from Englishmanhood. How exactly it follows, whether the suppressed premiss (22-2) is required for the utterance to be valid, whether the utterance was meant to convey a valid argument—all of these are different questions.

THE COOPERATIVE PRINCIPLE. What is the point of conversation? Presumably people do not assemble merely to exchange random sounds. Even there is an *appearance* of random sounds emitted by speakers in a conversation, we should still think of the speakers as communicating. Pretty much by definition, in any conversation a speaker intends to be intelligible to the hearer, and the hearer interprets the speaker as (at least) attempting to be intelligible to the hearer. Recalling Grice's 'Meaning', we can say that utterances in a conversation are endowed with non-natural meaning. Further, the possibility of such meaning requires cooperation. The speaker coordinates his utterances with the presumed interpretation of the hearer. In turn, the hearer coordinates his interpretation with the presumed intention of the speaker. This coordination is possible by the mutual adoption of certain rules that an intelligible utterance is expected to follow.

How, in practical terms, could the speaker make his utterance intelligible? The basic rule for him is to make an utterance *appropriate* to the (putative) purpose and to the occasion of the conversation.

Question 1 (The Pioneer plaque). In the 1970s NASA sent a message to alien civilisations on board of *Pioneer* space probe (Figure 1). Explain how the plaque's creators followed the Cooperative Principle.

CONVERSATIONAL MAXIMS. Grice lists four maxims divided into further sub-maxims. Let us comment on each.

MAXIM OF QUANTITY. The speaker is required to provide information appropriate to the purpose, but not too much information. So in the following exchange on the street:

(22-3) A: What's the time?
B: It is two o'clock.

the speaker *B* seems to comply with the maxim of quantity. We imagine that if *B* tried to provide an *extremely* accurate information with the precision of an atomic clock, that would defy the purpose of the exchange (too long, too complicated to understand etc.). On the other hand, if the answer were, 'It's between twelve and six o'clock', then the exchange would equally fail to achieve its purpose. All of this is true, unless *B* *deliberately* violated the maxim and it was reasonably clear to *A* that he did so. More on that in a moment.

MAXIM OF QUALITY. The speaker is required to provide 'good' information, that is, describe the world in accordance with the evidence he has. So in the example above *B* is expected to deliver an answer after consulting his watch. On the other hand, if the hearer *A* takes *B*'s utterance at face value, seriously, then he should believe that *B* had at least some evidence on which to base his claim.

MAXIM OF RELEVANCE. About this mysterious maxim 'Be relevant!' Grice simply says that it contains many problems. Later in page 28 he says that, by this maxim, the speaker is required to provide information 'appropriate' to the occasion. And then we see why this maxim is troublesome: it now seems to be just a paraphrase of the Cooperative Principle! All other maxims in fact can be seen as just specific consequences of this very general maxim. This in fact is the direction later taken by Relevance theory (see various writings by Dan Sperber and Deirdre Wilson).

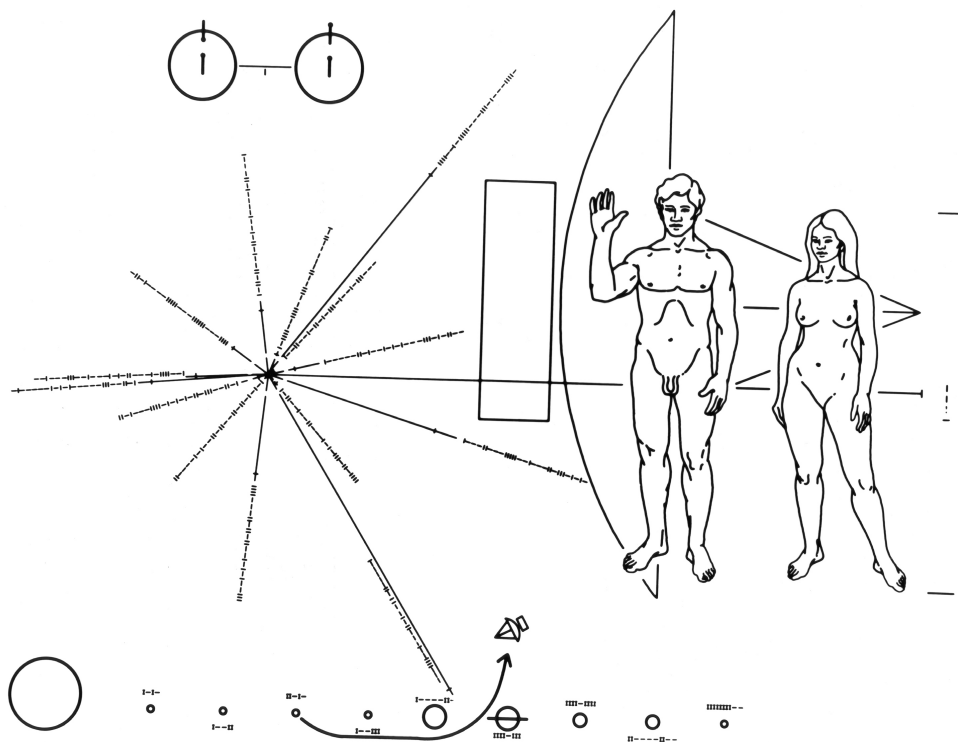


Figure 1: The Pioneer plaque

MAXIM OF MANNER. Into this family fall various sub-maxims having to do with clarity (perspicuity). The speaker is expected to be brief, orderly, avoid ambiguity. *B*'s utterance in (22-3) seems to meet these criteria.

Interestingly, Grice also mention the maxim of politeness (not to be confused with manner). He grants that such a maxim is normally observed, but insists that it is not essential for delivery of information. But you may wonder whether politeness is just a version of 'appropriateness', and thus that it is another candidate for a very general maxim at the level of the Cooperative Principle. However, it is easy to see that the maxim of politeness will clash with at least some of Gricean maxims.

Question 2. Give examples illustrating how politeness may clash with Gricean maxims.

IMPLICATURES FROM MAXIMS. The speaker may fail to follow the maxims for any number of reasons. Consider the Maxim of quality. The speaker may furtively lie. He may lie blatantly. He may lie to prioritise other maxims, such as the Maxim of quantity.

Question 3. Give an example illustrating the clash between the Maxim of quality and the Maxim of quantity.

Sometimes he may *exploit* the maxims. He will violate a maxim in such a way as to let the audience understand that the maxim is violated and draw their own conclusions. That is, on these occasions the speaker will cooperate by violating the maxims. These are the occasions where the speaker will imply that *q*, but only by stating that *p* (and without stating that *q*). The proposition *q*, in other words, will have to be calculated on the basis of the speaker's actual utterance and the assumption of his commitment to the maxims.

More precisely, the speaker will on such occasions be supposed (by the audience) to be aware that the proposition *q* is required to reconcile his utterance (the assertion that *p*) with his commitment to the Cooperative Principle. Further, in order to implicate that *q*, the speaker must believe that the audience can grasp *q* after a reasonable calculation.

Remark 4. It is not entirely clear from Grice's discussion whether exploitation of maxims is the only way of generating conversational implicatures. The examples in page 32 presumably show that it is not the only way. But it remains unclear why in these cases the speaker is not *exploiting* the maxims. Perhaps the difference is of degree. Sometimes the speaker very 'blatantly' violates the maxims, sometimes less so. Only in the former case we can speak of 'exploitation'.

Consider the utterance (21-4). Paul apparently fails to give a relevant answer. What does being in prison have to do with doing well in the job? So Ann, if she assumes that Paul is not merely blabbering but trying to communicate, must identify some further proposition that would be sufficient for making Paul a cooperative agent. That proposition may be, 'Ludwig has not got into a fight', 'Ludwig has not engaged in backroom dealing' etc. Which proposition exactly is implicated should be determined based on background knowledge shared by Ann and Paul (say, they both know that Ludwig is generally aggressive).