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Re-visiting the Cooperative Principle:
How to account for implicatures in a non-cooperative conversation

Grice’s (1975) conversational implicatures arise because of violations of his four maxims of conversation. These maxims are in turn based on Grice’s Cooperative Principle (CP), which states that participants in a conversation are assumed to have compatible goals in the conversation. However, in conversations whose participants have conflicting goals and intentions, these implicatures still hold, as is seen in the following example from Sarah Palin’s 2008 interview with Katie Couric:

Couric: You’ve said quote ‘John McCain will reform the way Wall St. does business.’ Other than supporting stricter regulations of Fannie Mae and Freddie Mac two years ago, can you give us any more examples of his leading the charge for more oversight?
Palin: I think that the example that you just cited with his warnings two years ago about Fannie and Freddie, that’s paramount. That’s a heck of a lot more than other senators and representatives did for us
Implicature: “No, I cannot give you any more examples of his leading the charge for more oversight.“

How then, does this implicature arise? Grice (1989) acknowledges these conversations as exceptions to his CP, recommending revision. Asher and Lascarides (2013) and Potts (2008) propose that even in the absence of Gricean cooperation at the level of intentions, a surface level linguistic cooperativity can still provoke implicatures. Lumsden (2008) returns to the intention level, since different intentions lead to different implicatures. Thus, we need an interpretation of the CP that considers intention but does not require a common goal. I ultimately decide that the CP should mean that conversants understand the goal of their interlocutor and that implicatures arise based on what the hearer thinks that goal is, in sync with theirs or otherwise. In fact, the goal they understand their interlocutor to have determines what implicatures they draw, meaning that the same utterances could cause different implicatures depending on the extra-linguistic goals the hearer believes the speaker to have!

I will then apply this to the decidedly non-cooperative Couric/Palin interview, analyzing implicatures that arise based on the audience’s understanding of their intentions.

Bibliography:


