Implicature

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Implicature

Introduction

The concept of Implicature was first introduced by the **British Philosopher H. P, Grice**, who defined the term essentially what is communicated less than what is said. Implicature is a key concept in pragmatics, which refers to what is suggested by a speaker through an utterance, but not explicitly stated. It relies on context, shared knowledge, and conversational principles, requiring the listener to infer additional meaning beyond the literal interpretation of words. It is something the speaker **implies** with an utterance, even though it is not literally expressed; what is meant often goes beyond what is said and this **additional meaning is inferred by the listener**.

Implicature

Definition and Basic Concept

Stephen C. Levinson (1983) defines implicature as "a component of speaker meaning that constitutes an aspect of what is meant in a speaker's utterance without being part of what is said". In other words, implicature involves meaning that is not directly expressed but understood based on context and inference.

George Yule (1996) describes implicature as "what is suggested in an utterance, even though neither expressed nor strictly implied". It requires the listener to use conversational principles, such as those related to relevance or quantity, to infer the intended meaning.

Yan Huang (2007) also highlights that implicature plays a critical role in indirect communication, as speakers often rely on it to convey meaning efficiently, while avoiding direct statements. In pragmatics, understanding implicature is essential for interpreting how language works in real-world contexts.

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Types of Implicature

Implicature is typically categorized into two main types: conventional and conversational. These categories are central to the theory of implicature, particularly as outlined by H.P. Grice.

1. Conversational Implicatures: These are more dependent on context and the specific conversation in which they occur. Grice proposed that effective communication depends on cooperation between speaker and listener, and that speakers adhere to the cooperative principle, which is governed by four maxims:

Maxim of Quantity: Give as much information as needed, but no more.

Maxim of Quality: Be truthful; do not say what you believe to be false or lack evidence for.

Maxim of Relation: Be relevant.

Maxim of Manner: Be clear, avoid ambiguity or obscurity.

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Types of Implicature

1. Conversational Implicatures:

When a speaker violates one of these maxims, the listener infers additional meaning based on conversational implicature.

Grice distinguished two types of conversational implicature. There are **generalized implicature** and **particularized implicature**. In **Generalized implicature,** the utterances do not have particular contexts to infer the meaning. On the other hand, **particularized implicature**, the utterances have inferences that are required to work out the conveyed meanings.

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Types of Implicature

1. Conversational Implicatures:

Generalized conversational implicature: Is the implicature that arises without any particular context, or requires a special scenario. Levinson (1983, p.126) defines Generalized conversational implicatures that occur without reference to any particular features of the context.

In other words, specialized background knowledge or inferences are not required in calculating the additional conveyed meaning. Grice (1989, p.37) states this type of implicature is characterized by "the application of a certain form of words in an utterance would normally carry such implicature".

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Types of Implicature

1. Conversational Implicatures:

Generalized conversational implicature:

Grice (1975, p.56) adds that generalized implicature is a conversational implicature that is inferable without reference to a particular context, examples:

"*I was sitting in a garden one day. A child looked over the fence.*"

The implicatures in the above example, that **the garden and the child** mentioned are not the speaker's, are calculated on the principle that if the speaker was capable of being more specific (i.e. more informative, following the quantity maxim), then he or she would have said **'my garden'** and **'my child'**.

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Types of Implicature

1. Conversational Implicatures:

Generalized conversational implicature:

A number of other generalized conversational implicatures are commonly communicated on the basis of a scale of values and are consequently known as **scalar implicatures**.

Certain information is always communicated by choosing a word which expresses one value from a scale of values. This is particularly obvious in terms for expressing quantity, as shown in the scales in (2) below, where terms are listed from the highest to the lowest value. (2) **< all, most, many, some, few > < always, often, sometimes >**

"*Most of John's friends believe in marriage.*"

Implicature: Not all of John's friends believe in married.

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Types of Implicature

1. Conversational Implicatures:

Particularized Conversational Implicature: This type depends on a specific context. The speaker's meaning relies on shared knowledge or assumptions between the speaker and listener, for example:

John: *Where's Peter?*

Marry: *The light in his office is on.*

Implicature: Peter is in his office.

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Types of Implicature

2. Conventional Implicatures: These implicatures are tied to specific expressions or words and are independent of context. They are part of the conventional meaning of an expression. In contrast to the conversational implicatures, conventional implicatures are not based on the cooperative principle or the maxims. They don't have to occur in conversation, and they don't depend on special contexts for their interpretation. Conventional implicatures are associated with specific words and result in additional conveyed meanings when those words are used. The English conjunction 'but' is one of these words. The interpretation of any utterance of the type *p but q* will be based on the conjunction *p & q* plus an implicature of **'contrast'** between the information in **p** and the information in **q**. In the following example, the fact that '**Mary suggested black**' (= **p**) is contrasted, via the conventional implicature of '**but**', with "**I chose white**" (= **q**).

a. *Mary suggested black, but I chose white.*

b. **p & q** (Implication: **p** is in contrast to **q**)

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Types of Implicature

2. Conventional Implicatures:

Other English words such as '**even**' and '**yet**' also have conventional implicatures. When '**even**' is included in any sentence describing an event, there is an implicature of '**contrary to expectation**'. Thus, in the example below, there are two events reported (i.e. *John's coming* and *John's helping*) with the conventional implicature of '**even**' adding a '**contrary to expectation**' interpretation of those events.

a. *Even John came to the party.*

b. *He even helped tidy up afterwards.*

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Types of Implicature

2. Conventional Implicatures:

The conventional implicature of **'yet'** is that the present situation is expected to be different, or perhaps the opposite, at a later time. In uttering the statement in (a.) below, the speaker produces an implicature that she expects the statement 'Dennis is here' (=p) to be true later, as indicated in [b.],

a. *Dennis isn't here yet*, (= *NOT p*)

b. *NOT p is true*

(**Implicature: p** expected to be true later)

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Features of Implicature (Testing for Implicature)

Levinson (1983) lists several features of implicature that help distinguish it from other forms of meaning like entailment or presupposition:

- **Cancelability:** An implicature can be negated without contradiction, while an entailment cannot (Can you cancel the implied meaning without contradiction?)

Example:

"*He is a teacher, but he is not necessarily good at teaching.*" (The implicature that being a teacher means being good at teaching is canceled).

Implicature

Features of Implicature (Testing for Implicature)

- **Non-conventionality:** Implicatures are not tied to the inherent meaning of words.

  Example: "*She's a lawyer, but she's not rich.*"

  The word "**but**" here implies a **contrast** that is not tied to any conventional meaning of the words themselves.

- **Calculability:** Implicatures can be derived logically by reasoning about context, as in the examples of conversational implicature above.

Implicature

Features of Implicature (Testing for Implicature)

Non-detachability: Implicature relies on the context and cannot be detached from it. Changing the context would change the implicature.

Example:

"*Can you open the window?*"

This is understood as a request for action. If said in a different context, such as a rhetorical question, the implicature would shift.

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Importance of Implicature in Pragmatics

Implicature is central to pragmatic theory because it highlights the gap between literal meaning and speaker intention. According to Huang (2007), implicature helps speakers communicate indirectly, allowing them to make statements that leave room for interpretation based on the context (pp. 25–28). Levinson (1983) emphasizes that implicature allows speakers to convey meaning efficiently without needing to explicitly state everything (p. 97).

Yule (1996) further explains that implicature is vital for understanding how meaning works in actual communication, especially since much of what we communicate is not directly stated but inferred.

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References

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