

Cancelation Resistant PCIs

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1. Introduction

An implicature i that arises from an utterance U is cancelable if U is consistent with *not* i . If i is a cancelable implicature, then it is a conversational implicature. However, some particularized conversational implicatures (PCIs) cannot straightforwardly be canceled. Imagine that Mr. X is applying for a philosophy position and his teacher is writing him the following letter of recommendation:

- (1) Mr. X's command of English is excellent and his attendance at tutorials has been regular. He is a brilliant philosopher.

The first sentence of (1) carries the PCI that Mr. X isn't a brilliant philosopher, which we call i . The second sentence is a cancelation phrase, i.e. its literal content is *not* i . Generally, this phrase should be able to cancel the implicature. But the discourse in (1) allows for two different interpretations. Under the first interpretation the implicature of the first sentence is indeed canceled. But under the second interpretation, the cancelation phrase itself is interpreted non-literally. The speaker is understood as exploiting the maxim of Quality, i.e. the second sentence is read ironically. As such, the second sentence confirms the implicature of the first sentence. We will call PCIs like the PCI of the first sentence of (1) *cancelation resistant PCIs*.

In this paper we argue that these cancelation resistant PCIs have become semi-conventionalized. That is, in specific contexts, the implicature is so strongly attached to what is literally said, that canceling the implicature becomes very difficult. Hearers often refuse to accept an explicit cancelation, instead preferring to interpret the speaker as being ironic.

2. Background

2.1. Source of PCIs

Conversational implicatures arise under the assumption that speakers adhere to the Cooperative Prin-

ciple (CP): "make your conversational contribution such as is required, at the stage at which it occurs, by the accepted purpose or direction of the talk exchange in which you are engaged" (Grice, 1975, 45). Particularized conversational implicatures are *context dependent* inferences based on the assumption that speakers are being cooperative, following Gricean maxims. The same utterance may give rise to different PCIs in different contexts. This sets PCIs apart from generalized conversational implicatures (GCIs).¹ Consider the following examples from (Levinson, 2000, 16-17) that illustrate the difference:

- (2) A: What time is it?
B: Some of the guests are already leaving.
PCI: It must be late.
- (3) A: Where is John?
B: Some of the guests are already leaving.
PCI: Perhaps John has already left.

B's utterance carries different PCIs in (2) and (3), yet the same GCI arises: not all the guests are already leaving.

(Grice, 1975) identified three ways in which implicatures can be derived.² Implicatures can arise by speakers exploiting or flouting a maxim, by a clash between maxims, where a speaker breaks one maxim in order to avoid violating another maxim, or, in some cases implicatures may arise without breaking any maxims at all.

¹Note that some researchers ((Carston, 2004), (Hirschberg, 1985)) make no distinction between PCIs and GCIs, considering it to be more a difference of degree than type, but see (Levinson, 2000) for a defense of the distinction.

²For alternative ways of deriving implicatures, see for instance (Green and Carberry, 1992) for an account based on discourse relations, or (van Rooy, 2003) for an analysis based on exhaustification of answers. Since we know of no alternative means to derive the implicatures of all the examples we discuss, we take Grice's theory as our point of departure, even though Grice is not explicit on many points.

- (4) A: I am out of petrol.
B: There is a garage around the corner.
- (5) Miss X produced a series of sounds that corresponded closely with the score of “Home Sweet Home”.

According to Grice, the implicature in (4) is that the garage is open, and this is derived under the assumption that the speaker is obeying the maxim of Relation: be relevant. B would be infringing that maxim with his statement if he didn't think that the garage is open. In contrast, the implicature of example (5) arises because the speaker blatantly fails to observe the maxim of Manner: be brief and succinct. Violating a maxim does not always mean that the speaker is opting out of the Cooperative Principle. Unless the speaker has indicated that he is unwilling to be cooperative, the hearer must try to reconcile the violation with the assumption that the speaker adheres to the CP. The speaker's failure to be brief can be explained under the supposition that he thinks that Miss X is not a great singer. This then is what the speaker is implicating.

Some researchers doubt that implicatures can arise without breaking any maxims. For instance, Bach and Harnish criticize Grice's analysis of example (4). They argue that if the speaker implicates that which he must be assumed to believe in order to preserve the assumption that he is observing the maxim of relation, then the speaker has infringed the maxim of relation at the level of what is said (Bach and Harnish, 1979, 170: fn. 37). That means that the implicatures in both (4) and (5) are derived from the speaker's violation of one of the maxims.

Regardless of whether the difference between (4) and (5) is viewed as a matter of degree or as a matter of kind, there is still an intuitive difference in the ease with which the implicature can be integrated in the discourse. In (4), B's answer is obviously related to A's question. But for (5), it is not immediately evident why the speaker would utter such a complex predicate. In (5), the speaker *blatantly* violates the maxim of Manner. It is hard to provide a clear cut definition of *blatancy*. We assume *blatancy* as an intuitive notion.

Finally, Grice also identified a third group of implicatures that arise from a clash between the maxims. These implicatures usually arise when the speaker cannot be more informative and still be truthful. In (6) for instance the implicature is that the speaker doesn't know where in the South of France C lives:

- (6) A: Where does C live?
B: Somewhere in the South of France.

2.2. Canceling implicatures

Cancelability is one of the tests proposed by Grice in order to distinguish conversational implicatures from conventional implicatures. Of all the necessary conditions that Grice lists for conversational implicature, cancelability is considered to be the most useful one, because cancelability also distinguishes implicatures from entailments and some presuppositions (Hirschberg, 1985, 27).

Implicatures are defined as those inferences derivable by the CP from what is said that the speaker *intends* to communicate. As Hirschberg points out, this makes it difficult to ever actually interpret a cancellation phrase as canceling an implicature, since if the speaker uses that cancellation phrase, he must never have intended to communicate that implicature in the first place (Hirschberg, 1985, 27). This means that the first half of speaker B's utterance in (7) cannot be analyzed as implicating that Sally won't attend the meeting, because the second half contradicts this, i.e. “cancellation” is a misnomer because the presence of the “cancellation phrase” makes it clear that there was no implicature intended in the first place.

- (7) A: Will Sally attend the meeting?
B: Her car broke down but she'll still be there.

Hirschberg suggests that examples as these can be naturally understood as the speaker trying to block unwanted inferences that he expects the hearer may draw. Suppose one wants to find out whether p_j is conversationally implicated by an utterance p_i . Then, according to Hirschberg, it is sufficient to ask “whether the assertion of $p_i \wedge \neg p_j$ would be felicitous – without specifying that such an artificial construction itself represents an implicature and its cancellation” (Hirschberg, 1985, 28).

Cancelability as a test plays out differently depending on the type of information that is canceled. In general, the degree of conventionality influences the felicity of the cancellation. A high degree of conventionality corresponds to a high degree of infelicity. For example, trying to cancel an entailment (8) or an unembedded presupposition (9) generally results in nonsensical discourse.³

³Note however that in dialogue, another speaker is free to cancel these types of information, and this is then analyzed as a case of *denial*.

- (8) ?? Bill and Harry left, but Harry didn't leave.
- (9) ?? It's odd that dogs eat cheese, even though they don't.

In cases where a conventional implicature is cancelled, the discourse becomes odd, but less odd than in (8) and (9).

- (10) ? He is an Englishman; he is, therefore, brave, but I don't mean to imply that there is a connection between the two.

In contrast, conversational implicatures are easy to cancel. The following piece of discourse, in which a PCI is canceled, is perfectly felicitous:

- (11) A: Smith doesn't seem to have a girlfriend these days.
 B: He has been paying a lot of visits to New York lately, but I don't think he has a girlfriend there.

As said in the introduction, some PCIs are resistant to cancellation. For instance, in (12), it is not clear whether the speaker wants to block the inference that Miss X is a terrible singer or is confirming the inference that she is not, i.e. that the speaker was ironic when saying *She has a beautiful voice*:

- (12) Miss X produced a series of sounds that corresponded closely with the score of "Home Sweet Home". She has a beautiful voice.

What does the speaker intend to convey? The source of the confusion is the fact that based on the Cooperative Principle (CP), every utterance can potentially convey more than what is literally said. Thus cancellation phrases may also be understood as carrying an implicature themselves. The cancellation phrase in (5) is ambiguous between two readings. Either what is literally said is all that is conveyed, i.e. it is a straightforward cancellation of the previous implicature, or the cancellation phrase itself gives rise to an implicature, arising from exploiting the first maxim of Quality: don't say what you believe to be false. The speaker means to convey the *opposite* of what is literally said, i.e. the speaker's being ironic. The implicature of the cancellation phrase confirms the implicature of the first sentence.⁴

⁴Of course there are other possible interpretations as well, e.g. the speaker may have forgotten the English word for singing, or the speaker is playing some sort of game in

There is a surprising difference between the examples in (7) and (11) on the one hand and (1) and (12) on the other. For (7) and (11) only the non-ironic interpretation for the cancellation phrase seems prominent. In (7), the speaker intends to convey that despite the car trouble, Sally will be at the meeting. But for (1) and (12) it is easy to get the ironic interpretation.

We propose the following explanation. The ironic interpretation is obtained under the assumption that the speaker is infringing Quality. The maxim of Quality is often thought to have a privileged status, since it is hard to see how the other maxims can be fulfilled if Quality isn't satisfied (Levinson, 1983). Therefore, one has to have good reasons to suppose that the speaker is exploiting it. Apparently, in example (1) there is better reason to assume that the speaker is ironic than in (7). The likeliness of the ironic interpretation is influenced by at least two factors, which we examine in this paper. These are the origin of the implicature and the type of topic in which the implicature frequently arises, which influences the degree of conventionality of the implicature.

3. Data

Let's look at a very telling example of a PCI that is difficult to cancel. The following example is taken from (Horn, 2004, 5). The conversation comes from the movie *When Harry met Sally* (1989). Harry is setting up a blind date between Sally and his friend Jess:

- (13) Jess: If she's so great why aren't YOU taking her out?
 Harry: I told you, we're just friends.
 Jess: So you're saying she's not that attractive.
 Harry: No, I told you, she IS attractive.
 Jess: But you also said she has a good personality.
 Harry: .She HAS a good personality.
 Jess: *When someone's not that attractive they're ALWAYS described as having a good personality.*
 Harry: Look if you were to ask me *what does she look like ?* and I said she has a good personality, that means she's not attractive. But just because I happen to mention that she has a good personality, she could be either.

which it is forbidden to use words that rhyme with 'bang'. But these interpretations are very unlikely.

Horn uses (13) to illustrate the difference between PCIs and GCIs. According to Horn, Jess's italicized utterance, "reanalyzes a particularized implicature (S, in describing X to H as having a good personality implicates that X is not attractive) as generalized, to which Harry responds by patiently pointing out the strongly context dependent nature of the inference in question" (Horn, 2004, 5).

We have a different interpretation. If Jess is really interpreting a PCI as a GCI, then he should have said that when you describe someone as having a good personality, you always mean that they are not attractive. However Jess is saying the opposite, and we think this should be taken more seriously. Jess is actually expressing the fact that the expression "has a good personality" has been conventionalized as an expression to describe someone who isn't attractive without doing so directly.

Consider Harry's response that the expression that Sally has a good personality only means that she's not attractive in a context where the question is what Sally looks like. Note that Harry seems to agree with Jess's evaluation that in such a context, saying someone has a good personality always is intended to convey that they are not attractive. In the following example we manipulated the context, and the cancelation is indeed odd.

- (14) J: What does Sally look like?
 H: ? She has a good personality, but I don't mean to imply that she isn't attractive.

Jess could now still reply that when someone's not that attractive they're *always* described as having a good personality. That is, discourse (15) is natural, in contrast to (16):

- (15) J: What does Sally look like?
 H: She has a good personality. And she is also attractive.
 J: But you also said that she has a good personality.
 H: She HAS a good personality.
 J: When someone's not that attractive they're ALWAYS described as having a good personality.
- (16) J: Will Sally attend the meeting?
 H: Her car broke down, but she will still be there.
 J: But you also said her car broke down.
 H: Her car DID break down.
 J: When someone will not attend a meeting, this is ALWAYS described as their car having broken down.

It is strange in (16) for Jess to object and confront Harry with the fact that he also said that Sally's car broke down. It doesn't seem as if Jess is a competent speaker of English. But in (15) it seems far less strange to ask Harry why he chose to say that Sally has a good personality. In (15) Jess is still suspicious about Sally's looks.

Thus, some PCIs are cancelation resistant to the degree that conversation participants are willing to argue about the right of the other speaker to cancel the implicature. The data presented in this section also show that the reluctance to be canceled is dependent on the context of utterance.

4. Analysis

There may be many factors that contribute to raising the prominence of the ironic reading. We think we've identified two main features that the set of examples we have examined share. The first is the common source of the implicature of the original utterance. And the second is the degree to which the expression that gives rise to the implicature has been conventionalized in certain contexts.

4.1. Maxim exploitation

One key feature that all the examples of cancelation resistant PCIs share, is that their source of origin is the flouting or exploitation of one of the maxims. If a maxim has been flouted by an utterance, thus giving rise to an implicature, then canceling that implicature makes the initial utterance (what is said) seem odd. Suppose that (1) was intended as a positive letter of recommendation. Then we must conclude that the writer has at least written the letter in a funny order. In a way, this also counts as not very cooperative behavior. The writer of (1) has violated the maxim of Manner. Similarly, in (12) if Miss X has such a beautiful voice, then why would A say that she produced a series of sounds that corresponded closely to the score of "Home Sweet Home"?

In cases like these, interpreting the cancelation phrase as ironic becomes a good option. Only under this interpretation can the speaker's entire utterance be understood as not violating any of the maxims.

In contrast, in (11), which doesn't arise from flouting a maxim, there is still a way to make sense of the speaker's entire utterance without supposing that a maxim is violated. Even if Smith's visits to New York do not mean that he has a girlfriend there, at least the speaker is granting that one might take these visits as evidence for the existence of a girlfriend in New York. Mentioning these visits is not irrelevant.

4.2. Context Dependence and Cancelability

Recall that cancelability is a test to distinguish conventional implicatures from conversational implicatures. Given that the additional meanings in the examples are implicatures, and that in some contexts these implicatures are reluctant to be canceled, we may conclude that these PCIs have become semi-conventionalized.

That conversational implicatures could develop into conventional meanings is not a strange idea at all, and has been argued for in various places in the literature. For example, (Cole, 1975) argues for the case that *let's* has developed a conventionalized meaning as a second person imperative. Consider the following example from (Cole, 1975, 261):

- (17) Listen, Sam. Let's get that work out, before we lose the client, why don't you?

The literal meaning of *let's* is first person plural. But the reading of (17) is that the speaker is not intending to help Sam with his work. Note that the sentence accepts a second person tag-question, which indicates that the second person imperative meaning has become so conventionalized that it interacts with syntactic constraints.

Sadock argues that “conversational implicature can be conventionalized by stages”(Sadock, 1978, 268), Sadock also points out that conversational principles can be used to account for a large number of additional meanings associated with certain phrases that goes far beyond their literal interpretation. Idioms fall into this category. Even though the meaning of some idioms can be calculated using conversational principles, this doesn't preclude the fact that the idiomatic meaning has become conventionalized. As an example he gives *go to the bathroom* which is now seldom used in its literal meaning involving movement to a room where there is a bathtub. As evidence he gives (18), which has a natural interpretation:

- (18) My dog went to the bathroom on the living room carpet.

The utterance in (18) is a euphemism, and uses implicature to convey something which the speaker wants to avoid saying directly. As Sadock writes “euphemisms fairly rapidly come to mean what they were originally intended to circumlocute, and so cease to be euphemisms”(Sadock, 1978, 287).

A good place to look for examples of conversational implicatures is among taboo-topics, or socially questionable remarks. And indeed, when we look more closer to the examples of cancellation resistant

PCIs, (e.g. (1), (12), (14)) one of the features they share, is that they often involve negative evaluative remarks.

Discussions in which someone's looks, personality or ability are at issue lead to the use of implicatures to communicate negative evaluative statements. The frequent and consistent use of conversational implicatures to convey negative evaluations results in the conventionalization of the implicature as the meaning of the utterance that initially gave rise to the implicature. Now it becomes difficult in conversations about these topics to use that very same expression with its literal meaning.

The following example illustrates an implicature that hasn't become conventionalized yet, but has the potential to be so. The example is found in one of the shows of Herman Finkers, a Dutch comedian.⁵ This example is of particular interest because the speaker explicitly states the reasoning behind the use of the expression *lief kind*.

- (19) Wanneer een kind niet mooi is, dan zou ik niet gaan huichelen. Ja, ik weet ook wel, je kunt ook weer niet zeggen van: “Wat is dat een lelijk kind”. Dat kan niet, moet je ook niet doen. Wat ik altijd doe als een kind niet zo mooi is, dan zeg ik altijd: “Het is een *lief kind*.” Onze burens bijvoorbeeld, die kregen een ontzettend lief kind. Toen heb ik ook heel eerlijk gezegd: “Dit is het liefste kind dat ik ooit heb gezien”
- (20) (our translation) When a baby isn't cute, I wouldn't lie about it. Of course I know that one cannot say: “That is one ugly baby”. One cannot and should not do that. What I always say when a child is not that cute is: “That is a *sweet baby*”. For example, my neighbors just had an extremely sweet child. I told them in all honesty: “This is the sweetest child I have ever seen”

It is clear that the speaker doesn't want to lie. Nor does he want to break the social convention of not telling people that their children are ugly.

4.3. Semi-conventionalized PCIs

We consider cancellation resistant PCIs to be *semi-conventionalized*. Fully conventionalized implicatures are context independent. But this doesn't hold for our examples. When we say that a certain meaning is conventionalized for an expression, we do not

⁵Example taken from the 1990 show: *De zon gaat zinneloos onder, morgen moet ze toch weer op*.

mean to say that this expression has that meaning in every context. Even idiomatic expressions can still, in certain contexts be used in their literal meanings. For instance, *go to the bathroom* can still mean to walk to the room with the bathtub, and not have anything to do with bodily functions. Additionally, even *lets* has its non-literal meaning only in contexts where the speaker has some authority over the addressee. Similarly, it is still possible to say of someone that she has a good personality without conveying that she is unattractive. This is just not possible within a specific context where someone's looks are under discussion.

How does this relate to GCIs? So far in this article we have discussed PCIs of two types: cancelation resistant PCIs and normal PCIs, and we have only briefly mentioned GCIs. GCIs are less context dependent than PCIs, and therefore, they are more conventionalized than PCIs. But they do not exhibit the same resistance to cancelation. What sets GCIs apart from PCIs, is that there is no specific discussion or topic type associated with the use of expressions that give rise to these GCIs; they frequently occur in all types of discussions. Again, we come to the conclusion that the resistance to cancelation is strongly correlated with frequent and consistent use in a specific context.

It is in this respect important to keep two uses of the notion "convention" apart. On the one hand we think of conventional information as context independent meaning, i.e. as always arising, independent of contextual features. Under this view, GCIs are more conventional than PCIs. But on the other hand, we speak of convention when an implicature is associated with the meaning of a certain expression. The implicature it gives rise to immediately arises and isn't cancelable. In this way, PCIs are conventionalized. As we have seen, many conventionalized expressions are context dependent.

5. Conclusion

We have shown that PCIs differ in their ability to be canceled. For some PCIs, the respective cancelation phrase has a strong preference to be interpreted ironically rather than literally, thus preserving the implicature.

This group of cancelation resistant PCIs shares two characteristics that contribute to the difficulty in cancellation. First, they arise from flouting a maxim. Second, they often appear in discussions involving the evaluation of someone's looks or abilities, where consistent use of implicature to communicate negative meaning can quickly lead to the strong association of

this stronger meaning with the expressions used, leading to semi-conventionalization.

What type of data could corroborate these intuitions? Perhaps an elicitation or a reading judgment task, to study how robust these intuitions are among a larger number of speakers. Additionally, a corpus study that shows that implicating expressions, e.g. *she has a good personality* never occur prior to an expression that contradicts the implicature, e.g. *she's very attractive* would suggest that we are on the right track.

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