

Nuances of Implicitness

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Abstract – Meaning has been a thorny, controversial and problematic aspect in the study of language. Further, there is a layer of meaning that has stemmed from the traditional view in pragmatic theory that a distinction exists between *saying* and *implying*. This distinction between ‘what is said’ and ‘what is implicated’ has become one of the essential components in pragmatics and the philosophy of language. While the distinction between the explicit content and the implicit import of an utterance is widely accepted, reflection on this distinction indicates that taking things to simply belong to saying or implying is in fact insufficient. Moreover, there is still room for argument whether any such two-way distinction can do justice to other nuances of meaning involved in utterance interpretation. The distinctions of sentence meaning/utterance meaning, sentence meaning/speaker meaning, and the basic saying/implying have recently been extended to encompass other offshoots that have stemmed in larger part from implicature theory. These include the following dichotomies: implicature/implicature; implicature/explicature; implicature/entailment; implicature/presupposition; implicature/enrichment; and implicature/inference. It is the aim of the present paper to go through this distinction to show the other nuances of implicitness based on the theory of implicature and how far the basic distinction between saying and implying holds when treating these offshoots. The findings of the present paper indicate that the implicature theory holds so influential that it is the basis for all other ramifications and nuances of implicitness, but that the basic distinction needs to be re-defined. Further, these further distinctions include but not necessarily exhaust all nuances of implicitness of meaning as there is still much to be said about the *unsaid yet implied*. Moreover, ‘what is said’ is closely related to the conventional meaning of the sentence, but four levels must be distinguished: sentence meaning, what is said in the semantic sense, what is said in the pragmatic sense, and what is implied.

Keywords: saying, implying, implicated, implicature, implicature, explicature, inference, entailment, presupposition, sentence meaning, utterance meaning

1. Introduction

It is widely accepted that there is a distinction between the explicit content of an utterance and its implicit effect. Thus, within linguistic pragmatics and the philosophy of language, there is a tendency to draw a distinction between the ‘lexical (linguistic) meaning’ of the sentence (‘what is said’ by an utterance of the sentence) and ‘speaker meaning’, (or what is conveyed by the speaker). In other words, a distinction is commonly drawn between

what a speaker's words literally mean and what a speaker means by his or her words over and above what his or her words literally mean.

Further, multiple levels of speaker meaning coexist; speakers can use utterances to mean one thing at an explicit level, but mean something else at an implicit level. Sometimes sentences are 'heard' to have implications that they do not strictly have. Some regard utterance meaning as a species of speaker meaning; others regard it as a distinct level of meaning.

This research aims at presenting the ways in which the explicit/implicit distinction is depicted in linguistic pragmatics and the philosophy of language, to reveal the nature of the other ramifications, offshoots, and nuances of implicitness based on the theory of implicature. Another aim is to find out how far the basic distinction between the explicit and the implicit holds when treating these offshoots and nuances of implicitness; and further, to what extent any two-way distinction is sufficient to capture the nuances and levels of meaning involved in utterance interpretation.

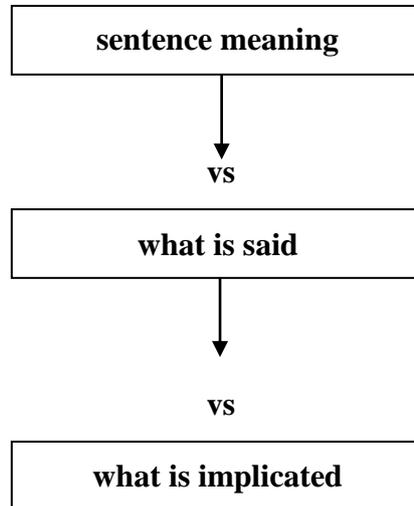
2. The Sentence 'Literal'/Utterance Meaning Distinction

The first distinction to start with is the most basic one holding between sentence 'literal' and utterance meaning (Levinson, 1995). This distinction is not new; still it has its own share of confusion. For Cruse, sentence meaning refers to "the combination of assertion and what is asserted in the literal, contextualized use of a declarative sentence," while an utterance meaning refers to "the totality of what the speaker intends to convey by making an utterance. Sentence meaning may not adequately represent the speaker's intention by making a statement or a reply that is beyond expectation or non-standard, but utterance meaning does" (2003: 21-2).

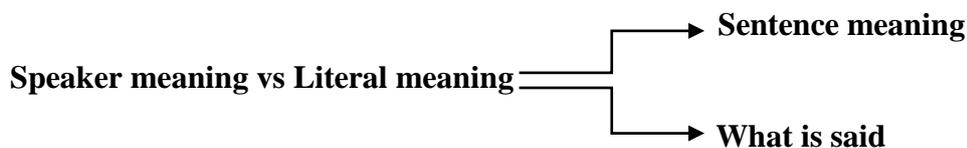
The literal meaning of the utterance is the proposition it provides. The literal meaning can be defined as 'what is said'. Levinson (1995: 93) subdivides the 'utterance meaning' into 'speaker meaning' and 'pragmatic meaning'. Levinson employs the terms 'utterance-token meaning' vs. 'utterance-type meaning' for these. The 'utterance-token meaning' (or speaker meaning) is what is intended or conveyed by the speaker in a given situation. 'Utterance-type meaning' (or pragmatic meaning), on the other hand, is "a level of systematic pragmatic inference based on general expectations about how language is normally used." (ibid.)

Some linguists object to the notion that sentences have a literal meaning and that what is said always depends on the context, but still make a distinction between what is said and what is implicated. Clark (1996:144), for instance, points out that some linguistic expressions do not possess a literal meaning as they do not represent anything. The important point here, however, is that there is a 'pragmatic' level of meaning which goes beyond what the strings of words mean. Levinson's preferred interpretation is that "there are just two levels to a theory of communication: a level of sentence meaning (grammar) and a level of speaker-meaning (pragmatics)" (Levinson, 2000: 22). However, Recanati (2001: 75) believes that "anyone who has reflected on the sentence meaning/utterance meaning distinction knows that a simple distinction is in fact insufficient. Two equally important distinctions must be made."

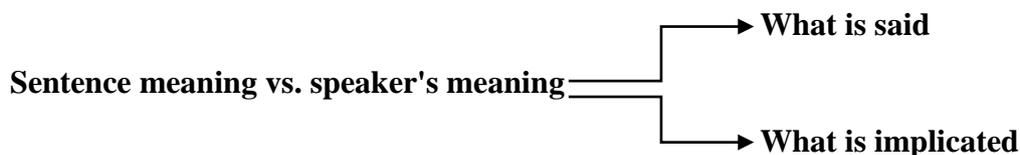
- A distinction between the linguistic meaning of a sentence-type, and what is said (the proposition expressed) by an utterance of the sentence.
- Second, we have the distinction between what is actually said and what is merely 'conveyed' by the utterance. 'What is said' being a term common to both distinctions, we end up with a triad:



Moreover, together, sentence meaning and what is said constitute the literal meaning of the utterance as opposed to what the speaker means:



The other interpretation stresses the commonality between what is said and what is implicated, both of which are taken to be pragmatically determined:



Essential to this interpretation is the claim that 'what is said', though constrained by the meaning of the sentence, is not as tightly constrained as is traditionally thought. (Recanati, 2001: 76-7)

3. The Saying/Implying Distinction

It was Paul Grice who triggered the philosophical discussions on the notion that, sometimes, language users mean more than what we say. The distinction between ‘what the speaker says’ and ‘what the speaker implies’, (Grice ‘The causal theory of perception’ 1961/67: 90-5), and later the distinction between ‘what is said’ and ‘what is implicated’ in his William James Lectures (Grice 1975; 1989: 22-40), have become inevitable in the philosophy of language and pragmatics.

The ‘what is said’ by an utterance and ‘what is implicated’ dichotomy has become the foundation of the explicit/implicit distinction. This distinction has become closely knotted with another distinction: semantics/pragmatics. For some philosophers and linguists they are seen as essentially one and the same; ‘what is said’ is equated with the truth conditional content of the utterance which in turn is equated with sentence meaning (semantics), leaving implicatures as the sole field of pragmatics.

According to Carston, (2002: 27), in Grice’s theory, ‘what is said’ takes part in two slightly different distinctions: “what is said versus what is implicated, and what is said versus what is meant.” The second distinction seems to allow for the possibility that “‘what is said’ is not meant, that it may not be part of what the speaker communicates but, rather, may be used as an instrument for the communication of something else.”

Implying requires additional cognitive effort to go beyond the literal meaning of an utterance in order to grasp the speaker’s intended meaning. Accordingly, what is said is seen as the truth-conditional content of the utterance and the implicatures of an utterance are additional communicated propositions which do not contribute to truth conditions. Further, implicated propositions may be either conversational or conventional.

4. The Conventional/Conversational Implicature Distinction

Grice distinguished two varieties of implicatures: conventional and conversational, nonconventional (1975: 45). Both types convey, beyond the semantic content of the words uttered, an additional meaning. The difference between them lies in the fact that in the conventional type, the same implicature is there whenever and wherever the utterance (with which the implicature is associated) is uttered. In nonconventional, conversational implicatures, on the other hand, what is implied depends heavily on the context of the utterance, that is, they are context dependent. Conversational implicature refer to the ‘assumptions suggested by the speaker and inferred by the hearer in an exchange situation. These assumptions are not encoded in the words said but are generated by the interlocutors’ cooperation to achieve rational communication’.

According to Davies, (2000: 16), discussions of this distinction also tend to confuse these two varieties. The distinction between the two types of implicature has as its basis the speaker-meaning and sentence-meaning distinction. A conventional implicature is an implication on the basis of the conventional meanings of the words occurring in a sentence; whereas a conversational implicature is an implication worked out through conversational

principles and assumptions, relying on more than the linguistic meaning of words in a sentence.

5. The Particularized/Generalized CIs Distinction

Conversational implicatures themselves divide into two sub-classes, particularized and generalized. The particularized conversational implicatures depend basically, in addition to the content of the utterance and the Cooperative Principle, on the context of utterance. The latter, which seem to be attached to all utterances of some kind, are generalized implicatures. They are relatively independent of context and that is why they usually get confused with conventional implicatures as both are associated with particular linguistic forms.

6. The Implicature/Explicature Distinction

Right after the implicature notion was established, some linguists and language philosophers suggested additional terms to account for other aspects of pragmatic inferences that implicature theory has overlooked. The first term was 'explicature' which is defined as "an ostensively communicated assumption which is inferentially developed from the incomplete conceptual representation (logical form) resulting from linguistic decoding." This contrasts with implicature which is an "ostensively communicated assumption that is derived solely via processes of pragmatic inference." (Carston and Uchida, 1998: 296)

It might be assumed that the explicature is no more than the literal meaning of the words uttered. But there is a great difference between the literal meaning of a given utterance and the explicature. An explicature entails the literal content of the expression uttered, but an implicature does not. Thus explicature lacks a functional independence from the literal sense, whereas an implicature has: it is fully distinct from and logically independent of what the speaker actually says.

In analysing implicature, however, two main propositions arise: an explicature is what the speaker explicitly expressed, or what was said, "...whether the speaker spoke truly or not rests on the truth or falsity of the explicature. The implicature is what the speaker conveyed implicitly, or in common parlance, what was implied." (Kearns, 2000: 271)

There is an assumption that any aspect of utterance meaning pragmatically determined is an implicature. Sperber and Wilson defend, instead, that "a number of problems with classical implicature analyses are resolved when the 'implicatures' are reanalysed as pragmatically determined aspects of explicit content." Moreover, they conceive of the explicit side of communication as "richer, more inferential, and hence more worthy of pragmatic investigation than do most pragmatists in the Gricean tradition." (1986: 183)

Many aspects of implicature meaning are considered by Relevance Theory as part of what is said or, explicature. An assumption is an explicature if and only if "it is a development of a logical form encoded by the utterance." When an assumption

communicated by the utterance is not explicit but implicit, we have an implicature. (Sperber and Wilson 1986: 182)

In the relevance-based account of utterance understanding, two distinctions are essential: the first is between linguistically decoded meaning and pragmatically inferred meaning; the second concerns the two kinds of assumption communicated by a speaker: explicature and implicature. Sperber & Wilson (1986/95: 182) draw the following distinction stating that an assumption that is communicated by an utterance is explicit, ‘explicature’, if it is a development of a logical form encoded by the utterance; and an assumption communicated by utterance which is not explicit is implicit ‘implicature’. The definitions above make it clear that the conceptual content of an implicature is based on pragmatic inference while the conceptual content of an explicature is a combination of decoded linguistic meaning and pragmatically inferred meaning.

7. The Implicature/Implicature Distinction

Both implicatures and implicatures go beyond what is said, but unlike implicatures, which are additional propositions external to what is said, implicatures are built out of what is said “even if no words or phrases are being used figuratively and even after any ambiguities or indexical references are resolved, in implicature what the sentence means does not fully determine what the speaker means.” (Bach, 1994: 139)

In implicature “one says and communicates one thing and thereby communicates something else in addition.” Implicature, on the other hand, is “a matter of saying something but communicating something else instead, something closely related to what is said.” (Bach, 1994: 126) Unlike metaphorical and other sorts of nonliteral utterance, implicature is not a case of using particular words figuratively. Rather, part of what is communicated is “only implicit in what is explicitly expressed, either because the utterance is semantically underdeterminate and completion is required or because what is being communicated is an expanded version of the proposition expressed.” (Ibid.) Thus, the implicit/explicit distinction does not seem to hold even with this dichotomy as implicatures are thought of to be related to or part of ‘what is said’.

8. The Implicature/Inference Distinction

It is exactly here within this distinction that most misconception and misinterpretation of pragmatically determined aspects of meaning lie. Thomas’s (1995:58) reinforces this point stating that “it is the confusion of these two levels of interpretation which is at the root of some misunderstanding of Grice’s theory.” Thomas draws a distinction between implying and inferring, stating that when a speaker or a sentence *implies* something, it means it is conveyed or suggested without being stated outright. *Inference*, on the other hand, is the hearer’s activity, i.e., drawing conclusions that are not explicit in what was said. Thus, implying is an addresser-related process, while inference is an addressee-related one.

According to Brown and Yule the term implicature “accounts for what a speaker can imply, suggest or mean, as distinct from what the speaker literally says” (1983: 31). Or as Noveck (2001: 166) puts it “an inference that consists in attributing to a speaker an implicit meaning that goes beyond the explicit linguistic meaning of an utterance.” Implicature itself is a pragmatic inference. Therefore, it is better to distinguish two varieties of pragmatic inference: a narrow sense that refers to conversational implicature, and a broad sense inference that subsumes all types of inference the hearer attempt on utterance interpretation.

9. The Presupposition/Implicature Distinction

Presupposition, as a term, refers to the logical meaning of a sentence or meanings that are logically associated with or entailed by a sentence. Implicatures, on the other hand, contribute to the update of the representation of context either by contributing to the content of an assertion or by suggesting a supplement to it.

Another difference between implicature and presupposition is that whereas implicature cannot be detached from an utterance by changing the words for synonyms, Levinson finds that there are other kinds of pragmatic implication “that are attached to the form of rather than the meaning of what is said;” Thus in contrast to implicatures, presuppositions are detachable; that is, “it does seem to be possible to find another way of saying the same thing that happens to lack the inference in question” (1983: 103).

In this sense, the term implicature is used with the intention to bring it into a sharp contrast with terms such as logical implication, entailment, and logical consequence which, as Levinson concludes, are generally used to designate inferences which are derived solely from logical or semantic content. Implicatures “are not semantic inferences, but rather inferences based on both the content of what has been said and some specific assumptions about the cooperative nature of ordinary verbal interaction” (ibid.).

Accordingly, both presupposition and implicature require inferences transcending the linguistic material contained in the text. Nevertheless, the fact that in some cases the inferred content happens to belong to the participants’ shared knowledge does not make the implicature a presupposition. Consequently, presupposition is distinct from implicature.

10. The Entailment/Implicature Distinction

In terms of the entailment/implicature distinction, scholars tend to draw on the semantics/pragmatics distinction for that effect. Gazdar (1979:38) defines implicature as “a proposition that is implied in the utterance of a sentence in a context even though that proposition is not a part of nor an entailment of what was actually said.” Similarly, Allan (1999:1) finds that implicatures arise from the use of language in particular contexts, and that they differ from entailments in being defeasible.

Differing from entailment, implicature refers to ‘any meaning which is conveyed indirectly or through hints, and understood implicitly without ever being explicitly stated’ (Grundy, 2000: 73). Implicatures refer to what is suggested in an utterance, it is not a

condition for the truth of the utterance and is neither expressed nor entailed by the utterance (Atlas, 2005: 36, Grice, 1975: 279, Griffiths, 2006:124, McCawley, 1978: 245).

Conversational implicatures are different from logical implications or entailments as they are thoroughly based on the logical or semantic content of sentences. Moreover, the crucial difference between implicature and entailment is that whereas implicatures are cancellable, entailments cannot be cancelled as they depend on the sentence.

11. The Implicature/Enrichment Distinction

The term ‘pragmatic enrichment’ is sometimes broadly used to refer to “the process in virtue of which the content conveyed by an utterance comes to include all sorts of elements which are contextually implied without being part of what the utterance literally means.” (Recanati, 2010:1) Pragmatic enrichment, on its standard use, is meant to contrast with ‘conversational implicature,’ rather than synonymous for it; “while conversational implicatures belong to the post-semantic layer of interpretation, pragmatic enrichment belongs to the semantic layer: it affects the proposition expressed by an utterance.” (ibid: 2)

There is enrichment in that sense only when the following three conditions are jointly satisfied: (i) the context adds some element to the interpretation of the utterance; (ii) that element is truth-conditionally relevant, it affects the proposition expressed (unlike conversational implicatures); yet (iii) its contextual provision is not necessary, in the sense that, if that element was left aside, the utterance would still express a complete proposition. (ibid: 4)

Theories differ slightly on the amount of meaning that should be encoded in semantic representations. All, however, agree that there is a gap between semantically-encoded ‘meanings’ and the speaker’s intended message. The aspects of meaning that are not semantically encoded are supplied by ‘pragmatic enrichment’.

12. Concluding Remarks

The findings of the present paper reveal that the-taken-for-granted simple distinction of implicit/explicit is insufficient to encompass various nuances of the implicit meaning and that implicature theory still holds so influential that, for many, it is the basis for all other ramifications and nuances of implicitness. That basic distinction, however, needs to be re-defined if other ramifications and nuances of implicitness are to be broadly addressed.

The common Gricean portrait of ‘what is said’ and ‘what is implicated’ as the two components of utterance meaning is not sufficient. Although ‘what is said’ is conceived of to be strongly linked with the conventional meaning of the sentence, four levels of meaning need to be differentiated: sentence meaning, what is said in the semantic sense, what is said in the pragmatic sense, and what is implied. (save the often neglected aspect of implicit meaning that was casually introduced by Grice in his brief remarks on irony and metaphor, which is the notion of ‘making as if to say’).

Moreover, these further distinctions include but not necessarily exhaust all nuances of implicitness of meaning as there is still much to be said about the unsaid yet implied. Further, there are still cases where speaker meaning is neither said nor implicated, i.e., speakers sometimes may mean things which they neither say nor implicate; and sometimes what speakers mean may include more than what they actually say and implicate.

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