Communication, Implicature, and Assertion

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Philosophy of Language » Lecture 9

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What is Said and What is Communicated

What is Said vs. What is Conveyed

› Up to now, we have be investigating literal meaning: **what is said** by a sentence, in a context, i.e., the proposition expressed.

› But sometimes what I mean to **communicate** or convey is something more than, or other than, the literal meaning of my utterance. Suppose I'm at dinner, and the server asks if I'd like to see the dessert menu. I say

  (1) I'm really full.

› The literal meaning of (1) is just that Antony is really full at the time of utterance. On the face of it, this has nothing to do with the question asked.

› Nevertheless both the server and I agree on what I've managed to convey, which is that I do not want to look at the dessert menu. Call this latter proposition **what is conveyed** by my utterance of (1).

› How does this kind of communicative exchange work?

Implicature

> Suppose that A and B are talking about a mutual friend, C, who is now working in a bank. A asks B how C is getting on in his job, and B replies, *Oh quite well, I think; he likes his colleagues, and he hasn't been to prison yet*. At this point, A might well inquire what B was implying, what he was suggesting, or even what he meant by saying that C had not yet been to prison. … It is clear that whatever B implied, suggested, meant in this example, is distinct from what B said, which was simply that C had not been to prison yet. I wish to introduce, as terms of art, the verb *implicate* and the related nouns *implicature* (cf. implying) and *implicatum* (cf. what is implied). (Grice 1967: 24)

› Implicature concerns what is sometimes called *speaker meaning*: it rests on a distinction 'between what *the speaker's words meant*, on a given occasion, and what *he meant*, in saying these words, on that occasion' (Kripke 1977: 262).

Conventional Implicature

Conventional Implicature Defined

› Grice distinguishes between **conventional** and **conversational** implicature.

› A conventional implicature is one where 'the conventional meaning of the words used will determine what is implicated, besides helping to determine what is said' (Grice 1967: 25). An example:

  (2) Maria is poor and happy.
  (3) Maria is poor but happy.

› Grice suggests that *and* and *but* both denote here the logical conjunction, so (2) and (3) are both true if Maria is poor and Maria is happy, false otherwise. (This view recommends itself on the grounds of simplicity – non-truth-functional connectives are harder to model.)

› The felt difference in meaning between (2) and (3), Grice suggests, comes from their different implications. The word *but* implicates that there is some contrast between being poor and being happy; *and* in (2) has no such implication.

› What's more, this implication has become part of the conventional understanding of 'but'.

Convention and Conventional Implicature

› What Grice means by 'conventional' is that the implicature is part of the meaning **conventionally assigned** to the word, rather than associated with the utterance in some calculable, non-arbitrary, way.

  » An implicature *I* of an uttered sentence *S* is **conventional** when *S* implicates *I* on every occasion of use with standard meaning.

› You can't say (3) without conveying that there is a tension between being poor and being happy; to avoid that suggestion, you would have to choose a different word.

  » This suggests it is part of the literal meaning, since it is **non-cancellable** – you can't say, *She's poor but happy, and there's no tension between poverty and happiness.*

› Some, like Bach (1999), are **sceptical** of whether there is a category of conventional implicature, and would either assimilate (3) to conversational implicature (below), or offer a non-truth-functional semantics for *but* – or assimilate the phenomenon to semantic presupposition (lecture 6).

Conventional Implicature and Presupposition

> For Grice, a conventional implicature C associated with an expression E manifests the following two definitional properties: (i) by virtue of being conventional, C constitutes a non-cancellable aspect of the meaning of E, and (ii) by virtue of being an implicature, C's truth or falsity has no effect on the truth conditions of E. (Horn 2007: 39)

› Conventional implicatures may be a special case of **semantic presupposition**.
› They are entailments (hard to cancel except when embedded: *She isn't poor **but** happy; she's poor **and** happy*).
  » The negation test for presupposition predicts that when we deny *She is poor but happy* we will have to use special stress on *but* to target the implicature – which is what we see.
  » And being cancellable-when-embedded is a marker of presupposition as opposed to (mere) entailment.
› Conventional implicatures also do not concern the foreground topic of conversation, the **at-issue content**.

Conversational Implicatures

Conversational Implicature

› Our original example (1) is an instance of **conversational implicature**.
› In such a case, the implication is there, but not through the literal meaning of the words – in another conversational context, I could easily use (1) without conveying anything about a menu.
› To find out the conversational implicature, we need to use what we already know, about the conversation and life more generally, to **figure out** what the speaker might be trying to convey when they make their utterance. We managed to do this in the restaurant case by drawing on our background knowledge of restaurants, digestion, satiation, etc.
› One might be tempted to give up: 'Surely there is nothing systematic we can say here – it's all so dependent on the particular conversational context, maybe any literal meaning can be used to convey anything!'

Conversation as a Joint Activity

› Such pessimism is unwarranted. In fact, as Grice showed, one general principle, together with some subsidiary **maxims** he takes to follow from the general principle, enable us to **work out** the implicatures in a wide range of cases.

› Grice begins by noting that

> Our talk exchanges do not normally consist of a succession of disconnected remarks, and would not be rational if they did. They are characteristically, to some degree at least, cooperative efforts; and each participant recognizes in them, to some extent, a common purpose or set of purposes, or at least a mutually accepted direction. … [A]t each stage, *some* possible conversational moves would be excluded as conversationally unsuitable. (Grice 1967: 26)

The Cooperative Principle

› Since conversation is a rational and cooperative exercise, we can set up a principle which is a norm governing how conversational participants **should** behave. Grice calls this the

Cooperative Principle   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. (Grice 1967: 26)

› In most cases, our conversational partners live up to this norm, and in any case we interpret their utterances **just as if** they are living up to this norm. The assumption of cooperation is the **default**.

» As we'll see, without this default assumption little would be conveyed except what is literally meant, so if we want efficient communication, we ought to live up to the norm (Grice 1967: 29–30).

› The Cooperative Principle is very general, and Grice gives effect to it using a number of more specialised **maxims**.

The Maxims (Grice 1967: 26–27)

1. **The Maxim of Quantity**
   1.1 Make your contribution as informative as is required (for the current purposes of the exchange).
   1.2 Do not make your contribution more informative than is required.
2. **The Maxim of Quality**, 'Try to make your contribution one that is true'
   2.1 Do not say what you believe to be false.
   2.2 Do not say that for which you lack adequate evidence.
3. **The Maxim of Relation**, 'Be relevant'
4. **The Maxim of Manner**
   4.1 Avoid obscurity of expression.
   4.2 Avoid ambiguity.
   4.3 Be brief (avoid unnecessary prolixity).
   4.4 Be orderly.

Analogous Maxims in Other Areas

As one of my avowed aims is to see talking as a special case or variety of purposive, indeed rational, behavior, it may be worth noting that the specific expectations or presumptions connected with at least some of the foregoing maxims have their analogues in the sphere of transactions that are not talk exchanges. …

1. *Quantity*. If you are assisting me to mend a car, I expect your contribution to be neither more nor less than is required. If for example, at a particular stage I need four screws, I expect you to hand me four, rather than two or six.
2. *Quality*. I expect your contributions to be genuine and not spurious. If I need sugar as an ingredient in the cake you are assisting me to make, I do not expect you to hand me salt; if I need a spoon, I do not expect a trick spoon made of rubber. (Grice 1967: 28)

Caculability and Scalar Implicatures

› The key contrast between conversational and conventional implicature is that conversational implicatures can be **calculated** by (most) hearers given the assumption that the speaker obeys the maxims. Consider

(4) Some athletes smoke.

› Why does this implicate – as it does – that **not all** athletes smoke?

> Assuming that the accepted purpose of the conversation requires the speaker to say whether or not all athletes smoke, a speaker who said "Some athletes smoke" would be infringing the Quantity maxim if she meant only what she said. So she must have meant more. If she believed that all athletes smoke, she would have said so. Since she did not, she must have meant that some but not all athletes smoke. As a bonus, she achieved brevity, in conformity to the maxim of Manner. (Davis 2024: §5)

» Note that we also need to assume the speaker would **know** if all athletes smoked in order to derive the implicature.

› This is an example of a **scalar implicature**. The idea is that there is an implicit scale (maybe *all*, *most*, *some*, *one*), and saying *some As B* implicates that no higher item on the scale would be correct. Another example is

(5) You can have icecream or cake *(implicates you can't have both)*.

Defining Conversational Implicature

> *S* conversationally implicates *p* iff *S* implicates *p* when:
>
> 1. *S* is presumed to be observing the Cooperative Principle (*cooperative presumption*);
> 2. The supposition that *S* believes *p* is required to make *S*'s utterance consistent with the Cooperative Principle (*determinacy*); and
> 3. *S* believes (or knows), and expects *H* to believe that *S* believes, that *H* is able to determine that 2 above is true (*mutual knowledge*). (Davis 2024: §5)

› More briefly: *q* is an implicature when the hearer can calculate that, given that the speaker is being cooperative in asserting *p*, then the speaker must **believe** *q* (and the speaker knows the hearer can and will calculate this – though perhaps this last clause is part of being cooperative).

Cancelability

› An utterance of (4) implicates, but **does not entail**, that not all athletes smoke.
› We can use the fact that the implication is not an entailment to **cancel** the implicature:
   (6) Some athletes smoke; indeed, all of them do!
   (7) I'm really full; still, I'll take a look!
› Conventional implicatures, and other entailments, are not readily cancellable when not embedded:
   (8) *She is poor but happy; in fact, there is no conflict between being poor and happy!
   (9) *She is poor but happy; indeed she is not poor!

Cancellability as a Test for Implicature

› Indeed, it might be thought that we can elevate cancellability into a **test** for (conversational) implicature:

Cancellability Test If an utterance of *S* conversationally implicates not-*I*, then (i) an utterance of '*S*; *I*' will be **mildly surprising** to the hearer, while (ii) an utterance of '*I*' on its own would not be surprising. (Birner 2013: 69)

› 'Mildly surprising' is supposed to capture the shock of a violated expectation when the implicature is denied, but not the outrage that it would be for a conversational partner to assert a contradiction.

  » The second condition is there to avoid cases where '*S*; *I*' is only surprising because '*I*' is surprising.

› Example: *I'm really full; I would like to see the dessert menu* might be mildingly surprising to the server, while *I would like to see the dessert menu* is banal. So *I'm really full* conversationally implicates *I would**n't** like to see the dessert menu*.

The Puzzle of Overgeneration: Symmetric Alternatives

› The implicature in (4) was explained by **Quantity**: if the speaker could have said more, they would have.

› But here's something more they could possibly have said (Davis 2024: §7):

    (10) Only some athletes smoke.

› What if we reason like this? *If the speaker had been in a position to say (10), they would have. So they must not believe (10). So (4) implicates that (10) is false while (4) is true. But that entails that all athletes smoke – precisely the opposite of the implication (4) is supposed to have!*

› This is the problem of **symmetric alternatives** (Trinh and Haida 2015: §1.2).

› A possible Gricean response is to appeal to symmetry breaker, some reason why (10) **couldn't** be uttered – why it is not a viable alternative to (4).

    » Perhaps uttering (10) would violate the maxim of **Manner**. So it is not just 'as a bonus' that (4) satisfies Manner – it must do, otherwise (10) could be back as a viable contribution.

    » But (10) isn't obviously a violation of Manner. Maybe (10) is not an alternative because it's not on the *all*, *some*, … scale.

    » But then how do we explain why *not all athletes smoke* implicates *Some athletes smoke*, *No athletes smoke*?

Clashing and Flouting in Conversational Implicature

Clashing and Flouting

› There are however a number of cases where we **cannot** rely on the cooperative assumption that no maxim is violated.

> A participant in a talk exchange may fail to fulfill a maxim in various ways, which include the following: …
>
> 3. He may be faced by a **clash**: He may be unable, for example, to fulfill the first maxim of Quantity (Be as informative as is required) without violating the second maxim of Quality (Have adequate evidence for what you say).
>
> 4. He may **flout** a maxim; that is, he may blatantly fail to fulfill it. (Grice 1967: 30)

Example of Implicature Involving a Clash

A is planning with B an itinerary for a holiday in France. Both know that A wants to see his friend C, if to do so would not involve too great a prolongation of his journey:

(11) A. *Where does C live?*
 B. *Somewhere in the South of France.*

(Gloss: There is no reason to suppose that B is opting out; his answer is, as he well knows, less informative than is required to meet A's needs. This infringement of the first maxim of Quantity can be explained only by the supposition that B is aware that to be more informative would be to say something that infringed the second maxim of Quality. 'Don't say what you lack adequate evidence for', so B implicates that he does not know in which town C lives.) (Grice 1967: 32–33)

Clashing scalar implicature: *I have $9*

Kyle to Ellen: "I have $9." Implicature: Kyle does not have > $9.

(12) *Contextual premise*: both Kyle and Ellen need $10 for their movie tickets.

(13) *Contextual premise*: it is mutual, public information that Kyle has complete knowledge of how much money he has on him.

(14) Assume Kyle is cooperative in the sense of the cooperative principle and the maxims.

(15) Then he will assert what is maximally relevant, informative, and true.

(16) By (12), the proposition p that Kyle has $\$n$ for $9 < n$ is more informative and relevant in this context than the proposition that he has $9.

(17) Therefore, Kyle must be experiencing a clash between the maxims: he cannot assert p because he lacks sufficient evidence to do so.

(18) By (13), he must lack evidence for p because it is false. (Potts 2015: §3.3)

The Recommendation (Elbourne 2011: 134)

› Suppose my friend X at another department calls me to ask about a PhD student in our department Y, who they are considering for a position. I say just this:

(19) Y has excellent handwriting and is punctual.

› I **appear** to violate Quality; I certainly am not as informative as my hearer wishes me to be.

› But then X thinks:

> Perhaps Antony is obeying a further maxim Grice mentions: 'Be Polite' (Grice 1967: 28). If so, perhaps he cannot be more informative without being impolite about Y – there is a clash of maxims. I conclude that his further opinion about Y's philosophical qualities must be negative. So Antony is implicating that the candidate is unsuitable for the job without saying it.

Cooperation through Mild Uncooperativeness

> A is writing a testimonial about a pupil who is a candidate for a philosophy job, and his letter reads as follows: 'Dear Sir, Mr. X's command of English is excellent, and his attendance at tutorials has been regular. Yours, etc.' (Gloss: A cannot be opting out, since if he wished to be uncooperative, why write at all? He cannot be unable, through ignorance, to say more, since the man [sic] is his pupil; moreover, he knows that more information than this is wanted. He must, therefore, be wishing to impart information that he is reluctant to write down. This supposition is tenable only if he thinks Mr. X is no good at philosophy. This, then, is what he is implicating.) (Grice 1967: 33)

› My apparent uncooperativeness about the quality of my utterance is explained by my being, overall, cooperative.

Exploiting

› Grice's analysis of the recommendation is that it involves **flouting** a maxim: violating it so flagrantly, that the hearer cannot help but notice the violation, and where there is no clash to explain it. (I may write a polite but scathing letter of recommendation.)

› Then, Grice says, the hearer will assume that obeying the maxim is difficult for the speaker in some other way, some way (typically) idiosyncratic to the speaker concerned.

  » If I were known to be a blabbermouth, unable to keep my opinions, positive or negative, to myself, then the explanation Grice offers would not work, and presumably X would remain puzzled by my linguistic performance.

› In a case where a speaker is (i) assumed to be overall cooperative, but (ii) flouts a maxim, then the speaker is said to **exploit** the maxim in intending a certain implication be conveyed.

Irony as Flouting

> X, with whom A has been on close terms until now, has betrayed a secret of A's to a business rival. A and his audience both know this. A says *X is a fine friend*. (Gloss: It is perfectly obvious to A and his audience that what A has said or has made as if to say is something he does not believe, and the audience knows that A knows that this is obvious to the audience. So, unless A's utterance is entirely pointless, A must be trying to get across some other proposition than the one he purports to be putting forward. This must be some obviously related proposition; the most obviously related proposition is the contradictory of the one he purports to be putting forward.) (Grice 1967: 34)

› Irony is the obvious **flouting** of the maxim of Quality and intending thereby to implicate the negation of what is said.

  » Dependent on hearer being able to understand what speaker is up to; not always the case in practice.

More Puzzle Cases (Davis 2024: §10)

(20) He broke a finger.
- (21) ⇒ He broke a finger of his own.
- (22) ⇏ He did not break a finger of his own.

(21) He entered the house.
- (24) ⇏ He entered his own house.
- (25) ⇒ He did not enter his own house.

- › How can Grice account for these examples: why does (20) implicate (21) – implicature is symbolised as ⇒ –, while (23) implicates (25)?
  - » Maybe we can look to **neo-Gricean theory**: see Horn (2004: §4) for an overview of this view.
  - » Or maybe it is just **background knowledge** at work: speakers and hearers just know it is more likely for someone to break their own finger than someone else's; and more likely to enter your own house than another's.

Grice in Action: 'It's Okay to be White'

Trolls in the Australian Senate

› Back in 2018, the Australian senate voted on a motion that it acknowledge that 'it is OK to be white'.

  » The motion was moved by the populist right wing One Nation party, in a blatant attempt to troll the Senate – outrageously, it (temporarily) gained the support of the then-governing conservative Coalition.

  » Even after the motion failed, the furore was further stoked when signs bearing the same phrase were pointedly posted outside the electoral offices of MPs who were publicly critical of the original vote (fig. 1).

Figure 1: The offensive sign outside Sarah Hanson-Young's electorate office – Twitter.

Implicature and Denial

› The Anti-Defamation League has detailed the history behind this phrase.
› That the phrase was supposed to 'trigger the libs' is evident. What is less is clear is **how** it manages to be triggering at all.
  » Note that *it's okay to be white* is a **logical consequence** of the inclusive claim *it is okay to be any colour at all*. If we object to the former, surely we must object to the stronger claim that entails it?
› Here Gricean theory can help – what is objectionable about the claim is not its literal content, which is true, but what it **implicates**.
› Moreover, the use of the phrase is particularly potent because it is difficult to **target an implication** for rejection.
  » It can come across, to the casual observer, as rejecting the literal content, which is then used as a pretext for accusations of 'reverse racism'.
› Strategically it's important to explain why this phrase is racist; at least some observers will be confused about how such a bland statement could be offensive.

Scalar Implicature Again

› The key mechanism in the Gricean explanation is, again, scalar implicature.

› The implicit 'scale' here is something like: *any colour*, *some colour*, *no colour*:

> Someone who says *It's okay to be white*, if they are being cooperative, must not think they can truthfully utter the stronger claim *It's okay to be any colour*. If they are being cooperative, they must not accept the stronger claim. So they are committed to accepting that it is okay to be white, but not that it is okay to be any colour at all. So they must accept that there are some colours it is **not** okay to be. And that racist sentiment is what they communicate by their utterance.

Rejecting Implicature

› Like presuppositions, it is often difficult to directly target an implicature.
› If one wishes to reject the racist implicature of *It's okay to be white*, one can hardly do so by asserting *It's not okay to be white*.
› You can **cancel** the implicature by saying something like *It's okay to be white – because it's okay to be any colour*. But you can't just say *no*.
  » A good example is seen in the response of the Labor MP WA Anne Aly, who says 'It's okay to be you, whoever you are; but this racial intimidation and harassment is not okay'.
  » She has to first affirm that it is okay to be anything you like (including white), and only then can she register her objection to the sign.

The Asymmetry of Triviality

› A residual question: why is *it's okay to be white* racist, but *it's okay to be different* isn't?
  » Why doesn't the latter implicate that it's not okay to confirm, and that only non-conformity is okay?
› The answer is that while it is trivial to be told *it's okay to be white* (given our social organisation, this is clearly background knowledge), but **not trivial** to be told *it's okay to be different*.
  » *It's okay to be white* is so trivial that we are left searching for an implicature to understand how the speaker might be being cooperative at all.
  » The same is not true for *It's okay to be different* – that doesn't require us to search for an implication to understand how the speaker thinks they might be cooperatively contributing to the conversation. The literal meaning is contribution enough.
› The same sort of reasoning might explain e.g. why *black lives matter* implicates that black lives matter **too**, while *white lives matter* implicates that **only** white lives matter (Jones 2016).

Pragmatic Presupposition

Cancellation and Entailment

› One of the hallmarks of implicatures as opposed to entailments is that implicatures like that in (26) are cancellable:

   (26) Some students passed; in fact, they all did! *(cancels the implicature that some did not pass)*

› However, entailments are not. Attempting to cancel an entailment should yield a self-contradictory claim, as we see in (27).

   (27) *Some students passed; in fact, not even one did! *(cannot cancel the entailment that at least one passed)*

› The cancellability test respects this; an attempt to cancel an entailment will yield more than 'mild surprise'.

Cancellation and Presupposition

› Semantic presupposition, discussed in lecture lecture 6, says that the presuppositions of a sentence are among its entailments. Accordingly, attempts to cancel a presupposition should be self-contradictory.

› But they are not! (As we noted when we originally discussed presupposition, to be fair.)

   (28) The King of France is not wise; there is no King of France! (Birner 2013: 158)
   (29) Rocky doesn't know that platypuses are cold-blooded – they aren't! (Stalnaker 1973c: 55)
   (30) It's climate change that's to blame for increased cyclone activity, if anything is. *(suspends the presupposition without denying it; Birner (2013: 160))*

› In these cases, it seems, we can assert some *q* that presupposes *p*, along with a disavowal of *p*, which should be flatly impossible if these presuppositions are semantic.

Plugs and Leaks

› Some presuppositions do not project upwards when embedded. While *The king of France lives next door* presupposes that someone is the king of France, this does not:

  (31) John thinks the king of France lives next door (to him).

› The attitude verb *thinks* is said to **plug** the presupposition from the embedded sentence percolating up (Birner 2013: 156).

› But, Birner notes, 'all plugs leak':

  (32) John thinks the Burberry emblem is attractive. (Birner 2013: 161)

› This does appear to presuppose *the Burberry emblem* refers. (Consider *John doesn't think the Burberry emblem is attractive*, which seems also to entail there is a Burberry emblem, and so its existence is a presupposition.)

› Why this difference? It has seemed to many that 'the survival of the presupposition may depend more on … factors … such the plausibility of the presupposition in view of the interlocutors' mutual knowledge' (Birner 2013: 161).

Pragmatic Presupposition

> If [presupposition] were purely semantic, we would not expect to be able to cancel the presupposition without contradiction, and we would not expect that contextual factors would affect whether or not a presupposition arises. (Birner 2013: 163)

› An alternative view is that presupposition is a **pragmatic** phenomenon: it arises partly because of 'facts about the users of sentences: their beliefs, intentions and expectations' (Stalnaker 1973a: 447). On Stalnaker's view,

> A person's presuppositions are the propositions whose truth he takes for granted, often unconsciously, in a conversation, an inquiry, or a deliberation. They are the background assumptions that may be used without being spoken – sometimes without being noticed… (Stalnaker 1973a: 447)

› Grice wanted to explain what speakers communicate, on the assumption that speakers are intending to **cooperate with** hearers in talking. Stalnaker wants to explain what speakers presuppose, on the assumption that speakers think they can **rely on** their hearers in this respect: there is some shared conversational background on which each can draw.

Extending the Context

› Our treatment of context-sensitivity in lecture 8 was limited to indexicals, anaphora, deixis, and the contextual provision of quantifier and predicate domains.

› Yet already **anaphoric** and **deictic fixation of pronomial reference** go well beyond the mechanical production of content from indexical parameters – a pronoun could be used to refer to **almost anything** that had previously come up in a conversation or is present in the wider environment.

› Grice noted that this kind of **broader** understanding of context was important also for understanding what a speaker communicates by an assertion: alongside the cooperative principle, calculation of an implicature requires

> the context, linguistic or otherwise, of the utterance; … other items of background knowledge; [and] the fact … that all relevant items … are available to both participants and both participants know or assume this to be the case. (Grice 1967: 31)

Common Ground and Speaker Presupposition

› Stalnaker's account of presupposition focuses on these other elements of the Gricean picture.

> the concept of speaker presupposition … is the central concept needed to characterize speech contexts. Roughly speaking the presuppositions of a speaker are the propositions whose truth he takes for granted as part of the background of the conversation. A proposition is presupposed if the speaker is disposed to act as if he assumes or believes that the proposition is true, and as if he assumes or believes that his audience assumes or believes that it is true as well. Presuppositions are what is taken by the speaker to be the COMMON GROUND of the participants in the conversation, what is treated as their COMMON KNOWLEDGE or MUTUAL KNOWLEDGE. The propositions presupposed in the intended sense need not really be common or mutual knowledge; the speaker need not even believe them. He may presuppose any proposition that he finds it convenient to assume for the purpose of the conversation, provided he is prepared to assume that his audience will assume it along wtth him. (Stalnaker 1978: 84)

› What is presupposed, that is, is just what is needed beyond the cooperative principle to make the calculation of implicatures possible.

Common Ground in Action

> Consider a slight tweak of one of Grice's example:

> (33) A: I am out of petrol.
>   B: The nearest garage is just round the corner. (Grice 1967: 32)

> Here it is a presupposition of B's utterance that garages sell petrol (that projects into *the nearest garage isn't just round the corner*) – without that presupposition there is nothing relevant in what B says.

> Here B is relying on this information being shared background knowledge (even if A doesn't know this about garages, B is **assuming** they do) – B speaks cooperatively only under the assumption that there is sufficient shared information context to enable A to work out the intended message.

> So this information is **presupposed** by B (along with everything else needed to supplement the literal content of what B says to make it have any bearing on what A says.)

Plugs and Presupposition Again

› Stalnaker's approach allows us to understand the semantically puzzling leakiness of presupposition plugs.

› In (31) (*John thinks the king of France lives next door*), it is **common knowledge** to speaker and hearer that there is no king of France; so there is no existence presupposition operative. Nothing in the propositional attitude verb *thinks* challenges that background assumption, so it continues smoothly on.

  » By contrast, an assertion *the king of France lives next door* would challenge the hearer's assumptions about common knowledge; in fact it would flout them so much that the hearer would need to interpret the speaker as believing there is a king of France – the speaker is only being cooperative if the speaker's presuppositions (and sense of what is common ground) are not as the hearer thought.

› We have common knowledge that there is a distinctive Burberry check; so (32) (*John thinks the Burberry check is attractive*) will seem to pick up that presupposition – note, not from the embedded sentence, but from the broader context!

Common Ground Formalised

> the more fundamental way of representing the speaker's presuppositions is … as a set of possible worlds, the possible worlds compatible with what is presupposed. This set, which I will call the CONTEXT SET, is the set of possible worlds recognized by the speaker to be the "live options" relevant to the conversation. A proposition is presupposed if and only if it is true in all of these possible worlds. … The presuppositions define the limits of the set of alternative possibilities among which speakers intend their expressions of propositions to distinguish. (Stalnaker 1978: 84–85)

> In representing presuppositions by a set, Stalnaker goes beyond Grice and begins the project of **formal pragmatics** – a project that bears fruit if the set-theoretic machinery helps understand or represent some conversational phenomena.

Assertion

› A benefit of Stalnaker's formalisation is that allows an elegant and simple account of **assertion**:

> To make an assertion is to reduce the context set in a particular way, provided that there are no objections from the other participants in the conversation. The particular way in which the context set is reduced is that all of the possible situations incompatible with what is said are eliminated. … the essential effect of an assertion is to change the presuppositions of the participants in the conversation by adding the content of what is asserted to what is presupposed. (Stalnaker 1978: 86)

› Stalnaker's model is that an assertion that p maps the old context set C_{old} to a new context set C_{new} as follows:

$$C_{\text{new}} = C_{\text{old}} \cap p.$$

(Recall that, for Stalnaker, p itself is a set of possible worlds, so this is well-formed.)

Rejection of an Assertion

> Stalnaker says 'This effect is avoided only if the assertion is rejected' (Stalnaker 1978: 86). This might happen in several ways:

1. It could happen if the context set that would result is one that doesn't contain any live options, i.e., if $C_{old} \cap p = \varnothing$ – as we observe, it is generally **not okay** to assert a **blatant falsehood** or deny something previously accepted in the conversation. A cooperative speaker would not do this, and hearers may sanction the contributions of uncooperative speakers (Stalnaker 1978: 88–89).

2. It could also happen if someone doesn't believe the actual world of the conversation is in the new context set – if the speaker has not said something inconsistent, but nevertheless **incredible**. This would reveal that different speakers aren't **aligned** in what they are presupposing.

3. It might happen if $C_{old} \cap p = C_{old}$, i.e., if p adds nothing.
   » This might be why it is okay to assert *John is married, and his husband is an excellent cook*, but not okay to assert *John's husband is an excellent cook, and *John is married* – a speaker who utters the first conjunct of the latter sentence must presuppose John is married, so the second conjunct is conversationally redundant (Stalnaker 1973b: 455; Birner 2013: 165).

BLM, Assertion, and Implicature

› With this Stalnakerian emphasis on assertion as adding to conversational common ground in mind, return to the topic of *black lives matter* versus *white lives matter*.

» It is apparently not background knowledge that black lives matter, otherwise our social organisation might be quite different; nor is society so irredeemably racist that it's negation is background knowledge.

» Accordingly, *black lives matter* may be **properly asserted**: it is compatible with common ground, and adds to the stock of presuppositions.

» By contrast, it is arguably already common ground that white lives matter; so that cannot be properly asserted.

» If a speaker says *white lives matter*, therefore, hearers will assume that the maxim of **quantity** is being flouted. Why? The speaker must have some other statement in mind that cannot be said without violating some other maxim. The natural candidate is the logically stronger statement *only white lives matter*, one that cannot be said without violating the maxim of manner – for it would clearly be disorderly to make overtly racist claims.

Semantic Presupposition Revisited

› Stalnaker's view sheds light on the semantic accounts of presupposition too, incorporating their empirical predictions by making an assumption about how **cooperative assertion** should proceed:

Stalnaker's Assumption 'Any assertive utterance should express a proposition, relative to each possible world in the context set, and that proposition should have a truth-value in each possible world in the context set' (Stalnaker 1978: 88).

› This assumption is **violated** if an assertion is made that semantically presupposes some ϕ that is not true throughout the context set (for then the assertion will face a truth-value gap at some world in the context set).

› Hence this assumption this will guarantee that all semantic presuppositions are pragmatic presuppositions.

» If this assumption is **regulative**, that will provide a reason for conversants to reject that attempted assertion as uncooperative.

Cancelling Presuppositions

› The phenomenon of **cancellable presuppositions** was part of what motivated dissatisfaction with the semantic approach.

› Note that all cases of cancelled presuppositions involve rejection of a previous assertion – as we noted in lecture 6, it is generally infelicitous to assert (28) without a prior assertion like *the king of France is wise*, and then (28) would be a rejection with focal stress on *not*.

› This is still understood to be a **metalinguistic negation** (Horn 1985), but this time it targets both the literal content that was asserted, as well as what was presupposed by the speaker in making that assertion.

  » For example, a speaker must be assuming the common ground contains *platypuses are cold-blooded* in order to cooperatively assert *Rocky knows that platypuses are cold-blooded*. To target that presupposition one must also reject the assertion which brought that presupposition to light: so one rejects the assertion (*Rocky does <u>not</u> know that platypuses are cold-blooded*), then rejects the assumption about common ground (*they aren't!*)

Accommodation

› The fact that presuppositions can be cancelled as well as created (as *John's husband is an excellent cook* creates a presupposition that it would otherwise need to be pre-supplied) seems to show that the context set shifts to **accommodate** conversational contributions (Birner 2013: 167–72), whether they narrow down possibilities like an assertion, or expand them like a rejection of a presupposition.

› Conversational context is very **forgiving**; if there is a way to shift the context set so as to retrospectively make a speaker out to be cooperative, it generally will shift in that way.

> Some things that might be said require suitable presuppositions. They are acceptable if the required presuppositions are present; not otherwise. 'me king of France is bald" requires the presupposition that France has one king, and one only…. [But] it's not as easy as you might think to say something that will be unacceptable for lack of required presuppositions. Say something that requires a missing presupposition, and straightway that presupposition springs into existence, making what you said acceptable after all. (Or at least, that is what happens if your conversational partners tacitly acquiesce – if no one says "But France has three kings!"….) (Lewis 1979: 339–40)

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