

Pragmatics 6

Some examples taken from *Meaning in Interaction, An Introduction to Pragmatics* by Jenny Thomas (Longman 1995)

Example 1:

The following incident, which occurred at a seaside resort in Kent, was reported in several national newspapers in July 1994.

Kent Coastguard reports that a girl, drifting out to sea on an inflatable set of false teeth, was rescued by a man on a giant inflatable lobster.

Example 2:

'We must remember your telephone bill', she said, hinting that Louise had talked long enough. 'Goodbye', said Louisa, ringing off. It takes the rich to remind one of bills, she thought.

Example 3:

Late on Christmas Eve 1993 an ambulance is sent to pick up a man who has collapsed in Newcastle city centre. The man is drunk and vomits all over the ambulanceman who goes to help him. The ambulanceman says:

'Great, that's really great! That's made my Christmas!'

There are times when people say (or write) exactly what they mean, but generally they are not totally explicit. Since on the other occasions they manage to convey far more than their words mean, or something quite different from the meanings of their words.

Grice attempted to explain how, by means of shared rules or conventions, competent language-users manage to understand one another. Grice's theory is an attempt at explaining how a hearer gets from what is said to what is meant, from the level of expressed meaning to the level of implied meaning. He first outlined his theory of implicature in 1967 when giving lectures at Harvard University. A shorter version of his theory was published in 1975 in a paper *'Logic and conversation'*.

Grice distinguished two sorts of implicature: **conventional implicature** and **conversational implicature**. They both convey an **additional level of meaning**, beyond the semantic meaning of the words uttered. They differ in that in the case of conventional implicature the same implicature is always conveyed, regardless of context, whereas in the case of conversational implicature, what is implied varies according to the context of utterance.

Example 4:

... she was cursed with a stammer, unmarried but far from stupid.

What follows *but* runs counter to expectations (similar words: *even, therefore, yet, for*)

Example 5:

She plays chess well, for a girl.

The word *but* carries the implicature that what follows will run counter to expectations. This sense of the word *but* always carries this implicature, regardless of the context in which it occurs (*My friends were poor, but honest. He is small, but perfectly formed.*) It is important to distinguish between **implicature** and **inference**, implying and inferring. To imply is to hint, suggest or convey some meaning indirectly by means of language (Example 2). **An implicature is generated intentionally by the speaker** and may (or may not) be understood by the hearer. To infer is to deduce something from evidence (this evidence may be linguistic, paralinguistic or non-linguistic). **An inference is produced by the hearer**. The notion of 'implicature' is a central concept in pragmatics.

Observing the maxims

Example 6:

Husband: *Where are the car keys?*

Wife: *They are on the table in the hall.*

The wife has answered clearly, truthfully, has given the right amount of information and has directly addressed her husband's goal in asking the question.

Flouting a maxim

Quantity:

giving more or less information than required by the situation

Example 7:

Petruchio has come to ask Baptista for his daughter's hand in marriage:

Pet: *And you, good sir! Pray, have you not a daughter
Call'd Katherina, fair and virtuous?*

Bap: *I have a daughter, sir, call'd Katherina.*

Relation:

making a response or observation which is very obviously irrelevant to the topic in hand

Example 8:

I finished working on my face. I grabbed my bag and a coat. I told Mother I was going out ... She asked me where I was going. I repeated myself. 'Out'.

Quality:

saying something which is blatantly untrue or for which the speaker lacks adequate evidence

Example 9:

B was on a long train journey and wanted to read her book. A was a fellow passenger who wanted to talk to her:

A: *What do you do?*

B: *I'm a teacher.*

A: *Where do you teach?*

B: *Outer Mongolia.*

A: *Sorry I asked!*

Some more examples of conversational implicature:

Example 10: A - a young boy; B - a colleague of his father

A: *It's my birthday today.*

B: *Many happy returns. How old are you?*

A: *I'm five.*

Example 11: A - father; B - A's son

A: *How old are you, George?*

B: *I'm eighteen, Father.*

A: *I know how old you are, you fool.*

Example 12: A - a psychiatrist; B - a woman patient

A: *What do you do?*

B: *I'm a nurse, but my husband won't let me work.*

A: *How old are you?*

B: *I'm thirty-nine.*

The semantic meaning of *How old are you?* is the same, but the implicature is different.