Class #26 - Conversational Implicature
Grice, "Logic and Conversation"

I. Logic and Implicature

Grice begins with a description of a debate between the formalist and the informalist over the purported divergence between the meanings of terms in formal languages and their natural-language counterparts.
The formalist says that the divergence is due to the inadequacy of natural language.
This divergence leads to imprecision and imperfection in the representation of natural language inferences.
The informalist says that the formalist's picture misconstrues the purpose of natural language, basing it on scientific paradigm.
For the informalist, there need to be two logics: one for natural language, and one for formal language.
Grice says that both the formalist and the informalist make a mistake of assuming such divergences exist.
Attention to the conditions governing conversation will clear up the problem.
Instead of attributing some kind of problem with meanings of natural languages, we can see many of the complexities in communication as surrounding the context of communication.
The general heading for the study of such contexts has become known as pragmatics.

One notable aspect of conversation is that we can communicate information beyond what we say.
Grice coins the term 'implicature' to apply to the information which is communicated without being said, that which is due to the pragmatics of communication rather than the semantics of a language.
Implicature helps distinguish what is said from what is implied, suggested or presupposed.

Implicatures may be conventional or nonconventional.
For a conventional implicature, Grice invokes, 'He is an Englishman; he is, therefore, brave'.
In uttering these words (smugly), Grice says both that someone is an Englishman and that the person is brave.
But he hasn't uttered the general principle that all Englishmen are brave.
That is just a mere conventional implicature, based on literal meanings of the relevant terms.
For an example of nonconventional implicature, Grice invokes, as a description of someone newly working in a bank, 'He likes his colleagues and he hasn't been to prison yet'.
In this sentence, the speaker is just stating that the subject has not been to prison.
The semantics of that portion of the sentence concern the person and prison.
That portion of the sentence is true if and only if the person has not yet been to prison.
But the speaker has also communicated something else about the subject, that he is liable to corruption, one supposes.
A semantic theory which ascribes an imputation of corruption to the speaker of the sentence will be complex and misleading.
Nothing was said about corruption.

Thus, to provide a good analysis of communication, we need not just an analysis of communication, but an analysis of the contexts of communication and the ways in which information can be communicated non-semantically.

II. The Cooperative Principle and Its Maxims

We can identify nonconventional implicatures by characterizing ordinary uses of language and certain principles underlying those uses.
A dominant characteristic of ordinary conversation is what Grice calls the Cooperative Principle, or CP.

> CP: Make your conversational contribution such as is required, at the stage at which it occurs, by the accepted purpose or direction of the talk exchange in which you are engaged.

To refine CP, Grice identifies maxims under four categories.

> Quantity: Provide no more or less information than required.
> Quality: Say neither what you believe false nor that for which you lack evidence.
> Relation: Be relevant.
> Manner: Be perspicuous, avoiding obscurity, ambiguity, and prolixity, while being orderly.

We noted earlier, and read in both Strawson and Austin, that some analyses of language suffer from restricting their attention in analyzing meaning to truth-valuable assertions.
The above maxims are aimed at the efficient transfer of information.
But there are other conversational maxims as well, ones which are aesthetic, social, or moral.
It's an interesting project, an aspect of what I called ordinary language philosophy in the previous set of notes (on Austin) to identify conversational maxims.

Grice argues that there are analogous maxims for all sorts of rational behavior.
Conversation, talk, is just one form of rational behavior.

> "[O]ne of my avowed aims is to see talking as a special case or variety of purposive, indeed rational, behavior..." (47)

Grice sees all of the above maxims as analogous to guidelines for interpersonal interactions in general, helping one another in various activities.
He presents examples of non-speaking behavioral analogues for each of the above categories.
Thus, just as Grice's IBS program analyzed meaning in terms of mental acts, intentions, his approach to pragmatics is to see language as just one aspect of our communicative and rational behavior.

Talk exchanges are, in some way, just like quasi-contractual cooperative transactions.
Both have participants with a common immediate aim.
Both have contributions that should be mutually dependent and dovetailed, in which there is some understanding that the partners continue until mutually deciding to stop.
But this model does not carry over to many exchanges, like quarreling and letter writing.

The point of identifying CP and its maxims is to establish a baseline for ordinary communication.
Once we have done that, we can identifying systematic, conventional ways in which ordinary maxims are violated.
And when we do that, we can identify the information which gets communicated by violating those maxims.
In other words, the pragmatics of communication consists largely in systematic violations of CP and its refinements.

III. Failing to Fulfill a Maxim

There are many ways to fail to fulfill a maxim.
One may violate it and, likely, mislead one's audience.
One may opt out, indicating unwillingness to cooperate.
One may find oneself with a clash among maxims, unable to be both maximally informative and maximally accurate.
A fourth way to fail to fulfill a maxim leads directly to conversational implicature.
We can flout a maxim, blatantly failing to fulfill it.

When we flout a maxim, we force our audience to make sense of our statements through attributions of implicature.
This is called exploiting a maxim.

> S, by saying p, conversationally implicates that q if
> > 1) S is presumed to be observing the conventional maxims, or at least CP;
> > 2) S is presumed to be aware that q is required in order to make consistent sense of p and the conventional maxims together;
> > 3) Both S and the audience think that each other can work out the above.

> Apply this to my initial example, to B's remark that C has not yet been to prison. In a suitable setting A might reason as follows: '(1) B has apparently violated the maxim 'Be relevant' and so may be regarded as having flouted one of the maxims conjoining perspicuity, yet I have no reason to suppose that he is opting out from the operation of the CP; (2) given the circumstances, I can regard his irrelevance as only apparent if, and only if, I suppose him to think that C is potentially dishonest; (3) B knows that I am capable of working out step (2). So B implicates that C is potentially dishonest' (50).

In implicature, we flout the maxims of ordinary conversation.
When both a speaker and an audience are complicit in the flouting, they are able to communicate using implicature.
This complicity is not easy to establish.
Grice provides five conditions to communicate with conversational implicature.

> Speaker and audience must be aware of:
> > 1. the conventional meaning of the words used, including the identity of any references involved;
> > 2. the CP and its maxims (at least implicitly);
> > 3. the context of the utterance;
> > 4. other items of background knowledge; and
> > 5. the fact (or supposed fact) that all relevant items falling under the previous headings are available to both participants and both participants know or assume this to be the case.

Grice provides three groups of examples to illustrate the uses of implicature.
In Group A, no maxim is violated.
In Group B, a maxim is violated, but because of an obvious clash with another maxim.
In Group C, there is an exploitation of a maxim.

Grice provides many examples, including understatement, uttering of tautologies, irony, metaphor, meiosis, hyperbole, ambiguity, and other tools.
The 'peccavi' example is apocryphal, though amusing.
Talia's example, in class, of, "It's chilly in here," is apt.


IV. Semantics and Pragmatics

Attention to the maxims governing communication might lead one to complicate, unnecessarily, one's semantics.
Sometimes, when one says, 'an X', we intend to communicate that the X is not ours.
Sometimes, we use it with the intention to communicate that the X is ours.
Sometimes we intend to indicate neither.
But we don't want to claim that there are semantic differences among such claims.

> I am inclined to think that one would not lend a sympathetic ear to a philosopher who suggested that there are three senses of the form of expression an X: one in which it means roughly 'something that satisfies the conditions defining the word X,' another in which it means approximately 'an X (in the first sense) that is only remotely related in a certain way to some person indicated by the context,' and yet another in which it means 'an X (in the first sense) that is closely related in a certain way to some person indicated by the context' (56).

In other words, the information which we communicate using implicature is not semantic.
It's pragmatic.
CP and its maxims help to identify the information, from context, which is conveyed beyond the meaning of the terms used.


Grice identifies some features which he claims conversational implicature must possess.
It can be canceled, explicitly or contextually, by opting out of the Cooperative principle.
Nondetachability: you can't say the same thing without the implicature, unless you add a different implicature.
Both parties need knowledge of the conventional force of a statement, minus implicature.
The truth of an implicature is unconnected to the truth of a statement; the implicature is not carried by what is said, but by how it is said.
Implicature is inexact; analysis of any implicature often leads to a disjunctive result.