Radical Pragmatics:
Levinson on the notion of Generalized Conversational Implicatures

David Beaver
Stanford University

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L: Introduction

- The book title is about GCIs (generalized conversational implicatures), but the introduction talks more about "preferred interpretation". Presumably this term wasn't seductive enough for the book title.
- Levinson is never very explicit about the relation between GCIs and preferred interpretations: are they identical? Do preferred interpretations include effects of particularized conversational implicatures and/or conventional implicatures? Is "preferred interpretation" the same as "presumptive meaning"? Can someone show me where he is explicit about this?
- Levinson introduces a picture theory of pragmatic meaning. Wittgenstein used the analogy to show the relation obtaining between a sentence and the world. Levinson uses it to show the relation between an utterance and a hearer. The hearer gets a 2-d sketch (cf. Marr) and must perform the miracle of interpretation using *default strengthening*.
- The other thing that caught my eye in the introduction was the calculation showing that there's an articulation "bottleneck". Everything else in communication happens 4 times faster than speaking, and if it hadn't been for this unfortunate factor there wouldn't be any pragmatics!!! I'm a tad suspicious about this hypothetical argument. We return to this in 1.3 where the argument is repeated at slightly greater length.

1.0 — plan for chapter 1

- Levinson will argue that GCIs are central at all levels of interpretation.
- He plans to start with an argument from authority (Grice's).

- He'll argue against 2 levels of interpretation, and infavour of three.
- He claims that GCIs and preferred interpretation are inevitable consequences of evolution, via an argument from his own-brand information theory.
- At this point he'll give a taxonomy of GCIs based on Horn and his own work with Atlas.
- Then he'll seek help from logic.
- At this point he moves onto the offensive, targetting Relevance Theory and Accommodation based approaches.
- Finally, he'll discuss evidence from one particular phenomenon, lexicalization patterns. (Why isn't this bit in chapter 2?)

1.1 Grice's Program

- We covered much of this last week.
- One piece of standard terminology I omited was non-natural meaning "meaning$_{nn}$", everything conveyed, whether conventionally explicit or not.
- Speaker means$_{nn}$ p by uttering U to A if speaker intends:

  (a) A to think p.

  (b) A to recognize that speaker intends p.

  (c) b to be the main reason for a.
- Levinson cites distinctive properties of conversational implicatures like those given last week, but adds "Universality".
- He describes the distinction between PCIs and GCIs on p.16 (examples 4 and 5. At times it seems like the entire book is about nothing else.
- The argument from authority is centered on p.18–20, where he quotes Grice saying how significant GCIs are, and then comments on the fact that the treatment of connectives was the single most important application of the theory of GCIs.
- There's a very important general principle here, what we can call "Grice's Razor": don't multiply word-senses beyond what can be explain using non-specific meanings and implicature derived strengthenings.
- How does Grice's razor relate to acquisition strategies? Is it just linguists who should prefer fewer senses, or do language learners prefer a more general interpretation that can be combined with pragmatic reasoning?

- Relatedly, there's often a methodological issue when we try to decide whether to apply Grice's razor. Given that learners are exposed both to specific and less specific uses of words, how are they to know whether to lexicalize both or just the more general one.
- Presumably there may be actually variation in the population as to what has been lexicalized, and there may be no absolute answer as to whether the community as a whole has followed Grice in putting the burden of explanation onto pragmatics not the lexicon.

1.2 Three layers versus two

- We learn that there is a "systematic hostility" towards theories of preferred interpretation. I'd rather say there was a systematic indifference towards them.
- The theory of GCIs is much narrower than some of the competition, e.g. Relevance Theory. Levinson is not presenting a general theory of cognition.
- The two levels of the commonly accepted view of communication are sentence meaning and speaker meaning.
- What Levinson seeks to interject (along, he claims, with Grice) is a level of "uitterance-type-meaning": a level where systematic pragmatic inference based on general expectation occurs.
- The use of the term "type" refers to the fact that this reasoning is uniform across whole classes of utterances.
- This as opposed to specific reasoning about the plans/desires of the individual speaker when making a specific utterance. Such specific reasoning takes place at the speaker meaning level.
- He seems to think of these "levels" as methodological abstractions rather than cognitive levels within a modular theory of mind, but their status remains unclear.
- Levinson compares his three levels to Austn's tripartite division into locutionary, illocutionary, and perlocutionary acts. I didn't find this clarified greatly.
- Levinson gives a rather superficial argument from speech act idioms: at what level is the meaning of "see you later" conventionalized? But could this data be captured by expanding the notion of sentence meaning beyond truth conditions? That would not force us to say that all illocutionary force was present as part of sentence meaning - the rest could be captured in speaker meaning.

- Locutionary acts do correspond with sentence meaning, but illocutionary acts are things speakers do, not inferences, and perlocutionary acts are effects on hearers. These effects commonly need not be recognized by the hearer as part of the speaker's intent, and so are not even necessarily part of meaning$_{\mathrm{nn}}$. But the speaker meaning level should be part of meaning$_{\mathrm{nn}}$.
- GCIs are not just Bach's "short-circuited implicatures", PCIs that have occurred so often that they have become regularized. Rather, GCIs emerge from "general heuristics". Thus a GCI need not be stored in a mental list: it could be generated on the fly from the heuristics.
- It is these general heuristics that Levinson feels distinguish him from the enemy — those who take all implicatures to be "nonce", i.e. generated on the fly using completely general reasoning mechanisms.
- I don't see such a clear difference: the enemy claims some heuristics too — that's what *relevance* is, and others Levinson cites are using maxims that they presumably don't believe are reinvented for the processing of every new sentence.

1.3 The argument from design

- The fun argument on p.28 reveals that we only talk at 100bps.
- This calculation assumes that we only make distinctions based on the array of segments used in the lexicon. There are no further supersegmental distinctions, no uses of timing, pitch or other vocal parameters, and there is no use of other channels, e.g. visual. These would all increase the rate.
- Also, the calculation does not take account of the actual lexicon, which allows fewer distinctions to be made at the multi-segment level, and so would reduce the effective bit rate.
- Even more seriously, the argument does not take into account error rates, which it can be assumed are met in part by redundancy in language, and also by loose packing of the lexicon's acoustical space. How this affects calculation of effective transmission rate is completely unclear to me.
- I find it very peculiar that this entire argument makes no reference to any developments in information theory later than Zipf. In particular, there is no reference at all to work of Shannon and followers. One would hink that Levinson was the first to become interested in information rates.
- These details are really beside the point, since I'm sure Levinson could have got to his conclusion whatever the facts.

- Levinson argues that all the other aspects of communication run at least 4 times faster. Again, he looks at peak transmission/processing rates, taking no account of error rates.
- He then deduces that mankind had no choice but to get around the "articulation bottleneck" using GCIs.
- In other words, if we could speak 4 times faster, there would be no general implicature from "A or B" to "I don't know A". Perhaps we would have a lexicon with alternative versions of "or", and perhaps we would spell out whether we knew A or not.
- Is there any direct evidence for such effects? Are there any differences regarding what GCIs are present in languages/genres where articulation rate is different, e.g. sign languages and written languages?
- Is it the case that we couldn't speak faster if we wanted to?
- Is it the case that we could not bump our transmission rate by using a richer phoneme inventory. Why don't all languages have a maximal number of phonemes?
- Levinson introduces the heuristics with respect to a blocks world example. The heuristics are:
  1. What isn't said isn't.
  2. What is simply described is stereotypically exemplified.
  3. What's said in an abnormal way isn't normal; or Marked message indicates marked situation.
- He starts of by supposing that there are only a few distinct possibilities in the blocks world, and apparently wants to show formally how the heuristics amplify information content.
- However, he soon retreats to an informal explanation of how they apply, with the unwarranted conclusion that the heuristics multiply information content f any message by "a factor of perhaps a score". This is really shoddy scholarship.
- He goes on to ask "could any rational and intelligent communicators, faced with a transmission bottleneck, fail to utilize such a simple solution to the problem of narrow bandwidth?"
- Well, ehhh, yes. Engineers have been constructing coding systems for years, and to my knowledge they've never chosen these heuristics.
- On the other hand, I would ask the question: could any natural language, spoken by super slick talkers with no major articulation problems, evolve without development of implicature directly comparable to our own?
- My intuition is that the only thing that would stop implicature arising is if the articulators were really stupid.

A typology of GCIs

- He now gives names for the blocks world heuristics.
- **Q** What isn't said isn't.
  This explains scalar and clausal implicatures. Importantly, Levinson restricts it to "salient alternates". Q gives an upper bound on the strength of a statement.

  I Express the stereotypical case simply.
  Examples in (17) on p.37. Basically a strengthening device.

  M Express the abnormal abnormally.
  This accounts for classic cases of *partial blocking*.
- Levinson proposes a general priority principal (p. 41): Q beats M, and both beat I. He doesn't give any explanation at this point. Can we think of one?

1.5 Non-monotonicity and Default Reasoning

- Levinson is weak in his knowledge of current terminology and practice in logic.
- E.g. His notion of deduction is purely classical.
- He also ignores much work that has gobe on, e.g. Mercer's formalizatin of Gazdar's theory in default logic.
- The argument in 1.5.3 is interesting. He presents Gazdar's theory (which we can go over in more detail) and then observes some problems.
- First, there's a problem that we can cancel at a distance.
- Second, and more fundamentally, implicatures can be "cancelled" in cases where there is no inconsistency.
- In fact these seem to be better described as cases where the implicature does not arise at all, because of relevance effects.
- Consider (39). Note that this is NOT an answer to the question "How many are forgeries?", e.g. it has the wrong intonation.
- Can intonation be used as a signal for when to look for contrasting alternatives? (cf. work by Pierrehumbert and Ward).

1.6: Against reduction

- The arguments against relevance seem good to me (but they would).
- If you've ever tried to squeeze predictions out of Relevance Theory, you'll know what I mean.
- The argument against accommodation accounts is weak. There is only one serious counterexample, on p.63.
- But couldn't/wouldn't Hobbs perhaps try to explain this in terms of a level of discourse relations? This would also be the case for Lascarides and Asher.

1.7 Lexicalization

- This is a nice empirical story!
- Why do "some", "may" and "or" lexicalize, while their subcontraries "not all", "possibly not" amd "not both" don't?

1.8 Conclusions

See page 72:

1. Not argued for.
2. An argument from authority
3. Probably wrong.
4. Didn't demonstrate that any one of the models discussed was up to the job.
5. Not a positive argument, and the attack on accommodation theory is flawed.
6. Yes, ut there are issues as to whether lexicalization patterns have any connection with cognitively real heuristics.

Principal Reference

Steven Levinson, *Presumptive Meanings: The theory of Generalized Conversational Implicature*, MIT Press, 2000.