

Implicature vs. Explicature: What’s the difference?

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I am often asked to explain the difference between my notion of implicature (Bach 1994) and the relevance theorists’ notion of explicature (Sperber and Wilson 1986; Carston 2002). Despite the differences between the theoretical frameworks within which they operate, the two notions seem very similar. Relevance theorists describe explicatures as “developments of logical forms,” whereas I think of implicatures as “expansions” or “completions” of semantic contents (depending on whether or not the sentence’s semantic content amounts to a proposition). That is not much of a difference. We agree that implicatures/explicatures go beyond what is said (in a strict sense) and yet fall short of being implicatures. So, what *is* the difference, or is it just terminological? As we will see, the real differences emerge when the two notions are situated in their respective theoretical frameworks with their contrasting conceptions of what is involved in linguistic communication.

Before going into these differences, I want to enumerate some basic issues on which there seems to be agreement, specifically between Robyn Carston and me, and to identify some issues on which we disagree (for the details of our respective views, see the works cited).

Points of agreement

1. We agree that speakers can communicate things that are neither fully determined by the semantics of the uttered sentence nor merely conversationally implicated. We may not agree on what this involves or how it is accomplished, and we may disagree on what constitutes sentence semantics, but clearly we agree that there is an intermediate phenomenon.
2. We agree that various cases of what are commonly thought to be instances of generalized conversational implicature are actually instances of this intermediate phenomenon, call it “implicature,” “explicature,” or, to be neutral, “enrichment.” Here are a few standard examples, with the implicit material in brackets:

Jack and Jill are married [to each other].

Bill insulted his boss and [as a result] got fired.

You’ll get promoted if [and only if] you work hard.

Ralph is ready [to go to work.]

Nina has had enough [pasta to eat].

Mistaking these for cases of implicature has consequences. For example, it leads Stephen Levinson to suppose that there are certain pragmatically “intrusive constructions” (2000: 198-217), constructions that are, as Robyn aptly puts it, “pragmatically penetrable” (Carston 2004a: 81). In my view, most of Levinson’s examples are cases of standardization. That makes them “generalized” in Grice’s sense – they are pragmatic regularities – but they are generalized conversational implic-*i*-tures, not implic-*a*-tures.

3. We both oppose what might be called “hidden indexicalism.” According to this view, influential in some circles, sentences whose semantic contents appear not to be full-fledged propositions actually contain hidden indexicals (or implicit, bindable variables),

whose interpretations relative to a given context of utterance yield propositional contents after all. On this view, the semantic contents of such sentences vary with context, but they're still propositional – provided the hidden indexical acquires a reference (or the variable is assigned a value or is bound). Robyn and I both find it gratuitous to posit hidden indexicals (or bindable variables) just for the sake of avoiding semantic incompleteness (Carston 2004b: 842). We endorse Stephen Neale's advice to anyone tempted by hidden indexicalism not to "get hooked on aphonics" (2004: 83).

4. We agree that so-called unarticulated constituents, being neither phonologically nor even syntactically realized, are not part of the semantic interpretation of a sentence. If such an element is neither a referent of an indexical nor a value of a variable, it cannot belong to the sentence's semantic content, even if it is a constituent of the primary proposition that the speaker is trying to convey in uttering the sentence.

5. We agree that speakers' referential intentions are not part of context, certainly not in the narrow sense of being a parameter that determines the semantic value of an expression used to refer (Carston 2004c: 638).

6. We agree that the primary bearers of truth-values are not sentences. And, although we disagree on what *are* the primary bearers of truth-values – Robyn thinks mental representations, I think propositions – we agree that linguistic meaning is ultimately a matter of psychology (Carston 2004b: 843).

7. We agree that there is no good use for the category of what is said, at least as Grice conceived of it. Grice defined what is said as what a speaker *means* that is "closely related to the conventional meaning of the sentence uttered" (1989: 25). Not only does this conception force Grice to describe nonliteral utterances as cases of "making as if to say" something rather than as saying one thing and meaning something else – but it implicitly assumes that the semantic content of a sentence must amount to a proposition. (Carston 2004c: 649).

8. Finally, Robyn and I agree that understanding literal utterances involves processes of the same sort (and is explained in the same sort of way) as those involved in understanding nonliteral utterances and implicatures. (Carston 2004c: 653) However, our reasons for thinking this are rather different. Robyn, and evidently relevance theorists generally, think that very few sentences, if any, express propositions – the "logical forms" of sentences have to be "developed" before a proposition is determined and expressed. My reason is that even if a speaker is being completely literal and means exactly what he says, *that* he means exactly what he says still has to be inferred. It takes more than decoding a sentence to figure out that a speaker is using it in a completely literal way. That's why it is a mistake, common though it is, to think that pragmatics kicks in where literal meaning leaves off.

Points of disagreement

1. Although Robyn and I agree that a great many sentences do not have propositions as their semantic contents, not even relative to contexts, I am unaware of any good reason (I am aware of various bad reasons) for insisting that the semantic contents of sentences are virtually never propositional. For example (contrary to Carston 2002: 30-42), the fact that our most fundamental thoughts about things in the world are essentially indexical and therefore expressible only by using indexical sentences doesn't keep the contents of these sentences from being propositional, albeit relative to contexts.

My main reason for thinking that at least some sentences express propositions is very simple. If none were, then none of our thoughts would be explicitly expressible. Indeed, it

is arguable that all of our thoughts are explicitly expressible, in which case for every thought there is at least one sentence whose utterance would express it explicitly.

The best explanation I can think of for why some people think that very few if any sentences express propositions is that they focus on the relatively short sentences we use in everyday conversation. They don't take into account the much longer and more cumbersome sentences that would make what we mean fully explicit. In everyday life we generally speak loosely, omitting the qualifications and disclaimers that would give more precise expression to our thoughts. To be sure, I am not suggesting here that we would generally find it easy to make our thoughts fully explicit.

My point here is that the influential view, which sometimes goes by the name of "contextualism," that sentences generally fail to express propositions, leads to the implausible view that thoughts are generally not explicitly expressible. More plausible is the view that many if not most of the sentences we commonly use fail to express propositions.

Although we disagree on whether most sentences are semantically incomplete, I don't think this disagreement is all that important as far as the theory of utterance processing is concerned. For in figuring out what a speaker means, it doesn't matter all that much whether a sentence expresses a "minimal" proposition or no proposition at all. Either way, what the speaker means is obviously some sort of enrichment of the semantic content of the sentence he's uttering, and the processes involved in figuring out which proposition that is are essentially the same.

2. We do disagree about what drives these reasoning processes. Robyn endorses the relevance theoretic story, whereas I endorse a Gricean picture. Leaving aside the various differences between the Cognitive and Communicative Principles of Relevance and the Principle of Optimal Relevance on the one hand and the Gricean maxims on the other, the main difference seems to be this. According to relevance theory, the process of understanding an utterance is driven by a kind of comprehension procedure based on accessibility:

Check interpretive hypotheses in order of their accessibility – that is, follow a path of least effort until an interpretation that satisfies the expectation of relevance is found; then stop. (Carston 2004b: 822).

This formulation can be refined in various ways, e.g., to take into account differences in speakers, in circumstances, hence in what counts as relevant, but the basic idea is to evaluate hypotheses about what the speaker means in the order that you think of them until you arrive at one that is relevant enough. However, calling this a "procedure" is, I think, a bit of an exaggeration. What it amounts to, really, is to consider hypotheses about what the speaker means in the order they occur to you – how else? – and to stop as soon as a sufficiently plausible one comes to mind. Given normal time constraints, especially if the speaker goes on to utter another sentence without much of a pause, one had better hit on a plausible hypothesis in a hurry.

I agree with the basic idea here, having described what goes on as an "inference to the first plausible explanation" (Bach and Harnish 1979: 92). What makes my approach Gricean is essentially this: in figuring out what a speaker means an addressee presumes that the speaker intends him to figure this out. This is a kind of game of coordination (Schelling 1960), involving strategic interaction, not an ordinary cognitive process.

And, contrary to what Sperber and Wilson suggest (1986: 256-7), there's nothing circular or regressive about Grice's (1957) idea that a hearer is to recognize the speaker's communicative intention partly on the basis of taking himself to be intended to do so. It's one thing to know *that* one is intended to do this and quite another to know specifically *what* it is that one is intended to do.

3. We also disagree on the role of the conversational maxims or, as I prefer to think of them, presumptions (about what speakers mean when they say what they say). Robyn supposes that for Grice they come into play in connection with figuring out conversational implicatures but not when a speaker means what he says and nothing more (Carston 2002: 100). Now, it is certainly true that Grice (1967) introduced the maxims in the course of stating his theory of conversational implicature, but nothing he says there or anywhere else implicates, or even suggests, that their role is limited to this. To be sure, he doesn't explicitly address this question, but to anyone who understands the rationale of his account, the answer is obvious.

The maxims or presumptions of conversation play essentially the same role in determining what a speaker means whether he implicates something, means just what he says or, for that matter, is trying to convey an implicature. Implicatures (and implicatures) arise only when one or another maxim is flouted or violated (the difference here depends partly on how the maxim is formulated – Grice's formulations in terms of saying, together with this notion of saying as entailing meaning, can confuse the issue). So, it would seem, when no maxim is flouted or violated, one can infer that the speaker means what he says. That is, there is nothing to trigger the sort of inference that Grice sketches out for when there is an apparent breach of a maxim. But this doesn't mean that the maxims play no role at all. It means only that they do not contribute to figuring out *what* the speaker means when that is not distinct from what he says. When what the speaker says and the fact that he says it fully comports with the maxims, that is enough to enable the hearer to figure out that what the speaker says exhausts what he means.

So my take on Grice here is consistent with the last point of agreement (8) between Robyn and me mentioned above, that understanding literal utterances involves processes of the same sort and is explained in the same sort of way as understanding nonliteral utterances and implicatures. It just that she thinks that this is true only from the standpoint of relevance theory and not from a Gricean perspective. But even from a Gricean perspective, understanding an utterance is never just a matter of decoding (see Bach and Harnish 1979: ch. 1). Figuring out what a speaker means is always a matter of inference.

Differences between implicature and explicature

According to relevance theorists, the "explicature," or "explicit content," of an utterance of a sentence is a "development" of the sentence's "logical form." On my view, an implicature is something that is built from what the speaker says in uttering the sentence. These conceptions sound similar enough, so how do they differ?

1. What relevance theorists call *explicit* content is what I'd rather call *directly* conveyed content. What they regard as explicit is, in generally, not fully explicit but partly implicit. Indeed, this is suggested by their term "explicature," which is a cognate of "explicate," not "explicit." To explicate something is to spell it out, and to spell out the explicature of an utterance would be to make fully explicit what has in fact been left partly implicit. That's why I call this partly implicit content an "implicature" (the term should not suggest that all of an implicature is implicit).

An implicature is conveyed directly, not indirectly like an implicature. That's because it's the thing the speaker means (assuming he's using all the constituents of the sentence literally) that is most closely connected to the semantic content of the sentence he's uttering. In implicating something, a speaker means one thing and conveys something else in addition. To implicate something is not to say it, not even partially. To "implicate" something (if I may coin a term) is to say it, but only partially, since one is leaving part of what one means implicit.

Anyway, it seems to me that when relevance theorists characterize an explicature as the “explicit” content of an utterance but allow that explicitness is a matter of degree, what they really mean is that it is content that’s *directly* conveyed, whether fully explicitly or partly implicitly.

2. Robyn find two virtues in the word “explicature”: being “aurally and graphologically more clearly distinguishable from ‘implicature’ than is ‘implicature,’” and being derived from the verb “explicate” (Carston 2002: 171). Unfortunately, these virtues are offset by the vice of being highly misleading. As already mentioned, “explicature” is derived not from “explicit” but from “explicate”; and to call an explicature the “explicit” content of an utterance obscures the fact that this content is partly implicit. Besides, “explicate” is the wrong verb for what the speaker does in leaving something implicit. I grant that “implicite,” being a made-up verb, is not wonderful either. But better a neologism than a solecism.

3. I distinguish two kinds of implicature, depending on whether getting from what is said to the implicature involves completion or expansion. Completion is required when the uttered sentence is semantically incomplete and fails to express a proposition, even relative to the context. Expansion occurs when the sentence does express a proposition but what the speaker means is, to put it roughly, a more specific or elaborate proposition. Relevance theorists don’t bother much with this distinction, mainly because they tend to think that sentences in general are semantically incomplete. I don’t put all that much weight on it myself, since there doesn’t seem to be much difference between what is required to understand implicatures of either sort. Even though completion is in some sense mandatory, assuming that what a speaker means must be a proposition, and expansion is not mandatory in that sense, in either case what the speaker means is obviously something more elaborate than what he says. The process of figuring out what that is is essentially the same either way.

4. Although the definitions of explicature I’ve seen seem to require that an explicature be a proposition (or “assumption,” in the jargon of relevance theory) that the speaker means (intends to communicate), relevance theorists sometimes extend the notion. In particular, they speak of “higher-level” explicatures (Carston 2002: 119). For example, if you assert that tigers are striped, the proposition that you said that tigers are striped and the proposition that you believe that tigers are striped count as further explicatures. Of course, it is readily inferable that you said this and that you believe this, but that doesn’t show that you *meant* either of those things. And presumably you didn’t. So I wouldn’t count them as implicatures.

Implicatures, like implicatures, are things speakers mean, not other things inferable from their saying what they say or from what they mean in saying it.

5. I accept a version of Austin’s distinction between locutionary, illocutionary, and perlocutionary acts (Bach and Harnish 1979: ch. 1). What a speaker says is the content of his locutionary act, what a speaker means is the content(s) of his illocutionary act(s), and both are distinct from his acts of (intentionally) producing further (perlocutionary) on his audience. However, this basic distinction seems to play no role in relevance theory. By neglecting it, relevance theorists tend to include more in the categories of explicature and implicature than belongs. To be sure, they describe explicatures and implicatures as things speakers communicate (or at least intend to communicate), but what they count as communicated is not very constrained. Moreover, by not distinguishing what the audience takes to be the attitudes the speaker is expressing from whatever beliefs and other attitudes the speaker intends the audience to form, they blur the distinction between understanding an utterance and the (perlocutionary) effects, actual or intended, of understanding it.

It would take considerable effort to work out how to incorporate the distinction between locutionary, illocutionary, and perlocutionary acts into relevance theory. Part of the challenge would be figure out how relevance theory, which is intended primarily as an approach to utterance comprehension, could be applied from the speaker's standpoint. Any broadly Gricean approach treats the speaker's and the hearer's perspectives as complementary. Communication is a kind of game of coordination, in which the speaker utters something with an intention that the hearer is to recognize, partly on the basis that he is intended to recognize it.

6. The above distinction, which includes the notion of a locutionary act, is relevant to the ongoing controversy about "what is said." Robyn and others have argued that a strict, semantics-driven conception of what is said, insofar as it is distinct from the notion of literal meaning, has no useful role to play in an account of utterance comprehension. That is debatable. For one thing, it's not just the literal meaning of the sentence that matters but the fact that the speaker uttered that sentence with that meaning.

The main criticism, that a Gricean account implausibly requires that the hearer determine what is said before determining what the speaker implicates or otherwise means (see, for example, Carston 2002: 100), neglects the distinction between what goes on in a cognitive process with what information is available to that process (see e.g. my 2001: 24-5). Besides, this criticism does not address the conception of what is said as the content of a locutionary act, which is performed by the speaker, not the hearer.

What is said in the locutionary sense is not, in general, the content of the illocutionary act the speaker is performing. Of course, the phrase "what is said" is often used to mean what the speaker states or asserts, but stating and asserting are illocutionary acts. What is said in the locutionary sense is independent of the content of whatever illocutionary act the speaker is performing. It is something that is the same whether or not the speaker means what he says, or even means anything at all, whether or not he fully understands the meaning of his words, whether he is being sincere or insincere, whether or not he is speaking literally or nonliterally, and whether or not he is speaking directly or indirectly. So far as I know, none of these reasons for this strict notion of what is said has been seriously addressed in the literature.

"What is said" is correlative with "say" in the locutionary sense. To my knowledge, nobody who objects to the importance of the notion expressed by this phrase has even mentioned, much less given reasons to avoid using, the notion of a locutionary act (but see Searle (1968), who objects to the notion of locutionary act, and, in reply, Bach and Harnish 1979: 288-9). People who complain about, for example, the psychological irrelevance of what is said need to offer an account of what a speaker does in uttering given sentence that is independent of and logically prior to what he means in uttering it.

Robyn makes the astute observation that the above notion of what is said does not apply to nonelliptical subsentential utterances (Carston 2002: 153, 173-4). She is right, for these are not cases of saying-that simpliciter. I would argue that they are cases of saying-of-something-that, that is, saying something of some topic. In these cases what one is saying something of is a pragmatic matter but one is still performing the locutionary act of saying something of it. Anyway, one thing is clear about subsentential as opposed to sentential utterances: what the speaker means is *less* explicit and *more* implicit. So I don't see how they can help the cause of explicature theory.

7. An implicature is on a par with an implicature, in that both are things that speakers mean in saying what they say. In contrast, an explicature is a property of an utterance. I have a problem with that, since I think only sentences (and their constituents) and speakers mean things (though not in the same sense of "mean"). I don't think there's any need for an independent notion of utterance meaning. Indeed, phrases like "truth conditions of an

utterance” just lead to confusion if they pertain to anything other than the semantic content of a sentence or what a speaker says or means in uttering it.

8. Robyn apparently would count as an explicature any case of narrowing, loosening, or otherwise modulating the encoded meaning of an expression (Carston 2002: ch. 5). I think the different kinds of case should be classified differently. If the expression in question is being used figuratively, the utterance should be classified as nonliteral, not as an implicature (or explicature). Cases in which the expression in question is to be taken as if it were modified in a certain way, e.g., “three” as “exactly three” or “hexagonal” as “roughly hexagonal,” do count as implicatures, since they involve expansion or completion, depending on whether or not the sentence expresses a proposition. Finally, cases of lexical underdetermination, where the expression in question does not express a determinate property or relation (“put,” “get,” “in,” and “to” are common examples) involve completion, since the sentence in which it occurs (unless suitably elaborated) does not express a proposition.

I doubt that anything important hinges on how we decide which cases do and which do count as implicature/explicature. That’s because I don’t think these subtle differences indicate much of a difference in the processes underlying either the production or comprehension of utterances of these different sorts.

Postscript on Relevance Theory

I have tried to compare and contrast implicature and explicature without getting caught up in a debate on the merits of relevance theory. However, it may be of interest to mention what I regard as its most serious difficulties, most of which are fairly well known. Never mind relevance theorists’ highly idiosyncratic and misleading use of term “relevance.” As they use it, they don’t mean relevance in the ordinary sense of the term but, rather, the ratio of quantity of cognitive effects to degree of processing effort. Here are the more serious problems.

1. The most obvious problem is that of how to quantify and to measure degrees of cognitive effects and degrees of processing effort. The formulations I’ve seen of relevance-theoretic concepts and principles are too vague to be of much help in this regard.

2. Then there is the uniqueness problem: since relevance is a function of two variables (however they are measured), in particular a ratio, there is no unique way to maximize relevance or, indeed, to achieve any specific degree of it. Any increase or decrease in processing effort can be offset by a corresponding increase or decrease in cognitive effects, and vice versa. So there is no unique answer to the question of what is the most relevant interpretation of a given utterance.

3. Accordingly, it’s not clear what predictive or explanatory value can be attributed to the Cognitive and Communicative Principles of Relevance and to the Principle of Optimal Relevance. Moreover, it would seem that these principles falsely predict that trivial, stupid, boring, or repetitious utterances are much harder to understand than they really are.

4. Then there is the problem of individual differences. Since a given utterance is likely to have different cognitive effects on and require different degrees of cognitive effort by different people, it is not clear that relevance theory can explain how a speaker can successfully communicate with different people at the same time.

5. Finally, as mentioned earlier, relevance theory does not do justice to Grice’s insight that communication is a kind of game of coordination: the speaker intends the hearer to figure out what he means partly on the basis that he is intended to do so, and the hearer, in figuring out what a speaker means, presumes that the speaker intends him to figure this

out. Instead, relevance theory requires that speakers be applied relevance theorists: to succeed in making their communicative intentions evident, they must be able to predict which interpretation of a given utterance best satisfies relevance principles, since that is the one that relevance theory predicts (assuming it were informative and precise enough to make a prediction) will be the first that occurs to the hearer that satisfies the expectation of relevance.

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