

## Notes on the Availability Principle in Pragmatics

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**Abstract.** Intended speaker meaning is considered an essential concept in the field of pragmatics. Ever since the emergence of the pragmatic study of language, theories have attempted to explicate this meaning, such as Gricean (1991) conversational implicature, speech acts theory (Austin, 1962; Searle, 1969), and the Availability Principle (Recanati, 1991), among others.

This paper, first, discusses the Gricean distinction between what is said and the conversational implicatures of an utterance. It, then, introduces Recanati's distinction between sentence meaning, what is said, and what is communicated, and argues along his lines that some pragmatically determined aspects of utterance meaning—such as conventional, conversational and scalar implicatures—can be considered an integral part of the pragmatics of what is said by the virtue of the Availability Principle (AP) rather than a conversational implicature. Finally, discussing the inclusive and exclusive meanings of "or", the paper concludes that the AP has also limitations.

### Introduction

Speaker meaning is considered the central tenet in pragmatics. Ever since the onset of pragmatic study of language, theories have attempted to explicate this meaning. These include Gricean conversational implicatures (Grice, 1991), speech acts theory (Austin, 1962; Searle, 1969), the Availability Principle (Recanati, 1991), among others.

In this paper, I will discuss Grice's distinction between what is said and the conversational implicatures of an utterance. Then, I will introduce Recanati's distinction between the sentence meaning, what is said, and what is communicated and argue along his lines that some pragmatically determined aspects of utterance meaning—such as conventional, conversational, and scalar implicatures—can be considered as constitutive of what is said by the virtue of the Availability Principle (AP). Finally, I will show the limitations of this theory by examining the inclusive and exclusive meanings of "or".

### Gricean Framework

In his influential article "Logic and Conversation", Grice (1991) proposes the concept of

conversational implicature to account for the meaning conveyed beyond the literal sense of an utterance. He suggests that any utterance has two layers of meaning: (1) the natural meaning, and (2) the non-natural meaning. The natural meaning refers to the literal meaning of a sentence, the meaning determined by the literal truth-conditions of what is said and accounted for by truth-based semantics. The non-natural meaning, however, conveys intentional and purposive meaning. This layer of meaning is the pragmatic meaning of what is said and basically refers to the use of context to infer speaker meaning, the meaning that is communicated beyond the literal sense of what is said.

To comprehend the speaker meaning or pragmatic meaning, Grice (1991: p. 307) suggests the notion of the "Cooperative Principle" (CP):

"You're 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."

This simply means, as Fasold (1990: p. 129) puts it, "that people engaged in conversation will say something suitable at that point in the development of the talk." Grice, further, sub-divides the CP into a set

of "maxims" of conversation that participants in a verbal interaction are mutually expected to observe. These maxims are as follows (Grice, 1991: p. 308):

1. *Quantity*:
  - (a) Make your contribution as informative as is required (for the current purposes of the exchange).
  - (b) Do not make your contribution more informative than is required.
2. *Quality*: Try to make your contribution one that is true.
3. *Relation*: Be relevant.
4. *Manner*: Be perspicuous.

The mechanism of inferences works in two distinct ways. First, speakers observe the maxims in a direct way that brings about straightforward inferences based on the assumption that the speaker is following the maxims. That is, while uttering a sentence, the speaker is being relevant, truthful, complete and clear as he considers appropriate. Consider Levinson's (1983: p. 105, Example 22) example:

**(1) Does your farm contain 400 acres?**

+> I don't know that it does, and I want to know if it does.

(+>) indicates that uttering (1) generally implicates that if the utterer follows the maxims and particularly the quality maxim, the implication is that the speaker asks the question because he sincerely does not know the answer and wants the needed information. Grice refers to these types of inferences as "conventional" implicatures, which Levinson dubs as "standard" implicatures.

Grice (1991: p. 307) elaborates that sometimes "the conventional meaning of the words used will determine what is implicated, besides helping to determine what is said." What is meant by this is that the conventional meaning of a sentence is determined by the words themselves and by the virtue of the contextual ingredients of what is said. Let us consider example 2 from Recanati (1991: pp. 97-98).

**(2) I have not had breakfast today.**

In terms of conventional meaning or implicature, if we assume that the speaker of (2) is being cooperative and following the maxims, he simply means that he has had no breakfast on a particular day, i.e. on the day the utterance is issued. In addition, the meaning of "I" in (2) by itself has no propositional content that can be analyzed truth-conditionally. It is determined only by knowing the

referent who utters the sentence in a particular context. But context is controlled by the conventional meaning of the words in the sentence. Therefore, the meaning of the deictic "I" changes when different speakers utter the same sentence.

It is precisely these meanings which are accounted for by "conventional" implicatures. Again, these implicatures are created by the virtue of the conventional meaning of the words in the sentence and the implication of the utterance. That is, they are inferences based on the content of what is said and not what is derived via pragmatics principles like the maxims, i.e. conversational implicatures.

The second type of inferences is the conversational implicature. These implicatures are generated by flouting or exploiting one of the maxims for communicative purposes. Contrary to following the maxims as it is in the case of conventional implicatures, the speaker deliberately and overtly breaches one or more maxims. In other words, the speaker does not observe one or more maxims openly for an ulterior conversational motive to be communicated by an utterance. Consider the following example:

**(3) A: How are you, John?**

**B: Well, I haven't had breakfast today.**

In this example, B's answer, taken literally, fails to answer A's question and thus seems to violate at least the maxim of Relevance (Be relevant), if not also the maxim of Quantity (Make your contribution as informative as is required). In fact, it provides not only irrelevant information to the propositional content of the question, but it also contributes more information than necessarily required. Despite the apparent failure of cooperation, B's utterance is deemed to be cooperative at some non-superficial level. This is done by assuming that it is, in fact, cooperative. Trying to see the possible connection of B's answer to A's question, one arrives at the suggestion that B's answer conveys to his audience that he is not feeling well because he is hungry and wishes to be fed.

Regarding this issue, Levinson (1983: p. 102), indeed, observes that such "inferences arise to preserve the assumption of co-operation; it is only by making the assumption contrary to superficial indications that the inferences arise in the first place." Grice refers to these inferences as "conversational implicatures" which account for the meaning communicated beyond what is literally said. They are pragmatically rather than semantically determined.

To sum up, Grice distinguishes between two types of meaning: (1) the literal sentence or semantic

meaning, and (2) the pragmatic meaning. The latter meaning can be described as (a) conventional meaning or implicature and as (b) conversational implicature, depending on the type of the mechanism of inferencing used to reach such meanings.

### Enriching Gricean Framework

The above mentioned Gricean framework explains ambiguities in two ways: (1) the semantic approach which determines the ambiguity of what is literally said at the sentence level (sentence meaning), and (2) the pragmatic approach that accounts for the total meaning of the utterance. This meaning generally comprises what is said and what is communicated together with the conversational implicatures. Thus, the connection between what is said and what is communicated is made clear.

However, Gricean framework does not "account for the step from sentence meaning to what is said" (Recanati, 1991: p. 99). Similar to the deictic "I" in (2) above, consider for example "he" in Recanati's example:

#### (4) He has bought John's book.

Recanati suggests that the conventional meaning of "he" in (4) tells only that the referent is male. However, such meaning is not sufficient to identify the referent in the context of the utterance. To put it simply, there seems to be no established rule to link the context to the relevant semantic value of the referent. Therefore, he suggests enriching the Gricean picture by hypothesizing three levels of meaning:

1. Sentence meaning.
2. What is said.
3. What is communicated which includes what is said and the conversational implicatures of the utterance.

This enriched Gricean picture, Recanati observes, necessitates that there are three ways to account for ambiguities:

1. Semantic approach to sentence meaning.
2. Pragmatic approach to what is said.
3. Pragmatic approach to what is communicated.

Suggesting two pragmatic approaches to locate ambiguities at the levels of what is said and what is communicated weakens the Gricean implicit assumption of only two approaches: the semantic (sentence meaning) and the pragmatic (what is communicated) approaches. However, Recanati's pragmatic approach of "what is said" is not left

without a question mark. How can one distinguish between the pragmatically determined utterance meaning of what is said and what is communicated?

Recanati discusses this question by rejecting The Minimalist and the Independence Principles in favor of the Availability and the Scope Principles. Since the main thrust of his account of the pragmatics of what is said depends on the (AP), I first review this principle and later discuss that some of the "conventional or standard" and "scaler" implicatures do not pass the AP test.

### The Availability Principle: Review and Discussion

Recanati's "availability principle" or "hypothesis" as he calls it goes as follows:

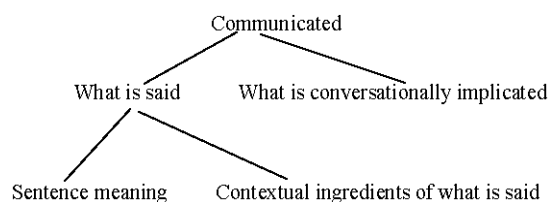
"In deciding whether a pragmatically determined aspect of utterance meaning is part of what is said, that is, in making a decision concerning what is said, we should always try to preserve our pre-theoretic intuitions on the matter" (Recanati, 1991: p. 106).

This principle simply means that the meaning of what is said by an utterance is determined by its availability or accessibility to the ordinary conscious intuitions of the common speaker-hearer. By "available", Recanati observes that what is said is not at some "sub-doxastic level" or abstract level, rather it is accessible to conscious intuitions. Consider the following example:

#### (5) Everybody drank tea.

Under ordinary circumstances, the proposition expressed by (5) is not that every person in the world drank tea as the literal meaning of the utterance dictates in the absolute sense (semantic meaning), but that the speaker means that everybody in some contextually identifiable group drank tea. Recall that this kind of meaning is accounted for in the Gricean framework through the conventional implicature. According to Recanati's AP, however, understanding (5) in the latter sense must be based on the ordinary intuitions of the speaker and the hearer. But, how does Recanati account for this assumption?

The AP is based on two suppositions. First, the sentence meaning is more abstract and theoretical than what is said. Second, the intuitions of the speaker about what is said are considered a starting point in determining sentence meaning. As such, Recanati rejects the classical communication tree (Fig. 1) in which what is communicated is placed at the top level of the tree, the input of which is what is said and what is implicated.

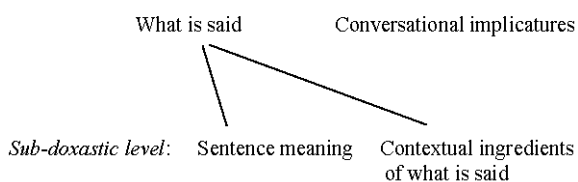


**Fig. 1. The classical communication tree. Adapted from Recanati (1991: p. 106).**

Contrary to what is communicated, sentence meaning in Fig. 1 is at the bottom of the tree. It is abstract, cognitively deep and consciously unavailable to the speaker who utters the sentence. However, what is said, being located at an intermediate level, is cognitively shallower and less abstract than sentence meaning. Recanati also adds that it cannot be concluded that what is said is consciously available by the virtue of its being closer to what is communicated than to sentence meaning. He elaborates that what is said "could be no less sub-doxastic than sentence meaning" (p. 106). This assumption, of course, goes against his claim that what is said is consciously available. Therefore, to solve this problem, he modifies Fig. 1 by raising up what is said and what is implicated to the top level and considering what is communicated as simply "a name" for both the components of the new top level. In this framework, what is communicated "consists of" what is said and what is implicated, rather than being "above" them. In other words, he collapses the first and the second levels from the top into one level by raising up level two into the position of level one. This level, he claims, is characterized by conscious accessibility (Fig. 2).

*What is communicated:*

(top level, consciously accessible)



**Fig. 2. The communication tree based on the Availability Principle. Adapted from Recanati (1991: p. 107).**

As such, the mechanism of conscious availability can be interpreted on the basis of the necessity principle of presupposition: If X is characterized by Y, the components of X (Z and T)

are necessarily presupposed to be also characterized by Y. That is, if what is communicated is described by being consciously available, its components (what is said and what is implicated) are necessarily presupposed to be described by conscious availability.

Going back to example 5, "Everybody drank tea", one can observe that checking what is said against the intuitions of the speaker constitutes a test to determine the pragmatic meaning of what is said. Using the AP, one can determine that the understood meaning of what is said is that everybody in some contextually identifiable group drank tea. Not only that, but this is also the preferred meaning at least by the speaker since the literal meaning is so abstract that the speaker cannot easily identify. Based on these assumptions, the AP rejects the analysis that identifies what the speaker says with the proposition that everybody in the world drank tea, simply because such abstract meaning is not what the speaker means, and he himself would not recognize it as being what he said.

If one discerns that the meaning arrived at by the AP above (i.e. everybody in some identifiable context drank tea) is traditionally accounted for by Gricean conventional implicature, one can make out why Recanati insists on considering this type of meaning as part of the pragmatics of what is said rather than an implicature.

One important consequence of the AP is that it rejects, as Recanati observes, some of the conversational implicatures such as "scaler" implicatures. Consider his example:

#### (6) John has three children.

The usual analysis of (6) runs as follows: The literal semantic meaning expressed by the proposition in (6) is that John has "at least" three children. Suppose the speaker wants to communicate by (6) that John has "exactly" three children, can one assume the literal meaning indicates the speaker's meaning, "exactly or no more than three children"? The answer is obviously "no", simply because the semantic interpretation of (6) is so abstract that it cannot be intuitively available to the speaker. Therefore, one must consider the pragmatic meaning "exactly or no more than three children" as part of what is said by the speaker, the meaning traditionally explained in terms of conversational implicature. This is precisely why Recanati rejects the explanation derived through implicatures in favor of the pragmatics of what is said.

To elaborate, one can argue that example (6) illustrates the conventional or standard implicature of what is said, the implicature usually generated by observing the maxims straightforwardly. Recanati suggests that one should explicate the communicated meaning in terms of implicatures only if it cannot be explained by the AP. In other words, the implicature analysis should be adopted to explain only genuine implicatures, i.e. the external meaning of what is said. Since the meaning conveyed in (6) "exactly or no more than three children" is consciously available to the speaker, it should be regarded as part of what is said, not an external meaning communicated to the hearers as a standard or conventional implicature.

By the same token, example (2), "I have not had breakfast today", communicates the meaning that the speaker has had no breakfast on the day the utterance is issued. Gricean conventional implicature provides an explanation for this meaning. By the virtue of the AP, however, the meaning conveyed by Gricean conventional implicature should be considered identical with what is said and part of the pragmatics of what is said.

In sum, Recanati rejects the classical analysis of (2), (5) and (6) on the grounds that the literal proposition expressed by these utterances are not consciously available to the speaker. What the speaker recognizes is the pragmatically determined aspect of these utterances, and hence they are deemed to be part of what is said rather than being associated with conversational implicatures.

#### **The Inclusive and Exclusive Meanings of "or"**

In a like manner, one can (as Recanati suggests, but does not discuss) explicate the exclusive "or". This sense of "or" is typically accounted for by conversational implicatures. For instance, Fasold (1990) suggests that the sentence in example (7) below is interpreted as a case of exclusive "or" by means of positing a conversational implicature together with the literal proposition of the utterance. He concludes that semanticists who give two senses to "or" inclusive and exclusive are considered wrong by those who accept the Gricean framework.

I argue along Recanati's hypothesis that in (7) the exclusive reading of "or" is part of the pragmatic aspect of what is said rather than a conversational implicature.

#### **(7) John is either patriotic or quixotic.**

It is customary to say that the proposition expressed literally by (7) is that John is both patriotic and quixotic (the inclusive meaning of "or"), even if the speaker means to communicate by this utterance that John is either patriotic or quixotic, but not both (the exclusive meaning of "or"). If John is both patriotic and quixotic, the speaker should say so according to the maxims of Quantity and Quality by being informative and truthful respectively. Since the inclusive proposition of "or" is not consciously available to the speaker himself due to his unawareness of such abstract sentence meaning, the only proposition that he intends to communicate is the exclusive sense of "or", i.e. John is either patriotic or quixotic, but not both. As such, the exclusive meaning of "or" is considered an integral part of what is said rather than being an external meaning generated through a conversational implicature.

The same remarks can be made about example (8) and other similar sentences.

#### **(8) He is either mad or pretends to be mad.**

The literal semantic meaning of (8), which is consciously inaccessible to the speaker, conveys the inclusive sense of "or", i.e. he is mad and pretends to be mad. But, this kind of abstract proposition makes no sense even to the speaker himself. The only consciously available meaning that the speaker indicates to convey is the exclusive sense of "or", i.e. he is either mad or pretends to be mad, but not both. Indeed, this is the intended speaker meaning of what is said simply because a mad person cannot logically pretend to be mad. This meaning must be viewed as part of the pragmatic ingredient of what is said rather than a conversational implicature.

In sum, there is some truth in Recanati's pragmatic analysis of what is said as I illustrated with the use of inclusive and exclusive readings of "or" in examples (7) and (8) above. But there is more!

Recanati promises to provide a rule or criterion to distinguish between genuine implicatures (or external meaning) and pragmatic constituents of the proposition expressed (or what is said). He, therefore, suggests the AP which basically depends on the commonsense intuitions of the speaker and assumes that these intuitions are identical to the proposition expressed in what is said. Thus, he treats the speakers' intuitions respectfully and considers them a starting point in his analysis of what is said. Using intuitions as a criterion to solve a pragmatic problem even pre-theoretically seems to be problematic as Recanati himself states:

"When I claim that we have intuitions concerning what is said, I do not wish to deny that these intuitions may be fuzzy, or that we may sometimes have conflicting intuitions" (Recanati, 1991: p. 108).

Yet, Recanati insists on considering intuitions as "clear enough to rule out a number of analyses that are grossly inconsistent with them" (p. 108). To elaborate, one finds such fuzzy and conflicting intuitions in the following example from Fasold (1990):

**(9) Henry likes apples or bananas.**

Recanati's AP dictates that the exclusive meaning of "or" conveyed traditionally in terms of conversational implicature (either apples or bananas, but not both) is, in fact, considered part of the constituent of what is said.

However, the problem in (9) is that the literal inclusive meaning of "or" expressed in the proposition Henry likes both apples and bananas is also consciously available to the speakers and the hearers of this utterance. To test this assumption, I appealed, as often suggested in transformation grammar by Radford (1988), to the intuitions of five native speakers of English about sentence well-formedness, which is derived from the acceptability judgments of example (9). Of course, I did not use these technical terms when I asked about my informants' judgments. They all agreed that when uttered or heard, example (9) is (a) acceptable, and (b) intuitively conveys both the inclusive and exclusive senses of "or".

But, why is it that these informants thought that (9) conveys both readings of "or"? Notice that I asked the informants to give me their judgments when they "hear" or "utter" (9), but not when they read it. As such, the informants conjure up contexts in their minds when they think about the meaning of (9). This is precisely why Mey (2001: p. 39) considers the pragmatic view of language as "user-oriented", i.e. how "linguistic elements are used in the context of interaction". Mey elaborates that context is "dynamic" in language use. That is, participants continuously negotiate contextual parameters while interacting until what they say becomes intelligible. Thus, it is highly likely that these informants incessantly searched for the appropriate contexts for (9) in which both senses of "or" can be detected.

To substantiate my argument, let us consider the following example:

**(10) Host: Apples or bananas?**

**Guest: Well, I like apples or bananas.**

In (10) the host offers his guest some fruit by saying, "Apples or bananas?" Based on the AP, the proposition of what is said is either apples or bananas, but not both (exclusive sense of "or") since it is consciously available to the speaker as discussed above. Similarly, one can argue that the host would not make such an offer (a) if he does not have both apples and bananas, and (b) if he does not expect the guest to ask for both apples and bananas once the offer is made. In other words, the inclusive meaning of "or" is also intuitively available to the speaker and is part of what is said.

In the guest's response, "Well, I like apples or bananas", one can easily see that the inclusive and the exclusive meanings of "or" are equally intuitively available to the speaker. The guest's response may respectively mean that he wants both apples and bananas, or that it makes no difference to him whether the host offers him apples or bananas, but not both. In examples (9) and (10), should we consider the inclusive sense of "or" as a constituent of what is said by the virtue of its conscious accessibility? If so, should we consider the exclusive sense of "or" as a genuine implicature or as an integral part of what is said, or both?

Logical thinking dictates that if there is an established theory of pragmatic communication, it is preferable to attribute such examples as (9) and (10) to the explanation provided by the established theory—not as an exception to the newly suggested theory of the AP—at least until such sentences are validly accounted for by the new theory. Hence, these two examples do not conform to the AP and should be accounted for pragmatically in the traditional Gricean framework.

However, one point should be mentioned in favor of Recanati's use of the native speaker's intuitions to analyze the pragmatics of what is said. What is good in syntax can be equally good in pragmatics. In his quest for a theory of language structure, Chomsky (1977: p. 40) distinguishes between two types of competence: (a) grammatical competence (related to the theory of language structure), and (b) pragmatic competence (correlated with the theory of language use). He utilizes the native speaker's "intuitions" to make judgments about sentence grammaticality or well-formedness. If the intuitions of native speakers are reasonably good to reflect their competence, the same intuitions derived through "acceptability judgments" (Chomsky, 1965: pp. 10-15) can be used to reflect performance or the pragmatic competence of the speakers. Chomsky (1986: p. 36), however, clearly indicates that "judgments of acceptability, for

example, may fail to provide direct evidence as to grammatical status because of the intrusion of numerous other factors. The same is true of other judgments of form and meaning".

As a matter of fact, fuzzy and conflicting intuitions exist in certain cases as in the situations where the informant "is confused, or tired, or bored... and hence makes a hasty and perhaps erroneous judgment" (Radford, 1988: p. 12). In reality, however, neither the linguist nor the hearers of what is said can confidently tell what the speaker means. It is the speaker and only the speaker of what is said can assuredly tell what he means by what he says. Linguists can only make the best disciplined conjectures of what is said and account for such conjectures through forming their own theories.

One such theory is Recanati's AP which can be considered an ambitious step to break out of the classical Gricean framework to explicate speaker meaning of "what is said". It is sufficient to say here that one's intuitions may *sometimes* be clear enough, as Recanati himself points out, to rule out some analyses which are incongruous with them. His theory is, indeed, a potential threat to at least *some* conversational implicatures.

### Conclusion

In conclusion, I reviewed the classical Gricean framework which assumes that there are only two ways to account for ambiguities: (a) the semantic approach which determines the ambiguity of what is literally said at the sentence level, and (b) the pragmatic approach that accounts for the meaning conveyed beyond the sentence meaning in terms of implicatures. In the enriched Gricean framework, I

discussed that ambiguities are accounted for on three levels: (a) the semantic approach of sentence meaning, (b) the pragmatic approach of what is said, and (c) the pragmatic approach of what is communicated. I argued along Recanati's AP that some pragmatically generated meanings are not genuine implicatures, but rather the pragmatic constituents of what is said by virtue of the AP. Ambitious though it may be, such a theory, I demonstrated by using "or", also has limitations.

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## ملاحظات حول مبدأ التوافر في التداولية

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ملخص البحث. يُعد الذي يقصده المتحدث مفهوماً جوهرياً في علم المعنى التداولي. فمنذ نشوء هذا العلم ظهرت نظريات عدة تحاول شرح هذا المعنى مثل "نظرية التضمنية التحاورية" عند غرايس في عام ١٩٧٥م، و"نظرية أفعال القول" لأوستن في عام ١٩٦٢م وسيريل في عام ١٩٦٩م، و"نظرية مبدأ التوافر" لريكاناتي في عام ١٩٩١/١٩٨٩م.

يناقش هذا البحث الفرق بين "ما يقال" و"ما يتضمن القول في الحديث"، ومن ثم يرى البحث بأن بعضاً من المعاني المتضمنة لدى غرايس يمكن اعتبارها جزءاً من المعنى التداولي لما يقال وفقاً لمبدأ التوافر عند ريكاناتي الذي يميز الفرق بين "معنى الجملة" و"ما يقال" و"ما يريد المتكلم إيصاله". ومن ثم يبين البحث مدى صحة "مبدأ التوافر"، وذلك بتحليل معنى "أو"، ويخلص إلى أن هذا المبدأ قد يفسر بعض الظواهر اللغوية التي كانت تعتمد على نظرية التضمنية التحاورية لتفسيرها، إلا أن نتائجه محدودة في أحيان أخرى. ومع ذلك يعد "مبدأ التوافر" خطوة جريئة في استخدام حدس المتحدث العادي لتفسير المعنى التداولي لـ"ما يقال".