

How to cancel an implicature

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Abstract

Cancelability is one of the main tests to identify conversational implicatures in general, and scalar implicatures in particular. Despite this fact, cancelability itself is a phenomenon rarely looked at. This paper presents an account of when the cancellation of a scalar implicature is an acceptable discourse move and provides experimental evidence to support our proposal. Our main claim is that the felicity of a scalar implicature cancellation depends on the discourse structure. More specifically, cancellation is acceptable only if it addresses a Question Under Discussion that differs from the previous one. As will be shown, this proposal has the additional benefit of permitting us to tease apart cancellations from self-repairs.

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1. Introduction

This paper is concerned with the phenomenon of *scalar implicature cancellation*, an example of which can be seen in (1).

(1) John passed some of his exams. In fact, he passed all of them.

In Grice's (1989) terms, by using *some* in the first sentence of (1), the speaker is implying *not most* and *not all*, because if he were able to utter something stronger (i.e., if he believed that John passed most or all of his exams), he would have done so. We can thus reason that the stronger statements do not hold. This intended meaning, however, is not an entailment, it's something weaker: a conversational implicature.

Horn (1972) provides an analysis of a particular type of implicatures, namely those that arise from the Maxim of Quality and involve scales, which we will refer to as *scalar implicatures* (henceforth SIs) throughout this paper. (1) showed an example of a SI. According to Horn, quantifiers such as *some* evoke a scale of the sort (all, most, many, some), where – in upward entailing contexts – each item entails the items to their right and conversationally implicates the negation of the ones to their left. That is, while *all* entails *most*, *most* conversationally implicates *not all*. The latter is treated as a conversational implicature because (among other things) it can be canceled via a sentence introduced by *in fact*, as shown in the second sentence in (1).² Precisely, cancellation is taken to be as one of the defining properties of implicatures. In Grice's words:

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² In this paper we are concerned with the phenomenon of cancellation, and we will ignore the debate between conventionalists and globalists regarding the pragmatic or syntactic/semantic nature of the exact reading of scalar expressions. We refer the interested reader to Geurts (2011:§7.2 and 7.3), Chierchia et al. (2012) and references therein.

“[...] a putative conversational implicature that *p* is explicitly cancelable if, to the form of words the utterance of which putatively implicates that *p*, it is admissible to add *but not p*, or *I do not mean to imply that p*, and it is contextually cancelable if one can find situations in which the utterance of the form of words would simply not carry the implicature” (Grice, 1989:44).

And he goes on to saying: “I think that all conversational implicatures are cancelable” (Grice, 1989:44).

Although cancellation has been widely used as a test to identify implicatures, it has been hardly studied in itself. It is, nevertheless, an interesting phenomenon as such, which can help us understand the nature of conversational implicature. Moreover, it is far from being an unconstrained process.

A first contrast that strikes us as surprising is that while in (2-a), repeated from above, the cancellation is possible, the minimal change in (2-b) renders the cancellation highly infelicitous. Given that, as shown by Grice’s quote above, conversational implicatures are usually regarded as constituting a very weak meaning, highly dependent on contextual factors, why should they resist cancellation in some cases?

- (2) a. John passed some of his exams. In fact, he passed all of them.
b. #John passed some of his exams. In fact, it’s amazing he passed all of them.

What changes in (2-b) is that the intended cancellation is embedded under an emotive factive predicate (i.e., a verb that presupposes the truth of its sentential complement), so the question arises: Why is not possible to cancel a conversational implicature with a presupposition?

A second contrast has to do with the *raison d’être* of cancellations. Why do they exist at all if, within the Gricean program, they should be viewed as uncooperative? That is, how can we make sense of a discourse where the same speaker first utters a weaker statement and, immediately after, a stronger one? Why did he not utter the stronger statement to begin with?

Related to this, (3) shows that not only presuppositions are bad cancelers; even assertions exhibit restrictions on implicature cancellation. The following attempt at canceling the conversational implicature has the flavor of a contradiction or a correction.

- (3) A: How many exams did John pass?
B: #Some. In fact, he passed all of them.

Even though the *not all* implicature was cancelable in (2-a), once we take into account the broader picture of dialog, cancellations pose constraints that need to be studied.

Our research questions in this paper are the following:

1. When is it possible to cancel a SI?
2. How do contents at different levels of meaning (i.e., at-issue vs. projective) interact with each other?

The first goal we attempt to accomplish here is to explain the constraints SI cancellation is subject to and why it is constrained at all. Secondly, we aim to provide experimental evidence of such constraints.

This paper is organized as follows: in the remaining subsections of the introduction, we go over the relevant data in detail and discuss previous work; in section 2 we spell out the main contribution of this paper, namely the QUD constraint on canceling, and in sections 3 and 4 we provide experimental support for this constraint. Section 5 concludes with further discussion and a summary.

1.1. Data

Examples such as the ones in (4) illustrate the fact that SIs can be canceled by a subsequent assertion:

- (4) a. At the party I met a pretty tall boy. In fact, he was extremely tall.
b. Some of the students came to the party. In fact, I believe all of them came.
c. Yeah, I admit I do find Putin quite interesting. In fact very interesting.

By contrast, non-assertions cannot cancel, as shown in (5).

- (5) a. #That pretty tall boy I met, who in fact was extremely tall, took a trip to Venice.
b. #Some of my students came to the party. In fact, I regret that all of them came.

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