

Evaluating the cancellability test[☆]

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Abstract

This paper considers four lines of objection to the efficacy or worth of Grice's cancellability test for conversational implicatures – the coherence objection, the entailment objection, the sarcasm objection, and the ambiguity objection. I argue that the test survives these objections relatively unscathed; and hence conclude that the cancellability test is still a significant, useful, reliable indicator at the semantics/pragmatics interface.

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1. Introduction

Grice's (1975) epochal factorization of what is communicated by an utterance (in context) into the sub-components of what is semantically expressed and what is pragmatically implicated prompts the question of how exactly to distinguish between semantic content and pragmatic implicature. There are vibrant debates on this question,¹ and this paper picks up and further develops one strand among them. Specifically, it is focused on one of Grice's (1975) proposed criteria – namely, cancellability.

Cancellability is given pride of place by Grice (1975:39) as the first of five distinctive features of conversational implicatures, and it is deemed “. . . the best of the tests” by Sadock (1978:284) in his thorough early assessment. As we will see in section 3, cancellability has an impressive history of regulative usage, in helping to chart the contours of the S/P interface. However, influential criticisms of the cancellability test date back at least to Sadock (1978), Sperber and Wilson (1986), and Crimmins (1991); and new questions about its accuracy and efficacy continue to emerge.² Some even argue that the cancellability test should be abandoned (e.g., Carston, 2002, 2010; Weiner, 2006).

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¹ Cf. Szabó (2005), Stojanovic (2008) for examples, and Ariel (2016), Schlenker (2016) for recent accounts of the state of the art. An illustrative (but by no means remotely exhaustive) list of phenomena whose relation to the S/P interface is a matter of ongoing controversy might include: metaphor, irony, deferred interpretations, expressives (including especially pejoratives), gradable adjectives, domain restriction, and referential uses of descriptions.

² Cf. Camp (2006, 2012), Blome-Tillmann (2008, 2013), Capone (2009), Jaszczolt (2009), Burton-Roberts (2010, 2013), Dahlman (2012), Feng (2013), Haugh (2013), Akerman (2014), Walczak (2016), and Davies (2017).

I will consider four different lines of criticism of the cancellability test:

- the coherence objection (Capone, 2009; Burton-Roberts, 2010, 2013)
- the entailment objection (Sperber and Wilson, 1986; Carston, 2002, 2010)
- the sarcasm objection (Camp, 2006, 2012; Weiner, 2006)
- the ambiguity objection (Sadock, 1978; Crimmins, 1991; Carston, 2002, 2010)

The coherence objection seeks to undermine the very idea of the cancellability test; the entailment and sarcasm objections both allege that cancellability is not a necessary feature of implicatures (i.e., some implicatures are cancellation-resistant); and the ambiguity objection alleges that cancellability is not a sufficient feature of implicatures (i.e., the test is not sufficiently discriminating, because things other than implicatures are also cancellable).

In section 2, I situate this project within a neo-Gricean theoretical framework. Then in section 3 I specify a working hypothesis about cancellability, and in section 4 I argue that it survives these objections relatively unscathed. My conclusion will be that the cancellability test is still a significant, useful, reliable indicator at the S/P interface.

2. Framing the issue within a neo-Gricean framework

I depart from Grice's terminology,³ in employing the following terms to characterize Grice's factorization:

WHAT IS COMMUNICATED (with a use of a sentence, in context) is a function of two factors: (i) **WHAT IS SEMANTICALLY EXPRESSED**, and (ii) **WHAT IS PRAGMATICALLY IMPLICATED**

What is semantically expressed is a matter of what is encoded in the lexicon and imposed by the grammar, whereas what is pragmatically implicated is generated by the act of expressing a particular semantic content in a particular context of utterance. To cite one paradigmatic example, Grice's (1975:33) infamous letter of reference semantically expresses that Mr. X has an excellent command of English and a good attendance record, while implicating that Mr. X is (as Grice puts it) "no good at philosophy". Or again: by uttering "It's getting late" and thereby semantically expressing a mere observation about the time of day, one can (in context) implicate a desire for one's guests to leave soon.

One initial important qualification is that the above generalization is rather vague and sweeping, as linguistic communication subsumes a vast and complex array of overlapping sub-varieties. (This is true of both semantics and pragmatics individually, *a fortiori* their confluence.) A large measure of the beauty and power of Grice's factorization is its general applicability to a vast, broad range of cases; but the fine details of the precise balance between semantics and pragmatics may vary widely from case to case (from metaphors to pejoratives to gradable adjectives, to mention a few examples). A related important qualification is that there are plenty of cases in which it is extremely difficult to pry apart the semantics from the pragmatics.⁴ Nonetheless, it is generally conceded that there are clear paradigm cases of semantically expressing information vs. pragmatically implicating information, and that this distinction must be accounted for within a comprehensive account of linguistic communication.

I use 'neo-Gricean' to designate a variety of views which accord a central theoretical place to (some or other specific version of) Grice's factorization. (Examples of neo-Griceans, in this sense, include Kripke (1977), Bach (1999, 2000, 2005), Neale (2000, 2007), Horn (2004), and Potts (2005).) Neo-Griceans may depart from the letter of Grice's views on many specific points⁵; and the varieties of neo-Gricean views may be rather heterogeneous,

³ I will avoid Grice's terms "what is said" and "conventional meaning". While Grice is exceedingly consistent in his usage of "what is said", the diverse range of ways in which others use the expression render it sub-optimal. (In particular, the common locution "said that" is notoriously ambiguous between what I am calling WHAT IS COMMUNICATED and WHAT IS SEMANTICALLY EXPRESSED.) As for "conventional meaning", following largely on Bach's (1995, 2005) work on "standardized non-literality" or "pragmatic regularity", I countenance a kind of pragmatic implication that is systematic and regular, and so "conventional" in some senses of the term (Sullivan, 2012). I will reserve "meaning" for semantic work, but I hold that not everything that is conventional should be counted as semantic.

⁴ Cf. Recanati (2004, 2010) for extensive discussion. Take the process of enrichment, for example – hearers take 'She took out her key and opened the door' to assert that she opened the door *with the key*, but that information is neither (at least obviously or typically) semantically expressed nor pragmatically implicated. (Such cases are discussed again below, at a couple of junctures (e.g., notes 21, 33).)

⁵ For example, Bach (1999) and Potts (2005) reject Grice's position on conventional implicatures, while remaining squarely within the neo-Gricean orientation (a bit more on that in note 18); in work in progress (Sullivan, in progress) I defend a neo-Gricean approach to irony which rejects Grice's (1978:54) claim that derogation is essential to verbal irony; and so on. More generally, as Sedivy (2007:475) notes, "There is . . . considerable and fundamental disagreement among researchers about the appropriate way to classify certain pragmatic phenomena initially identified by Grice as implicature." To call someone a neo-Gricean, in the operative sense here, imparts a general theoretical commitment to the importance of Grice's factorization, but does not entail any specific doctrine about any specific phenomena.

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