Conventional meaning and conventional implicature: non-truth-conditional meanings of conditionals

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Abstract (regular paper)

In this paper, we address the terminological confusion that surrounds the notion of conventional implicature in the pragmatics literature. Grice's (1989: 25-26; 86, 88) remarks on the notion are very brief, and therefore, admittedly, involve a risk of obscurity. Indeed, different authors have understood and used the term *conventional implicature* in very different ways, ranging from non-truth-conditional aspects of the functions of words (e.g. Levinson 1979; Birner 2013; Potts 2005) and presuppositions of sentences (e.g. Karttunen & Peters 1979) to complete dismissal of the notion in Relevance Theory (e.g. Carston 2006).

First, we will argue that there is definitely a 'niche' in the theory of language use for a notion of conventional implicature, provided we recognize the necessity of fixing the meaning of terms in scientific theories more tightly than in everyday communication, in this case especially in relation to the terms *meaning* and *convention* (Verhagen 2019, 2021). We begin with a fresh 'close reading' of the original remarks by Grice, concluding that these actually indicate a need for distinguishing, in rather specific ways, between a) conventional *meaning* and conventional *implicature*, and b) meaning at the level of items (words, but also grammatical constructions) and at the level of sentences and utterances. Most importantly: a combination of conventional meanings of items in an utterance may license an implicature (an interpretation of the utterance that does not affect its truth conditions) that is not co-dependent on knowledge beyond the conventional items involved. Second, we characterize common interpretations of the notion conventional implicature in the pragmatics literature and the more or less radical failures to recognize these distinctions.

Finally, we will demonstrate the usefulness of the distinctions we propose by means of a case study of conditional constructions in natural language, based on a corpus study of Dutch (Reuneker 2022). Our conceptualization of the difference between conventional meaning and conventional implicature allows us to assign the most common Dutch conditional construction ('*als p, (dan) q', "*if p, (then) q") the function of indicating unassertiveness and connectedness as components of its conventional meaning, which contribute to various non-truth-conditional aspects of the interpretation of conditional sentences in discourse, such as specific types of unassertiveness (e.g. uncertainty or hypotheticality, Declerck & Reed 2001), and specific types of connections between *p* and *q* (e.g. causal, epistemic and speech act, Dancygier & Sweetser 2005). Although the corpus data show some grammatical features to be statistically correlated with certain implicatures, none of these relations is strong enough for an implicature to be called 'conventional' in the sense we are proposing (Reuneker 2022, ch. 6 and 7).

This implies a relatively large role for pragmatics, and perhaps lexical semantics, in explaining the ways in which conditionals are interpreted.

So, while the notion of conventional implicature does not appear to be instantiated in the grammar of Dutch conditionals, we show it is precisely our act of distinguishing between conventional implicature and conventional meaning that allows for an analysis of natural language conditionals in terms of two general (non-truth-conditional) aspects of conventional meaning and more specific conversational implicatures.

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