**CHAPTER 17**

Implicatures

**17.1 Conversational implicatures**

We have already encountered conversational implicatures in Chapter 2, where they were briefly characterized as *propositions or assumptions not encoded in what is actually said*. Consider the following example:

(I) A: Am I in time for supper?

B: I've cleared the table.

Here it is obviously B's intention to convey the proposition that A is too late for supper, but this has to be worked out by the hearer.

**17.2 Grice's conversational maxims**

**17.2.1 The co-operative principle**

One of the most influential accounts of implicature is that of Grice. Let us think in terms of a

prototypical conversation. Such a conversation is not a random succession of unrelated utterances produced alternately by participants: a prototypical conversation has something in the nature of a general purpose or direction, and the contributions of the participants are intelligibly related both to one another and to the overall aim of the conversation. By participating in a

conversation, a speaker implicitly signals that they agree to co-operate in the joint activity, to abide by the rules, as it were. Grice's version of what a conversationalist implicitly endorses (by accepting to take part in the conversation) runs as follows:

(i) 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.

This principle is elaborated by means of a set of maxims, which spell out what it means to co-operate in a conversational way.

**17.2.1.1 The maxim of quality**

The maxim of quality is concerned with truth telling. Consider the following:

Do not say what you believe to be false.

**17.2.1.2 The maxim of quantity**

The maxim of quantity is concerned with the amount of information (taken in its broadest sense) an utterance conveys.

(i) Don't make your contribution less informative.

(ii) Do not make your contribution more informative than is required.

Imagine a conversation between Mother and Daughter:

(33) M: What did you have for lunch today?

(34) D: Baked beans on toast.

(35) D: ?Food.

(36) D: ?I had 87 warmed-up baked beans (although eight of them were slightly

crushed) served on a slice of toast 12.7 cm. by 10.3 cm. which had been

unevenly toasted...

(34) is a 'normal' answer; (35) gives too little information; (36) gives too much.

**17.2.1.3 The maxim of relation**

The maxim is very simple:

Be relevant.

Consider the following:

(37) A: Have you seen Mary today?

B: ?I'm breathing.

**17.2.1.4 The maxim of manner**

The maxim of manner has four components:

(i) Avoid vague expressions

(ii) Avoid ambiguity.

(iii) Do not be excessively wordy.

**17.2.3 How implicatures arise**

It is now time to consider the question of how implicatures arise. In Grice's system, there are two main mechanisms. The first, which gives rise to what are sometimes called **standard implicatures,** requires the assumption that the speaker is doing their best to follow the co-operative principle, even though the result may not be the best, from the point of view of the hearer. The second mechanism involves a deliberate **flouting** of the maxims, which is intended to be perceived as deliberate by the hearer, but at the same time as none the less intending a sincere communication, that is to say, without abandonment of the co-operative principle. Let us look first of all at the first type.

**17.2.3.1 Standard implicatures**

To illustrate how standard implicatures arise, consider Grice's example:

(39) A: (stranded motorist) I've run out of petrol.

B: (passer-by) There's a garage just round the corner.

**17.2.3.2 Flouting the maxims**

The other way in which implicatures arise is through deliberate flouting of the maxims in circumstances in which (a) it is obvious to the hearer that the maxims are being flouted, (b) it is obvious to the hearer that the speaker intends the hearer to be aware that the maxims are being flouted, and (c) there are no signs that the speaker is opting out of the co-operative principle. The following examples are illustrative:

*The maxim of quality*

(46) The mushroom omelette wants his coffee with.

(47) I married a rat.

(48) It'll cost the earth, but what the hell!

*The maxim of quantity*

(50) It must be somewhere.

Of course, it must be somewhere! Completely pointless? Not quite: it implicates that a more determined search will be likely to result in success.

*The maxim of relation*

(52) A: I say, did you hear about Mary's...

B: Yes, well, it rained nearly the whole time we were there.

This is an obviously irrelevant comment. Assume that A and B are having a

conversation about a colleague, Mary. Mary approaches them, seen by B but

not by A. The implicature is: *Watch out! Here comes Mary!*

*The maxim of manner*

(53) A: I'll look after Samantha for you, don't worry. We'll have a lovely time.

Won't we, Sam?

B: Great, but if you don't mind, don't offer her any post-prandial concoctions involving supercooled oxide of hydrogen. It usually gives rise to convulsive nausea.

The implicature arising from this unnecessary wordiness is obviously that B does not want Samantha to know what she is saying.

**17.3. Politeness: principles and maxims**

**17.3.1 The politeness principle**

There is no doubt that the co-operative principle can go some way towards explaining the generation of implicatures. But one class of implicature which receives no account under this heading concerns implicatures of politeness. For this, Leech has proposed an independent pragmatic principle, to function alongside the co-operative principle, which he calls the politeness principle. Leech expresses the politeness principle thus:

(I) Minimize the expression of impolite beliefs.

Let us rephrase the principle as follows:

(II) Choose expressions which minimally belittle the hearer's status.

The sorts of things which may be thought to belittle the hearer's status (or, alternatively expressed, "cause the minimum loss of face to the hearer") are (READ ONLY):

• Treating the hearer as subservient to one's will, by desiring the hearer to do something which will cost effort, or restrict freedom, etc.

• Saying bad things about the hearer or people or things related to the hearer.

• Expressing pleasure at the hearer's misfortunes.

• Disagreeing with the hearer.

• Praising oneself.

It is worth while distinguishing between **positive** and **negative politeness.** Negative politeness mitigates the effect of belittling expressions. Hence, (54) is more polite than (55):

(54) Help me to move this piano.

(55) You couldn't possibly give me a hand with this piano, could you?

Positive politeness emphasizes the hearer's positive status:

(56) Thank you, that was extremely helpful.

**17.3.1.1 The tact maxim**

The tact maxim is oriented towards the hearer and has positive and negative sub-maxims:

Minimize cost to the hearer.

Maximize benefit to the hearer.

The operation of this maxim can be clearly seen in the context of impositives, that is, utterances which have the function of getting the hearer to do something (the term *impositive* includes commands, requests, beseechments, etc.).

We can roughly order impositives in terms of the cost to the hearer, greatest cost first:

Lend me your wife.

Wash the dishes.

Pass the salt.

*Say Ah!*

Have another sandwich.

Have a nice weekend.

We can think of this as a continuous **(cost-benefit)** scale, although, of course, there is a switch-over, somewhere in the middle of the list, from cost to benefit. For instance, (57) is more polite than (58), and (59) is even more polite:

(57) Could you wash the dishes?

(58) Wash the dishes!

(59) I was wondering if you could possibly wash the dishes.

Looking at impositives which correspond to a benefit to the hearer, we may first note that (60) is definitely not more polite than (61):

(60) I was wondering if you could possibly enjoy your holiday.

(61) Enjoy your holiday!

For impositives beneficial to the hearer, the situation is reversed, and the stronger impositives are the more polite. Sentence (60) is actually rather rude.

**17.3.1.2 The generosity maxim**

The generosity maxim is a sister to the tact maxim, and is oriented towards costs and benefits to the speaker:

Minimize benefit to self.

Maximize cost to self.

This maxim works in a way parallel to that of the tact maxim, except that the effects are reversed. So, for instance, offers to do something which involves benefit to her hearer, but cost to the speaker must be made as directly as possible, for politeness. Hence, (62) is more polite than (63):

(62) Let me wash the dishes.

(63) I was wondering if I could possibly wash the dishes.

On the other hand, politeness demands that requests for benefit to the speaker be weakened:

(64) I want to borrow your car.

(65) Could I possibly borrow your car?

**17.3.1.3 The praise maxim**

The maxims of praise and modesty form another natural duo, concerned, in this case, with the expression of positive or negative opinions about speaker or hearer. The maxim of praise is oriented towards the hearer, and goes as follows:

Minimize dispraise of the hearer.

Maximize praise of the hearer.

(66) A: Do you like my new dress?

B: \*No.

Well, yes, but it's not my favourite.

(67) A: Oh! I've been so thoughtless.

B: \*Yes, haven't you?

Not at all—think nothing of it.

**17.3.1.4 The modesty maxim**

The modesty maxim is the natural partner of the previous one, being oriented towards the speaker, with the relevant 'values' reversed:

Minimize praise of self.

Maximize dispraise of self.

(69) A: You did brilliantly!

B: \*Yes, didn't I?

Well, I thought I didn't do too badly.

**17.3.1.5 The agreement maxim**

The final two maxims do not form a pair. This is not, as Leech claims, because they do not involve bipolar scales (at least one of them does), but because they are inherently relational in a way that the others are not. That is to say, agreement is a relation between the opinions of the speaker and those of the hearer. This maxim is simply:

Minimize disagreement with the hearer.

Maximize agreement with the hearer.

The sub-maxims are not clearly distinct. A typical strategy is to begin with partial agreement before expressing disagreement:

(71) A: She should be sacked immediately. We can't tolerate unpunctuality.

B: \*I disagree.

I agree with the general principle, but in this case there are mitigating circumstances.

**17.3.1.6 The sympathy maxim**

Sympathy is again a matter of a relation between speaker and hearer, and cannot, therefore, be differentially speaker- or hearer-oriented:

Maximize sympathy (expression of positive feelings) towards the hearer.

Minimize antipathy (expression of negative feelings) towards the hearer.

As Leech points out, this maxim renders congratulations and commiserations or condolences inherently polite acts. However, once again, it seems we can speak of implicatures of politeness only if a discrepancy can be intuited between what the speaker says and what he or she feels.

**17.3.1.7 The consideration maxim**

Leech presents the consideration maxim as a separate principle (the Pollyanna

Principle). It goes like this:

Minimize the hearer's discomfort/displeasure.

Maximize the hearer's comfort/pleasure.

Negative politeness under this maxim involves the softening, by various devices, of references to painful, distressing, embarrassing or shocking events, facts, or things, etc. For instance, if someone's husband has recently died, it is more polite to say / *was sorry to hear about your husband* than / *was sorry to hear about your husband's death,* as the latter highlights the distressing event to a greater degree.

Further, if the hearer's daughter, Jennifer, has just won an Oscar, then (75) is more polite than (76):

(75) That was great news about Jennifer's Oscar.

(76) That was great news about Jennifer.