Chapter 6
Taking stock and looking forward

This short final chapter takes stock and makes some suggestions for future work. The first section is retrospective, briefly revisiting the major themes from the thesis and giving tentative answers to some of the questions posed in the opening chapter. The second section builds on these conclusions to offer some speculations about the function and ethics of implicature.

1. Taking stock

1.1 The Gricean framework

The main focus of this thesis has been Grice's account of how implicatures are generated ('the Gricean framework'), which I introduced in Chapter 2. I raised a number of objections to the account, but the key ones centred around Grice's claim that implicatures can be calculated from general conversational principles. This is an elegant and attractive idea, but I argued that it is wrong to think that there is this kind of rational connection between utterances and what they implicate. The relevant arguments in Chapters 3 and 4 can be seen as presenting a dilemma for Grice. If his account is construed as a descriptive one, which aims to explain our intuitions about what implicatures utterances possess, then it gives the wrong results, predicting implicatures that we do not take to be there and denying the existence of ones we do. If construed as a normative theory, which aims to establish speaker-independent norms of implicature, then it avoids many of the previous objections but ultimately fails on its own terms. The discussion of this latter option linked up with another major theme of the thesis, the normativity of implicature.

1.2 Normativity

A key question addressed in this thesis was whether it is possible to provide speaker-independent norms of implicature, which hold for all implicatures, including particularized ones. Following Saul, I argued that Grice's account is best understood as aiming to provide such norms, and I proposed various revisions to it to make it more consistent with this aim. However, in Chapter 4, I went on to

argue that the account nevertheless fails. Grice identifies what an utterance implicates with the supposition required to preserve the assumption that the speaker is being cooperative, but I argued that there is no way to determine what this supposition is without drawing on information about the speaker, including their background beliefs, intentions, and values.

I then proposed an intention-centred account of implicature which retained a normative element. According to this, what an utterance implicates is (roughly) what a typical audience would take the speaker to intend it to convey. Since this may be different from what the speaker actually intended it to convey, this gives implicature a normative dimension and allows for the possibility that an utterance may implicate something that the speaker does not in fact want to convey. I noted, however, that this account does not provide *speaker-independent* norms of implicature, since how a typical audience would interpret an utterance may depend on facts about the particular speaker, and similar utterances may generate different implicatures when produced by different speakers. I strongly suspect that speaker-independent norms of implicature are not in fact available and that this weak normative conception is the strongest we can hope for.

1.3 Speaker intentions

The role of speaker intentions in implicature has been another theme of the thesis. It surfaced first in Chapter 2, where we saw that there is a tension in Grice's work on implicature. On the one hand, it is plausible to think that Grice regards what a speaker implicates as one aspect of what they mean, from which it follows that implicatures must be backed by appropriate communicative intentions of the sort Grice takes to be involved in speaker meaning. Yet there is no mention of speaker intentions in Grice's definition of implicature itself. In Chapter 3 I proposed that we could resolve this tension by making a distinction between what an utterance implicates and what a speaker implicates, where an utterance implicates that q if the Gricean conditions for implicature are met, and a speaker implicates that q if they produce an utterance that implicates that q and also themselves mean that q.

The issue arose again in Chapter 4, where I argued that Gricean theory should acknowledge a greater role for speaker intentions in implicature. The theory identifies what an utterance implicates with what the speaker must be supposed to

believe in order to make sense of their utterance as a cooperative conversational contribution. But, I argued, this supposition cannot be calculated without drawing on information about the speaker's attitudes, including their intentions with regard to the appropriate background assumptions to use in making the calculation. Thus, what an utterance implicates may depend indirectly on the speaker's intentions. I argued that this undermined the idea that the Gricean framework provides speaker-independent norms of implicature, and, given this, I suggested that there was no reason to deny speaker intentions a more direct role in determining what utterances implicate.

By giving intentions such a role, I argued, we can resolve many of the problems considered in Chapter 3, where a Gricean calculation fails to fix a determinate implicated content. I argued that giving speaker intentions this role need not involve adopting a Humpty Dumpty theory of implicature, since we can retain a normative condition concerning how a typical audience would interpret the utterance.

1.4 An intention-centred account

Developing the idea just mentioned, I sketched an intention-centred account of implicature that retained a normative element. I proposed that an utterance implicates q (where q is not its literal meaning) if it *makes q available*, where this means that a typical audience would identify q as the speaker's intended meaning, inferring this from an open-ended range of evidence. This view is intention-centred, since what an utterance makes available is what the hearer thinks the speaker intended to convey. However, it also retains a normative element, since a speaker may give inadequate or misleading evidence of their intentions, with the result that what their utterance makes available differs from what they intended to convey.

1.5 Generalized implicatures

Since my aim in this thesis was to assess the Gricean framework as a global theory of implicature, I focused heavily on particularized implicatures, which present the hardest cases for the framework. However, this left open the possibility that Gricean principles might explain a more limited class of generalized, context-

independent implicatures. We looked at this possibility in Chapter 5, which discussed neo-Gricean theories, according to which hearers derive generalized implicatures by applying simple interpretative principles closely related to Grice's maxims. (As I explained, these theories can also be construed as theories of implicature generation, which make predictions similar to Grice's own.) The subject is a complex and technical one, but I raised a number of concerns about the approach, arguing that there are many exceptions to the implicature patterns predicted by neo-Griceanism and that it is unlikely that we apply neo-Gricean principles automatically and by default. A review of work in experimental pragmatics offered support for this conclusion, suggesting that implicature recovery is a context-driven process. At best, I suggested, a weak neo-Griceanism may be defensible, according to which neo-Gricean principles play a role in interpretation but contextual factors determine when and how they are applied.

Chapter 5 also considered the possibility that some generalized implicatures arise from language-specific conventions of use. There may be conventions within a language community that certain expressions, used with their literal meaning, convey something else. I suggested that this may offer a more economical explanation of some cases (such as 'an X' implicatures), but other points made in the chapter indicated the need for a cautionary approach to the convention view. I argued that scalar implicatures are attractively explained as due to context-sensitive applications of the Q-principle, in the way Hirschberg proposes, rather than to conventions. And, of course, the numerous exceptions to supposedly generalized implicatures pose as much a problem for convention theory as for neo-Griceanism. If there are implicature conventions, then, it seems, we do not follow them strictly and without regard for context. A proper assessment of convention theory would, however, require detailed work in historical and cross-cultural linguistics.

Under scrutiny, then, the view that there is a clearly defined class of generalized implicatures breaks down, and, with it, the idea that there are any genuinely context-independent norms of implicature. Rather, we find a continuum of cases from more to less particularized, differing in the relative roles played by contextual factors and general principles or conventions.

1.6 Implicature recovery

This thesis did not attempt to survey and assess the range of theories of implicature recovery. The discussion in Chapter 5 was focused on neo-Griceanism, and rival theories were discussed mainly in order to provide contrast with it. The conclusion of the chapter was that neo-Griceanism was an unpromising approach, at least in a strong form, but I did not attempt to adjudicate between the rival theories, nor did I discuss the recovery of particularized implicatures. However, some points fall out naturally from the wider discussion, and I shall make them briefly here.

First, given my emphasis on the role of context in implicature and my scepticism about the existence of generalized implicatures, relevance theory would be the natural complement to the view of implicature generation I have advocated. I take it that relevance theory is consistent with the idea that hearers attempt to detect speakers' communicative intentions, as on the intention-centred account I sketched. If speakers intend to provide their hearers with optimally relevant inputs (as relevance theory says they should), then in searching for the optimally relevant interpretation of an utterance, the hearer is in effect trying to detect the speaker's intentions. (In fact, this seems to be the view that relevance theorists take; see, for example Wilson and Sperber, 2004.)[1] This need not, I suggest, exclude a role for implicature conventions or even general principles, if applied in a context-sensitive way. Knowledge of conventions could feed into the search for optimally relevant interpretations just as knowledge of word meanings and idioms does. And if considerations of relevance dictate it, general principles might be applied to derive enriched interpretations (as in the Henry and Mary example in section 2.1 of Chapter 5). While I do not wish to make a positive commitment to a theory of

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[1]   They write, for example:

> Understanding is achieved when the communicative intention is fulfilled — that is, when the audience recognizes the informative intention ... According to relevance theory, use of an ostensive stimulus may create precise and predictable expectations of relevance not raised by other inputs. ... we will describe these expectations and show how they may help to identify the communicator's meaning. (Wilson and Sperber, 2004, p.611)

implicature recovery at this point, I feel that a pluralistic relevance-driven approach of this kind would be a natural path to explore, for those persuaded by the arguments in this thesis.

2. Looking forward

In Chapter 1 I promised to say something about the ethics of implicature, and I shall close by doing this. What follows is tentative and speculative, though it derives from the earlier discussion.

I will begin with some remarks about the social function of implicature, which is a topic that has, I think, received too little attention in the literature. Theorists often write as if the function of implicature is purely communicative. For Grice, implicating something is a way of making a cooperative contribution to a conversational exchange, and a message is implicated only if it can be interpreted as cooperative.[2] Neo-Griceans such as Levinson hold that generalized implicatures increase the efficiency of communication. And relevance theorists assume that speakers aim to produce optimally relevant utterances, which convey as much information as they are able and willing to provide. But is this the whole story? We certainly do use implicature to communicate, but why do we sometimes choose to implicate a message rather than speaking literally? What is the *distinctive* function of implicature?

If the distinctive function of implicature were to *improve* communication, then it does not seem very well suited to it. As we have seen, particularized implicatures often depend on subtle contextual cues and knowledge of the speaker's attitudes and habits, and even relatively generalized implicatures require more than simple application of interpretative maxims. If anything, use of implicature would be likely to impede communication, increasing demands on hearers and creating many new opportunities for misunderstanding and confusion. If effective

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[2] It is true (as noted in Chapter 2), that Grice recognizes the existence of a class of *nonconversational* nonconventional implicatures, which are generated by other maxims, including aesthetic, social, and moral ones (Grice 1975/1989, p.28). However, he says very little about such implicatures, and the overwhelming focus in the Gricean literature is on conversational implicature.

communication were our sole aim, it would surely be advisable to avoid implicature.

What other functions might implicature have? I noted Davis's claim that we can use implicature to be polite and stylish (Davis 1998, p.174), and I illustrated how considerations of tact might promote the use of a certain implicature practice (Chapter 5, section 3.4). I have no doubt that implicature does serve these purposes, but I want to make a further suggestion, inspired by the conclusions reached in this thesis.

I have argued that implicature is context-dependent to a greater degree than is recognized within the Gricean tradition. In particular, an implicature may depend on facts about the particular speaker, and may be designed for a specific class of hearers. Even supposedly generalized implicatures, I have argued, may depend on awareness of contextual factors, such as recognition of a contextually salient ordering or a shared convention of use. For a purely communicative practice, this would be a disadvantage, but perhaps it hints at an important function of implicature. Perhaps a function of implicature is to establish a bond between speaker and hearer that goes beyond that of simple information exchange. In making use of implicature, a speaker invites their hearer to engage with them in a more intimate way than is required for literal communication, drawing on shared experiences, assumptions, values, and conventions. The speaker invites the hearer to *read between the lines* — to become, as it were, a partner in the communicative act, completing it for themselves. And in doing this, it may be that they are signalling something about their attitude to the hearer — that like them, share their values, feel a rapport with them (or want to establish one).

In employing implicature, speakers may also make an implicit offer. If implicature use demands more from the hearer, then perhaps it signals that the speaker is offering more, too — that they will be more open, confiding, honest. In order to interpret an implicature the hearer must get on the same wavelength as the speaker, and once they have tuned in, they may expect to receive a special message. In these and other ways, implicature use may be seen as an invitation to *trust* the speaker.

If this is right, then I think it casts a new light on the ethics of implicature. The duties of the implicature user are not simply those of the cooperative

communicator (to be truthful, informative, relevant, and so on) but also those of someone who offered a sort of intimacy and invited trust. A person using implicature to mislead is not merely being uncooperative, but, in a minor way, betraying a trust. And this brings us back at last to Mr Bronston. Mr Bronston used implicature to mislead the court. (I take it that he did this intentionally; if the real Mr Bronston did not, then assume I am talking about a fictional one who did.) He invited the lawyer questioning him to read between the lines of what he said, as if they trusted each other, and he exploited the lawyer's willingness to accept his invitation. But it was not only Mr Bronston who was at fault. In court there is no place for the trusting communicative relationship that implicature creates. Chief Justice Burger was right; it was the questioning lawyer's duty to challenge Mr Bronston's answer, and in accepting it, they were negligent.

I am suggesting, then, that in order to understand the role of implicature and to address the ethical issues it raises, we need to take a broader view of the communicative situation and consider the personal relation that implicature use establishes between speakers and hearers. I hope to explore this approach in future work.