

Implicitness impact: Measuring texts[☆]

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Received 15 April 2013; received in revised form 17 September 2013; accepted 24 September 2013



Abstract

Implicitness, besides being an indispensable feature of language whose primary function is economic in nature, also plays a major role in persuasive communication. *Contents* are conveyed as implicit mainly by means of *implicatures*, while the *responsibility* of the speaker is kept implicit mainly by means of *presuppositions* and *topicalisations*. We propose a system of quantification indexes to measure the intensity and the extent to which each of these strategies conceals some part of a message. This makes it possible to assess the implicitness impact of each single occurrence in a text, and of the text as a whole. The mentioned measurement system is applied to a sample of political propaganda (a discourse by Rick Santorum and one by Mitt Romney). Presuppositions and Topics hiding the speaker's responsibility seem to achieve a higher implicitness impact as compared to implicatures hiding notional contents. One of the two discourses receives a significantly higher implicitness score than the other, which signals it as more tendentious communication. © 2013 Elsevier B.V. All rights reserved.

Keywords: Presuppositions; Implicatures; Information structure; Measuring implicitness in texts; Persuasion; Political discourse

1. Effects of implicit communication

At least since Frege (1892:40),¹ it has become clear to scholars dealing with language and texts (though it had been clear to professionals of rhetoric for millennia) that presenting some content implicitly may make it easier to convince the audience. This is quite evident for presuppositions (cf. Strawson, 1964; Garner, 1971; Ducrot, 1972), but it is easy to see how it applies to implicatures as well (cf. Grice, 1975).

1.1. What implicatures and presuppositions have in common

Both in implicatures and presuppositions, *part of the message remains implicit*. In the case of implicatures, it is the *content* of the message itself, that is not expressed:

- (1) - Is John back from Paris?
- Well, there is a red bike in front of the florist shop.

In (1), the content “John is back” is not overtly expressed. The addressee can/must imply it (according to Grice's Cooperation Principle) from shared knowledge such as John's possessing a red bicycle, and the florist shop being

[☆] Although the paper results from cooperation, ELV is responsible for sections 1 and 2; VM for sections 3 and 4. We wish to thank Simeon Floyd for carefully reviewing the whole paper, and two anonymous referees of the *Journal of Pragmatics* for their many valuable suggestions.

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¹ Cf. also Rigotti (1988:118), Lombardi Vallauri (1993, 1995).

managed by – say – John’s girlfriend, etc. In fact, if the knowledge shared by the participants is that the red bike belongs to John’s love rival, (1) ends up meaning the exact opposite: “John is not back”.

As for presuppositions, what remains implicit is not the notional content of the message, but another aspect of its introduction into the hearer’s knowledge, namely the endorsement, by the speaker, of the *responsibility for its truth*²:

(2) Kay is in the country. Her crime will be punished.

In (2), the idea that Kay has committed a crime is taken for granted, by means of the definite description *her crime*. More precisely, the speaker presents that content as if ((s)he is convinced that) the addressee is already aware of it, so (s)he need not state it. Otherwise, one should say:

(3) Kay has committed a crime.

This *act of informing the addressee* is absent in (2), or more accurately it is *skipped* and treated as not necessary. The speaker directly implies a world where the addressee already knows about the content of (3).

1.2. Assuming less responsibility

So, while implicatures “contain” (but conceal) the content to be held as true, presuppositions contain but conceal the very act³ of proposing it as true. This is most effective for the purpose of convincing someone of certain content, because it looks as if the speaker has no commitment to transferring that content. Instead of a world where the speaker wants the addressee to believe something, presupposition builds a world where the speaker believes that the addressee already knows and agrees upon that something, so there is no need to assert it again, but just to resume it for the sake of understanding the rest. The speaker apparently has *no intentionality* bound to that content.⁴

Now, if there is something that can raise a critical reaction in humans, it is the recognition of any attempt (on the part of someone else) to modify their status. That is what defines an assertion. It is an admission that you consider the addressee unaware, and an attempt to modify his/her status into that of being aware, and to become a believer. This may raise a critical reaction, such as “you want me to believe X, but exactly because you want that, there is probably some drawback for me; so I’d better carefully evaluate, and preferably reject X”. This is especially true when the addressee has reasons not to trust the speaker, or to suppose that he or she has some interest or some advantage to be drawn from the addressee, as is typically the case in public communication, contrary to what happens among friends, etc.

By increasing her/his distance from the message, a presupposition has the advantage of concealing the speaker’s responsibility for the proposed belief, i.e. the intention to modify the cognitive status of the addressee. It is suggested that some other situation causing previous knowledge (tacitly attributed to the addressee’s independent experience) is responsible for that content, and not the speaker. As a consequence, the addressee’s critical reaction towards the speaker has less reason to rise, and may be weaker, or null: there is little need to double check the truth of something we already know about. This effect of what is taken for granted is included by Givón (e.g. 1982) among the phenomena that he calls “unchallengeability” on the part of the addressee. One is strongly led to treat presupposed content as not subject to possible discussion. Sbisà (2007:54) attributes this attitude of the addressee to the fact that “rejecting an utterance (because deemed inappropriate or not assessable as true or false) is tantamount to undermining the speaker’s authority to produce that utterance, isolating him from the communicative relationship. As the interactants in a conversation are generally likely to keep such a relationship working, they accept the utterance as appropriate and, in turn, its presuppositions”, if there are any.

1.3. Reducing the addressee’s attention

A further effect of presupposition concerns effort economy while processing communication exchanges. When some content is already in the knowledge of the addressee, the speaker should not ignore this fact, and should present such information as presupposed. Otherwise, the addressee would be instructed to treat that piece of information as completely

² The concept of Responsibility, as we put it, has relations (which we cannot develop here) to that sometimes employed by studies on Evidentiality (cf. e.g. Fox, 2001; McCready, 2011).

³ We mean here “act” as a speech act in the very sense of Searle (and Austin), namely the act of informing the addressee of some content, by asserting its truth.

⁴ In recent philosophical studies (Toribio, 2002), the intentionality of the speaker has been reworded in terms of “semantic responsibility”, whose incidence on an utterance basically depends on the communication of *mindful* (including speaker’s commitment) vs. *mindless* contents (exempt from speaker’s commitment).

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