CONVERSATIONAL IMPLICATURE:
RE-ASSESSING THE GRICEAN FRAMEWORK

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Submitted in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of
Doctor of Philosophy in the Department of Philosophy
The University of Sheffield, October 2016

Word count (excluding abstract and references): 67,959

Abstract

Conversational implicature is (roughly) the practice of conveying one thing by saying another. Philosophical and linguistic work on the topic has been dominated by the approach proposed by Paul Grice — the *Gricean framework*, as I call it — according to which implicatures can be calculated from principles of cooperative behaviour. The framework faces numerous objections and counterexamples, however, and this thesis reassesses it in the light of recent work in the area. Chapters 1 and 2 introduce the topic, provide a detailed exposition of the Gricean framework, and highlight a problem concerning the role of speaker intentions in implicature. Chapter 3 sets out some problems for Grice's approach and argues that we can address them by reinterpreting his framework as a normative one. It proposes some revisions to the framework to make it more compatible with this reading and shows how the tension in Grice's view of speaker intentions can be resolved. Chapter 4 then argues that, despite its attractions, the revised theory has a serious flaw, being unable to establish norms of implicature that are speaker-independent. The chapter proposes instead an intention-centred account, which abandons the requirement of calculability and allows a direct role for speaker intentions, while still preserving a normative element. Chapter 5 looks at *neo-Gricean* theories, which use Gricean principles to explain a range of supposedly context-independent implicatures. It sets out some problems for neo-Griceanism, comparing it with rival approaches and surveying relevant experimental evidence. The chapter concludes that implicature is more context-sensitive than neo-Griceanism allows and that general principles have at best a limited role in its explanation. Chapter 6 draws some conclusions, arguing that implicature is less rational than Grice supposed and more dependent on context and speaker intention. It also offers some speculations about the social role and ethics of implicature.

This thesis is dedicated with love
to Harry, Mikis, and Matéa.

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Acknowledgements

This thesis has taken a very long time to finish. Work on it had to be fitted into the gaps left by full-time employment, and had to compete with the demands of several changes of job, three pregnancies, emigration, caring duties to disabled and elderly relatives, and the extended and unrelenting pressures of the Greek financial crisis. The fact that I didn't give up years ago and actually stuck it out to the end is due principally to two people: my primary supervisor, Professor Jennifer Saul, and my partner, Keith Frankish.

Jenny's skill and dedication as a supervisor deserve the highest praise. She has taught me, encouraged me, and perhaps most importantly, believed in me. Under her guidance and with her support, I have developed as a philosopher and achieved things I did not think I could. She has read many drafts of this thesis, always providing thoughtful, focused, and constructive comments and sound strategic advice, helping me to see the wood when I was lost in the trees. I thank her for her dedication and patience, for her support through some very difficult times, and for not giving up on me when it would have been much easier for her to do so.

Keith has also read many drafts of this material and provided immensely valuable feedback, especially on stylistic matters. He has listened to me talk about conversational implicature for many hours (despite, I fear, not finding the subject a particularly exciting one), and his questions and comments have helped me to sharpen my thinking on the topic in innumerable ways, large and small. Even more importantly, he has supported me, believed in me, and made many sacrifices to give me the time needed to complete the project. I couldn't have done it without him.

I also want to record my gratitude to George Botterill, who was my secondary supervisor during this project and with whom I spent many hours in thoughtful and productive discussion about implicature.

I am grateful to many other friends and colleagues for discussions that have fed directly or indirectly into this thesis. These include (in alphabetical order): Chris Daly, Johnathan Dancy, Wayne Davis, André Gallois, Eve Garrard, Andy Hamilton, Nick Lund, David McNaughton, and John Rogers.

Special thanks are due to my parents, Charis and Toula. My mother taught me to stand up for myself and to pursue my dreams, and my father set me an example of what can be achieved with determination and hard work. I also thank my dear brothers Giorgos, Lefteris, and Iannis, and my parents-in-law, Arthur and Eileen, for all their love and support. I am also very grateful to Eileen for her careful proofreading of the final draft.

I have dedicated this thesis to my children, and I thank them for putting up with my preoccupation with it for so long and for keeping my nose to the grindstone during the final push to finish.

Over the years I have given a number of talks drawing on material related to this thesis, including seminars at the universities of Keele and Sheffield and conferences at Lund, Reading, and Sheffield again. I am grateful to the audiences on all those occasions for their comments and questions.

A version of some of the material in Chapter 5, section 5 was originally prepared as part of my contribution to a paper on dual processes and implicature co-authored with Keith Frankish (Frankish and Kasmirli 2010). My thanks to Keith and the editors of the collection in which the paper appeared for inviting me to contribute to the paper. The material in question has been re-written, expanded, and updated for the thesis.

I have kept this list of thanks to the bare minimum and could have extended it much further. Many other friends and colleagues have helped too, in one way or another, and I am grateful to them all.

A note on grammar

In this thesis I use ‘they’, ‘them’, and ‘their’ as gender-neutral pronouns. This practice has a long history in English and, in the words of *The Cambridge Guide to English Usage*, ‘has become unremarkable — an element of common usage’ (Peters 2004, p.538).