

Understanding Figurative Language: Issues Related to Gricean Theory

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Introduction

Generally speaking, understanding verbal language is one of the goals of learning a second language. To be able to comprehend someone else's speech requires various types of knowledge and skills: the ability to perceive auditory input, profound knowledge of grammar and vocabulary to understand the propositional content of the utterance, extensive cultural, conventional and pragmatic knowledge in order to be able to infer the intended meaning of the utterance, and the ability to do all these types of processing in the brain in a short period of time. It is obviously a very complex process, but native speakers verbally communicate with each other with ease. When it comes to a second language user, it is a different story, and the difficulty may reside in any of the above factors. In this paper, linguistic theories related to comprehending figurative language are reviewed.

The first part introduces Grice's (1975, 1989) theory of conversational implicature' and the second part discusses some of the issues related to Gricean theory.

Grice's Theory of Conversational Implicature

Comprehension of everyday spoken language has been an issue in language philosophy, and ordinary language philosophers in particular have examined it in detail. Among them, Grice's (1975, 1989) theory has become one of the most influential theories in the area of figurative language research. It attempts to explain how people convey nonliteral meaning through limited linguistic output, using the terms "what is said" and "what is implicated." Grice extended formal logic and started a new approach, which he calls "conversational logic," based on a belief that communication between interlocutors is a cooperative and goal-directed behavior governed by it. Grice's theory not only accounts for verbal interaction but also any cooperative activity that people are engaged in, and it also assumes universality, because it is based on rationality rather than culture-specific conventions.

There are two notions that are central to Gricean theory: the Cooperative Principle (CP) and four Conversational Maxims. In his article, "Logic and conversation," Grice (1975) introduces the CP as a general principle. Grice (1989)¹ states that the CP is to "make your conversational contribution such as is required at the state at which it occurs, by the accepted purpose or direction of the talk exchange in which you are engaged" (p. 26). Given that CP is observed, the speaker assumes the hearer would be able to make sense out of an utterance that often seems illogical in a strict logical way, and also that the speaker can exploit the hearer's ability to do so. At the same time, the hearer thinks the speaker is trying to

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¹This is a revised version of 'Logic and conversation,' which was originally published as a lecture manuscript in 1967 and later published in an edited book in 1975 (Grice, 1975).

mean something logical by making a seemingly illogical utterance in a conversation. The speaker's meaning in such instance is called "conversational implicature."

Grice proposes four maxims that motivate conversational implicatures. They are Quantity, Quality, Relation, and Manner, and these are often called as Conversational Maxims. These maxims are:

Maxim of Quantity: 1. Make your contribution as informative as required (for the current purposes of the exchange).

2. Do not make your contribution more informative than is required.

Maxim of Quality: Try to make your contribution one that is true.

1. Do not say what you believe to be false.

2. Do not say that for which you lack adequate evidence.

Maxim of Relation: Be relevant

Maxim of Manner: Be perspicuous

1. Avoid obscurity of expression.

2. Avoid ambiguity.

3. Be brief (avoid unnecessary prolixity).

4. Be orderly. (Adapted from Grice, 1989, p.p. 26-27)

One is not required to follow these maxims, because maxims are not rules nor regulations that one must obey. Also abiding by CP does not necessarily mean abiding by these maxims. Rather, maxims are thought to be the guidelines that enable interlocutors to have the most effective and the most efficient exchange of ideas. The implicatures generated by following the maxims are sometimes called "standard implicatures."² A standard implicature typically occurs when the information speaker provides as the content of an utterance, at least on the surface, seems unsatisfactory to the hearer. The speaker assumes the hearer can reach the satisfactory information through calculation based on the utterance meaning, and contextual and other types of information. Through this process communication can be achieved. Grice's often cited example of this type of implicature is:

A: I'm out of petrol.

B: There is a garage round the corner. (Grice, 1989, p. 32)

Because the linguistic forms and lexical items used by B are not directly related to A's utterance, the second utterance seems to be violating the maxim of relation. Through working out the linguistic and non-linguistic data including the assumption that both are following CP, A can generate enough data that can fulfill the relation maxim. The working out process can make her believe the garage being mentioned in fact sells gasoline and also is open on that particular day, so that she can go there and buy some.

In human interaction, there are number of reasons to sacrifice efficacy such as to show politeness, to follow social or conventional rules, or to achieve some sort of speech effects. In the Gricean framework, these instances can be explained in relation to the above maxims. Grice describes the situations when maxims are not fulfilled:

²Levinson's terminology (Levinson, 1983). Grice categorized them as Group A examples (Grice, 1989, p. 32).

1. Violate a maxim quietly and unostentatiously
2. Opt out from the operation both of the maxims and of the CP
3. Fail to fulfill a maxim because of a clash
4. Flout a maxim (Adapted from Grice, 1989, p. 30)

The first case is liable to miscommunication, and the second case lets the speaker withdraw from the cooperative conversational exchange. The third case is quite possible, and Grice categorized it as the Group B examples in his paper. According to Grice, in the fourth case above, conversational implicature characteristically arises. In such a situation, he explains, the maxim is being “exploited,” and Grice categorized the examples as Group C.

A Group B example:

A: Where does C live?

B: Somewhere in the south of France. (Grice, 1989, p. 32)

In this example, the maxim of quantity is infringed, but since B does not have the exact information A has requested, B provides the unsatisfactory information instead of giving false information which would be a violation of quality maxim.

A Group C example:

A: Mrs. X is an old bag.

B: The weather has been quite delightful this summer. (Grice, 1989, p. 35)

In this case, B does not want to talk about Mrs. X with A, so instead of providing a relevant reply, B is giving a totally irrelevant answer to shift the topic. By flouting the maxim of relation, A is implying that quite clearly.

Grice (1975) described the process of comprehending implicature as follows. The speaker supposes that the hearer is able to infer the meaning through working out the process based on the following five types of information.

- (1) the conventional meaning of the words used, together with the identity of any references that may be involved;
- (2) the CP and its maxims;
- (3) the context, linguistic or otherwise, of the utterance;
- (4) other items of background knowledge;
- (5) the fact (or supposed fact) that all relevant items falling under the previous heading are available to both participants and both participants know or assume this to be the case. (p. 50)

(1) refers to the meaning of “what is said,” and, in a strict sense, it is not just a grammatically and semantically encoded meaning but rather a pragmatically enriched meaning, as Grice specifically described as “together with the identity of any references.” In later studies in language philosophy, the meaning of “what is said” in relation to “what is implicated” has become an issue.

There are several known characteristics in conversational implicature. One of them is that the implicating process must be able to be worked out even when the implicature is interpreted intuitively. This is usually referred to as “calculability.” Grice (1975) describes the general calculation process as follows:

“He has said that *p*; there is no reason to suppose that he is not observing the maxims, or at least the Cooperative Principle; he could not be doing this unless he thought that *q*; he knows (and knows that I know that he knows) that I can see that the supposition that he thinks that *q* is required; he has done nothing to stop me thinking that *q*; he intends me to think, or is at least willing to allow me to think, that *q*; and so he has implicated that *q*.” (p. 50)

Other characteristics include cancellability, non-detachability, and non-conventionality. Grice (1989) further explains that implicature is “not carried by what is said, but only by saying what is said” (p. 39) and also that the content of implicature (implicatum) seems to have indeterminacy, because there is no fixed list of explanations for calculation of implicatures.

The characteristics described above make it difficult to apply Gricean theory to actual linguistic data, because any formal analysis will not be easily done. Implicatures can be cancelled later in the conversation, can be retained with completely different grammatical forms as long as the propositional content remains the same, cannot be attached to specific cultural or linguistic norms, are not necessarily true, and are indeterminate in meaning. A formal analysis like Searle’s speech act theory will not be successful in analyzing implicatures, at least, within Grice’s original framework.³ It seems an informal analysis that focuses on proposition or meaning can be a good candidate for studying Gricean theory.

Culture is also a factor in the application of Gricean theory. Grice clearly states that both the speaker and the hearer must share some knowledge such as vocabulary, context, background knowledge and so forth. Therefore, although he claims the universality of CP and the Maxims, he seems to assume that cultural conventions and conventional linguistic knowledge should play an important role. Some pragmatic studies in the past directly applied Gricean theory to various cultural communities (e.g. Keenan, 1976; Vamarasi, 1990), and their findings imply that some modification is required to apply Grice’s data to different speech communities.

Issues Related to Gricean Theory

There are several problems that Gricean theory has been thought to have. One is from philosophy concerning the definitions of “what is said” and “what is implicated.” Another is from cognitive psychology concerning processing, and a third is from pragmatics concerning cultural applicability.

In philosophy, meaning has been defined very precisely, and the definition Grice provided (referred in the earlier section) has been somewhat controversial (Chapman, 2001). Grice (1975) mentioned that “what is said” is “closely related to the conventional meaning of the words” (p. 25), but this explanation does not seem to suffice as a definition. It seems there are several levels of meanings related to “what is said” in a conversation. The first level may be the grammatical meaning (semantic level), the second pragmatically enriched meaning (semantic meaning + reference assignment, indexing, etc.), and the third the pragmatic meaning (enriched meaning + inference, politeness, illocution, etc.), and Grice’s theory discusses how the third meaning is communicated based on the second meaning. It would have been, therefore, not very im-

³See the discussions in Vanderveken (1994) for a formal analysis of implicatures.

portant for Grice to distinguish between the first two meanings.⁴

Theoretically speaking, however, it could be an issue because the pragmatically enriched meaning can only be reached when enough contextual information is given, and, therefore, it presupposes that the “what is said” level requires as much information as the “what is implicated” level. If the meaning of the utterance is not static, the inference process has to use data that are not reliable. If the words used in the utterance have multiple meanings, disambiguating the meaning of the words requires contextual information, and that could potentially be a paradoxical situation. Further discussions on this matter can be found in the relevance theory presented by Sperber and Wilson (1986).⁵

In cognitive psychology unlike in philosophy, those various types of meanings have not been precisely defined.⁶ In this field, most studies in figurative language comprehension were conducted using the terms “literal meaning” and “nonliteral/intended meaning” of the utterance. These two terms roughly correspond to “what is said” and “what is implicated” in philosophy. Empirical testing is the method of research, and several models have been proposed and tested. Those studies have been developed from different theoretical frameworks, but the area they cover largely overlaps Grice’s theory.

Cognitive psychologists test comprehension of nonliteral utterances by measuring how fast the hearer can comprehend the intended meaning of the utterances. Most of the studies conducted in this field so far used idioms and conventional speech acts.⁷ There have been three processing models: literal-meaning-first model (Clark and Lucy, 1975; Bobrow and Bell, 1973), multiple-meaning model (Clark, 1979; Clark and Schunk, 1980; Swinney and Cutler, 1979; Takahashi and Roitblat, 1994), and conventional-meaning model (Gibbs, 1979, 1982).

The literal-meaning-first model assumes the hearer always accesses the literal meaning of the utterance before making any inference. The multiple-meaning model proposes that literal and intended (nonliteral) meanings are understood simultaneously. The conventional-meaning model assumes that the hearer tends to interpret the conventional meaning of utterances, and this model has normally been applied to the studies on comprehension of idioms and conventional speech acts. The researchers whose experiments support either the multiple-meaning model or the conventional-meaning model have rejected the literal-meaning-first model. The reason why the literal-meaning-first model has been rejected was because it did not consider various types of conventions used in spoken language.

Morgan (1991) discusses the diachronic process of linguistic conventions. He explains that there are two types of conventions: convention of language, and convention of usage. Convention of language refers to the arbitrary relation between linguistic form and its meaning. Convention of usage refers to the language in connection with the three elements he proposes: occasion, purpose, and means. The three elements can be called as “context,” and their relationships determine the language use. Morgan proposes that conventions of usage can become conventions of language, if occasion directly links with means

⁴See Gibbs (1994) for various definitions of figurative language.

⁵The relevance theory directly focuses on this problem using the terms explicature and implicature.

⁶See Gibbs (1982) and Katz (1998) for discussion on literal meaning.

⁷These are sometimes referred to as generalized conversational implicatures (Hotgraves, 2002).

through diachronic change. Morgan also explains that a similar transformation may occur with the types of conventions that require Gricean theory. This means that the meaning of, for example, an indirect request can be obtained without recourse to the original propositional content of the utterance, and it can even be referred to as its “literal meaning.”

Clark (1979), who is in cognitive psychology, also mentions two types of linguistic conventions: conventions of means and conventions of forms. The former refers to the use of a particular semantic device in order to perform an indirect speech act. The latter refers to the use of a specific linguistic form in order to perform an indirect speech act. The difference between convention of means and convention of form is a matter of degree, and that reflects the history of usage.

Grice's theory assumes no form-attached conventionality, but he assumes diachronic changes of implicatures.⁸ It can be argued that some of the examples Grice cited such as hyperbole, irony, or the so-called “Pope questions” typically use convention of means. Gibbs (1994) analyzed idioms as dead metaphors. He discusses:

Because contemporary speakers have little understanding of the original metaphorical roots of phrases like *spill the beans* and *kick the bucket*, people are thought to comprehend idioms in the same way as they know the meanings of individual words: as a matter of convention. (p. 274)

According to this view, idioms are the examples of conventions of forms, and their original literal meanings have already disappeared. Gibbs further discusses another type of convention such as the convention of greeting others by asking about their health situations in English. This greeting convention is also arbitrary, and the present day English speakers know little about the reason behind it. Although the forms for greeting are not necessarily conventionalized, the means has been conventionalized through diachronic change (Gibbs, 1994).

In everyday spoken language, it seems knowledge of conventions, whether it is implicit or explicit, plays a crucial role. This is further related to cultural factors. As the studies in cognitive psychology examined, conventionalized expressions such as metaphors and idioms have lost historical and original logical connections between the forms and their semantic meanings. Therefore, it is naturally to assume that there are cultural variations. Keenan's (1976) study has often been quoted as a counter example of Gricean theory, but the findings of her study can also be explained by the convention of means.

Keenan (1976) conducted an ethnographical study of the Malagasy culture. Her findings question the application of the maxim of Quantity in Malagasy. She examines a normative behavior in that culture, in which the maxim of quantity is obviously violated without giving a specific conversational implicature. For example, to a question “where is your mother?” a Malagasy would say “She is either in the house or at the market.” If we were to apply Grice's explanation, we would think that the speaker implies she does not have sufficient information of the location of her mother. In Malagasy society, however, this implicature is not made. Keenan provides two reasons: one is that in that society, new information is

⁸Grice uses the word ‘intuitively’ to describe such situations. See the discussion on non-conventionality of implicatures (Grice, 1989).

treated as a commodity, therefore, people do not give it away so easily; a second is that giving information requires some kind of responsibility, and that people generally do not want to take that kind of responsibility resulted from revealing information. Keenan explains that, in Malagasy society, the maxim of quantity becomes irrelevant.

Green (1990) explains that even in such a society, conversational maxims are intact, giving two reasons. One is that in Malagasy society, the maxim of Quality is regarded as being higher than the maxim of Quantity, because if one gave the wrong information, she would have to take the responsibility. The second comes from the fact that in Malagasy society, making explicit statements about beliefs and activities is a taboo. It is difficult to find if the application of Gricean theory has to be adjusted all the time in Malagasy society, but it is possible to say that there are some linguistic conventions related to Gricean theory in Malagasy that are different from those in English.

In order to understand utterances in a second language, it is necessary to know not just grammar and the semantic properties of the words used but also various types of conventions used in the culture where the language is spoken. Also, the way in which Gricean theory is to be applied may be different in a second language, and the possible choice of implicatures that are generated through calculation could be different. In this paper, the basic Gricean paradigm and some issues related to it have been discussed. Further research, especially empirical studies about comprehension of figurative language in a second language, will be necessary in a future.

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