

# LEARNING A SECOND LANGUAGE AND THE CONCEPT OF “WHAT IS SAID”

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## 1. Introduction

Communicating in one's second language is not an easy task even though the person has already learned to use some or even an extensive amount of vocabulary and grammar in the target language. Many theorists in pragmatics (e.g. politeness studies) have demonstrated this, just as our intuition strongly suggests. One difficulty might come from perception errors that the learners might produce. It is, however, rather difficult to predict when the learners will fail to comprehend utterances in conversation, because, apparently, it is not directly observable. Theoretically speaking, it is also difficult to predict what types of utterances are comprehended and what types are not, because comprehension of utterances is considered to involve a complex set of factors that are not yet fully studied.

Among the many theories that have been proposed in the past, Gricean theory (Grice, 1975)<sup>1</sup> is one of the most influential, although it is often considered problematic, especially when it comes to linguistic analysis. Gricean theory attempts to explain how the hearer reaches the intended meaning that the speaker is trying to convey. This is an essential feature for the interlocutors who are engaged in conversation, because people do not utter every piece of necessary information. As an extreme example, it has been often quoted in newspapers and so forth in Japan that a typical Japanese husband utters only three words, *meshi* (meal), *furo* (bath) and *neru* (sleep), at home. Communication is mostly done with these three words, largely because he and his wife share the information that does not have to be overtly mentioned and also because they, unfortunately, have only very limited communicative needs. These utterances are more or less conventionalized, but it is possible even for those who do not know about the three-word husbands in Japan to infer the intentions of these utterances given that they are uttered at home by the husband to his wife. None of these words has a complete proposition, but the hearer can generate the intended meaning somehow. In his well-known work, Grice proposes that there is a special type of logic involved in indirect expressions in speech, in which “what is implicated” is inferred based on “what is said” when the content of “what is said” is not logically applicable in the given context.

Ever since Grice (1975) presented the notion of implicature and conversational maxims, a lot of questions have been raised in relation to its application to actual linguistic data. Many such questions are from pragmatics, semantics, philosophy and cognitive psychology concerning the concepts of “what is said” and “what is implicated.” To this day, a clear explanation of what they actually mean has not been made. “What is said” is often considered the semantic content of the utterance, but researchers have explained this being problematic because “what is said” seems to require pragmatics as well. For a second

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<sup>1</sup>*Logic and conversation* was originally circulated as a lecture manuscript in 1967.

language learner, especially those who are learning the language in a classroom situation, it is a crucial problem, because it is often the case that they focus more on grammar and vocabulary than pragmatics, because pragmatic features are not as overtly rule-governed as grammar and semantics.

This paper focuses on the meaning of "what is said," exploring various studies concerning this issue and discusses possible problems second language learners have when they encounter indirect utterances in conversation.

## 2. What is "what is said"?

In philosophy the meaning in spoken language has been studied for a long time, and the definition of "what is said" as Grice provided has been somewhat controversial (Chapman, 2001). There are various types of meaning involved in conversation. Grice's theory cannot be fully applied to linguistic data without clarifying his seemingly rudimentary distinction between "what is said" and "what is implicated." In fact, the definition of "what is said" has become an issue in language philosophy and cognitive science (i.e. Ariel, 2002). A major cause of dispute comes from the different ways in which meaning is defined and described.

Looking back at the history of implicature studies, many different terms have been used to refer to the meaning of an utterance in conversation or the concepts related to it. They include: literal meaning, semantic meaning/content, coded meaning, linguistic meaning, sentence meaning, propositional meaning, textual meaning, minimal meaning, direct meaning, to name just a few. Different researchers from different fields have been discussing issues related to the meaning of "what is said" and "what is implicated" using those terms, and those terms have been used sometimes in the same way and sometimes differently.

Grice (1967) briefly describes what constitutes "what is said" in his original paper. Grice states that the hearer's first step for comprehension is to seek "the conventional meaning of the words used, together with the identity of any references that may be involved" (1975, p.50). If we assume that implicature is generated from "what is said" after the application of CP and Maxims, it is important to know what he meant by saying "what is said." Grice unfortunately did not provide a clear description of "what is said" except that he argued that "what is said" is "closely related to the conventional meaning of the words" (1975, p. 25). It is not clear that the meaning under discussion is a sentence meaning (proposition expressed) or just the combination of the lexical meanings of all the words used (proposition not expressed).

The most intuitive candidate for the definition of "what is said" is the literal meaning of the utterance. In fact, Gricean theory has been applied to the studies on non-literal language (e.g. Clark, 1975) in which the primary distinction of meaning is between literal meaning and non-literal meaning. In these studies, the utterance is interpreted based on its literal meaning, and when the literal meaning is inappropriate in the context, the intended meaning (non-literal meaning) is perceived through the application of conversational logic. Likewise, many researchers in the past have used the word "literal" rather casually in their studies (e.g. Gibbs, 1979), but the meaning of it differs depending on the context of its use.

In his later study, Gibbs (1994) raised the question about it and studied various examples of literality

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having been discussed in the literature. They are: conventional literality, subject-matter literality, non-metaphorical literality, truth-conditional literality and context-free literality (p. 75). He argues that some types of the meanings above sometimes overlap and sometimes do not, and that the term "literal meaning" itself is polysemous in nature and therefore problematic. He even conducted an empirical study on the definition of "literalness" using college students as subjects (Gibbs, Buchalter, Moise, & Farrar, 1993). He surmised that there is not a unified account of literalness among researchers or native speakers of English. Thus, it is difficult to treat "what is said" as the literal meaning of the utterance.

Ariel (2002) argues literal meaning based on the premise that "what is said" in Gricean term indeed is literal meaning. After reviewing studies from psycholinguistics to philosophy, she surmised that the concept that philosophers prefer to use as the literal meaning (coded meaning), which is context-independent, is incomplete for linguistic analyses. She claims there are three concepts that can be perceived as minimal meaning (literal meaning). They are the linguistic perspective of literal meaning, the psycholinguistic perspective of literal meaning, and an interactional perspective of literal meaning. In her version, there is no single literal meaning attached to an utterance that can fulfill the requirement (truth-conditional requirement, context-independence and so on) that philosophers have made in order to explain non-literal language. As Gibbs (1994) and Ariel (2002) suggest for linguistic analyses literal meaning seems to require pragmatic processing, even though for philosophical analyses, researchers seem to have assumed there is context-free literal meaning. Although it is still not clearly mentioned in literature whether the literal meaning Gibbs and Ariel refer to corresponds "what is said" in Gricean term, it seems to be very close in meaning.

Many studies discuss what "what is said" means (Ariel, 2002; Berg, 2002; Bezuidenhout & Cutting, 2001; Clark & Lucy, 1975; Gibbs, 1987, 2002; Recanati, 1991; Thomas, 1983) in different frameworks. So far, the standard approach seems to be that "what is said" has a complete proposition, and that the hearer processes the meaning of "what is said" first to understand the intended meaning of the utterance. Thus, conversational implicature arises based on the propositional content of the utterance. However, this view is not conclusive yet. In some studies of cognitive psychology, whether the hearer accesses the "literal meaning" first or not has been an issue, and researchers still dispute whether the hearers actually access the literal grammatical meaning or just the lexical meanings of individual words (Gibbs, 2002). Processing models researchers have created explain how they treat "what is said" and literal meaning.

### 3. How "what is said" is processed

The meaning and function of "what is said" can be examined by looking at processing models proposed by various researchers in the past. Several models can be generated from the theories from philosophical viewpoints, and it is possible to describe Grice's original approach as a model. Suppose a speaker A utters an utterance to B. According to Grice's approach, B may go through the following process:

Grice's approach

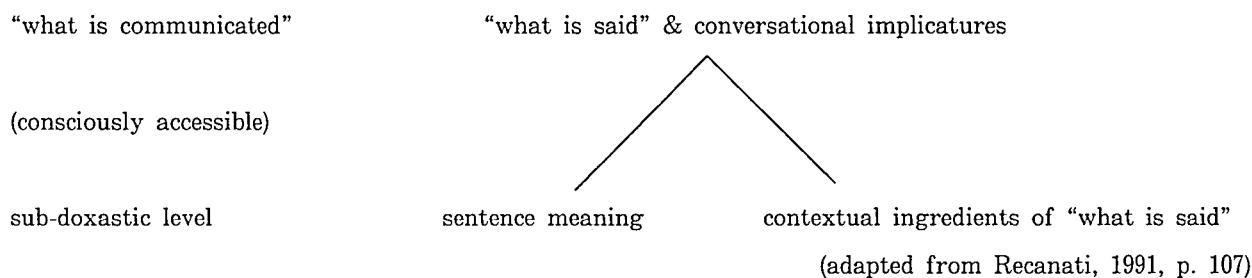
Step 1: Accessing "what is said"

Step 2: Comprehending "what is implicated"

Obviously, this simple model is problematic, because we still do not know what the above “what is said” and “what is implicated” actually mean. Several theorists have proposed modified models.

Recanati examined possible approaches to processing. As the first version of his model, he proposed a three-level approach: level 1. sentence meaning with contextual ingredient, level 2. “what is said” and implicatures, and level 3. “what is communicated” (Recanati, 1991). In this view, “what is said” subsumes pragmatic constituents, and the difference between implicatures and the pragmatic constituents of “what is said” can be decided by the “pre-theoretic intuitions” of the hearer. “What is communicated” consists of both “what is said” and the generated implicature. This model assumes obligatory access to sentence meaning. After discussing the role of “what is communicated,” Recanati, then proposes that “what is communicated” is actually a level that consists of “what is said” and implicatures.

Recanati's approach



This model also assumes obligatory access to the grammatical sentence meaning.

Relevance theorists (Sperber and Wilson, 1986, 1995) examined the utterance comprehension process and proposed their account of three levels of meaning.

The relevance theory

- Level 1. logical form (coded meaning, a skeleton<sup>2</sup> of what is conveyed)
- Level 2. explicature (what is said, proposition expressed)
- Level 3. implicature (what is implicated)

The relevance theory clearly argues that explicature is generated in pragmatics, which is context dependent, rather than in semantics, which is context independent. In this approach, processing the implicature depends on how much relevance the utterance has in the given context, and the processing is a simple two-step model:

Relevance-theoretic comprehension procedure

Follow a path of least effort in computing cognitive effects: Test interpretive hypotheses (disambiguation, reference resolutions, implicatures, etc.) in order of accessibility.

Stop when your expectations of relevance are satisfied. (Wilson, 2002, p.4)

The strength of the relevant theory, as they claim (Wilson, 2002, p.6), is that it employs both linguistic decoding and pragmatic inference at the same time.

As a contrasting view, Giora's (1997) graded salience hypothesis assumes the extended semantic mean-

<sup>1</sup>Ariel's (2002) expression.

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ings of utterances. It argues that some non-literal utterances have intended meanings encoded in the expressions themselves so that the hearer just has to access the intended meaning without recourse to the possible semantic meaning of the utterance. Her argument is based on the claim that figurative and non-figurative utterances are governed by a "general principle of salience" (Giora, 1997). For example, in the comprehension process of conventional metaphors, the metaphorical interpretation is first accessed, because it is more salient than its literal meaning. For novel metaphors, the hearer seeks more salient meanings until a contextually appropriate interpretation is reached. Some earlier studies about idiom comprehension by Gibbs (1986) also suggest strong semantic influence on comprehension.

In contrast to Recanati and other traditional theorists' view, the relevance theorists and Giora do not assume obligatory access to the grammatical semantic meaning of the utterance. It is still not clear whether it is processed so quickly that it does not show in the experiments or it is not processed at all when the intended meaning is accessed directly as they claim. More experimental data are needed in this regard.

There are several factors that are related to ease or difficulty of comprehension of utterances. Table 1 shows some of the terms often used in literature about comprehension of the utterances. All these terms, familiarity, conventionality, cognitive effects, and saliency are deeply related to the concept of context. Without consideration of contextual effects, it is impossible to determine if the utterances are easier or harder to comprehend, and that suggests "what is said" requires contextual information as Recanati and the Relevance theorists both agree.

Table 1. Key terms related to indirect / non-literal utterances in continuum

easier?	more familiar	more conventional	less cognitive effort	more salient
	↑	↑	↑	↑
	↓	↓	↓	↓
harder?	less familiar	less conventional	more cognitive effort	less salient

#### 4. "What is said" and L2 learners

In a theoretical framework, scholars dispute whether the complete proposition is generated at the level of "what is said" or not. Many recent studies that rely heavily on cognitive factors such as the relevance theory or Giora's graded salience hypothesis assume more experience-based (context-dependent) knowledge in order to perceive the utterance with less cognitive effort or as being more salient. This is an important problem for the L2 studies, because L2 learners presumably have a very limited chance to be exposed to various types of language use especially in a foreign language situation. If the grammatically decoded meaning of an utterance is not equal to "what is said," and that it does not always contribute to the intended meaning, the L2 learners will have to use a different strategy from that of the L1 speakers in order to comprehend utterances to complement the lack of deeply culturally rooted contextual knowledge.

Cognitive psychologists have experimentally examined comprehension processes, but again, most

studies use L1 data. It is necessary to study how nonnative speakers can acquire the skills to comprehend nonliteral utterances and find out whether the comprehension process is different from that of native speakers. Some researchers reviewed here agree that “what is said” contains a complete proposition based on grammatical as well as contextual information. It is suggested to study exactly what factors do both native and nonnative speakers use in order to reach the intended meaning.

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