

# Conversational implicature, thought, and communication

Jeff Speaks

October 17, 2006

*Abstract.* Some linguistic phenomena can occur in uses of language in thought, whereas others only occur in uses of language in communication. I argue that this distinction can be used as a test for whether some phenomenon can be explained via Grice's theory of conversational implicature (or any theory similarly based on principles governing conversation). I argue further, on the basis of this test, that conversational implicature cannot be used to explain quantifier domain restriction or apparent substitution failures involving coreferential names, but that it must be used to explain the the phenomenon of referential uses of definite descriptions. I conclude with a brief discussion of the relevance of this to the semantics/pragmatics distinction.

It is now a commonplace that what a speaker means, asserts, or conveys by an utterance of a sentence can go beyond what the sentence means (semantically expresses) in the context of utterance. It is, however, controversial which cases fit this description.

One such controversial case concerns quantifier domain restriction. Suppose, standing in my apartment after a party, I say to my wife dejectedly, 'Every bottle is empty.' What is uncontroversial is that what I convey by this utterance is not that every bottle in the universe is empty, but that every bottle in the apartment is empty. What is controversial is how this phenomenon should be explained.

On one view, the *semantic strategy*, the sentence 'Every bottle is empty' is context-sensitive; it expresses a different proposition relative to different contexts of utterance. This might be because, for example, the logical form of the sentence contains a variable whose value is the domain of quantification, and the value of this variable varies with contexts of utterance (Stanley and Szabó (2000)).

According to an opposed *pragmatic strategy*, the sentence literally means (semantically expresses) the false proposition that every bottle in the universe is empty; there is some other non-semantic explanation of the fact that in this scenario I manage to convey the restricted proposition that every bottle in the apartment is empty. There is considerable intuitive support for the pragmatic strategy for handling these cases; it is true, after all, that my wife could have replied by saying 'Well, *every* bottle isn't empty; our guests only

---

\*Thanks for helpful discussion to Steven Davis, Brendan Gillon, Michael Nelson, Scott Soames, and two anonymous referees for *Mind & Language*.

*Address for correspondence:* Jeff Speaks, Department of Philosophy, University of Notre Dame, 100 Malloy Hall, Notre Dame, IN 46556. *Email:* jspeaks@nd.edu.

drank all of the liquor in *our* apartment.’ There is certainly a sense in which this reply is, even if not helpful, on target; the pragmatic strategy has a nice explanation of this in terms of its claim that the original sentence is literally false.

One who endorses the pragmatic strategy must say how a proposition  $p$  can be conveyed by an utterance of a sentence which, in the context, means something other than  $p$ . According to a Gricean version of the pragmatic strategy, this explanation is given in terms of certain rules governing conversation. Grice’s idea was that in some utterances, one can convey a proposition by conversationally implicating it. One conversationally implicates a proposition  $p$  by an utterance when (roughly) the following three conditions are satisfied: (1) the speaker is presumed to be cooperative, in the sense that he is following the maxims of conversation; (2) the assumption that the speaker thinks  $p$  is required to bring his utterance into conformity with the conversational maxims; and (3) the speaker thinks that the audience is capable of seeing both that (2) is true, and that the speaker thinks that (2) is true (Grice, 1975, 30-1).<sup>1</sup> In the present case, the utterance of a sentence which means that every bottle (in the universe) is empty is an utterance of a sentence which is obviously false, and so violates the Maxim of Quality. So, if we are to assume that the speaker is being cooperative, we must assume that the speaker was trying to get across some distinct, not obviously false proposition; it seems likely that this proposition should be related to the obviously false one which was literally expressed by the sentence; given the context, the obvious choice is the proposition that every bottle *in the apartment* is empty.<sup>2</sup>

## 1 CONVERSATIONAL IMPLICATURE AND USES OF LANGUAGE IN THOUGHT

But there is a problem about applying the apparatus of conversational implicature in the case of quantifier domain restriction: the phenomena to be explained can be generated in cases of language use outside of conversations. The most important such cases concern uses of language in thought. Suppose that my wife went to bed before the end of the party, and that after the last guest leaves, I say dejectedly to myself, ‘Every bottle is empty.’ This case seems strikingly similar to the one described above, in which I use the same sentence in conversation. It would be just as natural to describe the case as one in which I said to myself that every bottle in the apartment was empty as it would be to give the corresponding description of my utterance of the same sentence, in conversation, to my wife. But despite this similarity, it does not seem open to the same explanation: sitting alone after the party I was not engaged in a conversation, and hence was not subject to the conversational maxims. And this seems to cast doubt on the original Gricean explanation of the utterance to my wife; to the extent that the phenomena seem the same, an explanation which rests on features specific to one is *ad hoc*.

Could a proponent of the Gricean explanation reply that thought is a kind of conversation with oneself, and so is governed by the same maxims as multi-party conversations? Not very plausibly. The Gricean says that my use of ‘Every bottle is empty’ in conversa-

---

<sup>1</sup>In her excellent ‘Speaker Meaning, What Is Said, and What Is Implicated’, Jennifer Saul distinguishes this definition of conversational implicature — Grice’s own — from related notions with which it is often conflated, which she terms ‘utterer-implicature’ and ‘audience-implicature.’ The arguments which follow against certain uses of conversational implicature to explain linguistic phenomena apply equally well to these related notions.

<sup>2</sup>For similar explanations of implicatures by Grice, see his discussions of ‘ $X$  is a fine friend’ and ‘You are the cream in my coffee’ (Grice, 1975, 34).

tion with my wife conveyed the restricted proposition that every bottle in the apartment is empty in part because I thought that she was capable of seeing that the assumption that I believed this and wanted to get it across by my utterance was required to make my utterance conform with the norms governing conversation (clause 3 in the definition of conversational implicature). But we cannot give the same explanation of my use of ‘Every bottle is empty’ in thought. Even if we grant that I count as the audience of my own utterance here, we should ask: Is it really the case that I manage to use this sentence to say to myself that every bottle in the apartment is empty only because I think that I am capable of working out that the assumption that I believe this is needed to make my utterance to myself consistent with the norms of conversation and, further, think that I know that I am capable of working out that I think this? Even if I could have these strange beliefs on an occasion, it hardly seems that they are required for me to use ‘Every bottle is empty’ in thought to mean that every bottle in the apartment is empty.<sup>3</sup>

---

<sup>3</sup>So this argument is distinct from the familiar argument against Gricean analyses of speaker-meaning in terms of audience-directed intentions which is based on the possibility of meaning something by an utterance without having an audience. That argument relies on the controversial claim that one cannot regard oneself as an audience in cases of ‘speaking to oneself’; the above argument does not rely on this claim, but only on the claim that one can use sentences like ‘Every bottle is empty’ in thought without having the bizarre beliefs which an explanation of such uses in terms of conversational implicature would require. Thanks to an anonymous referee for pressing this point.

It’s also important to note that nothing hangs on the view that the conversational implicatures are in this case generated by violations of the Maxim of Quality. As Kent Bach notes in ‘Quantification, Qualification, and Context’, we can generate cases of quantifier domain restriction with obviously true as well as obviously false sentences. In the present case, if I had uttered ‘Not every bottle is empty’, I would have succeeded in conveying the restricted proposition that not every bottle in the apartment is empty, despite the fact that the original sentence (according to the pragmatic strategy) expresses the true proposition that not every bottle in the universe is empty. For this reason it seems right that the most plausible version of the Gricean story about quantifier domain restriction takes my conveying the proposition that every bottle in the apartment is empty to be an instance of ‘conversational implicature’ generated by the utterance’s ‘obvious lack of relevant specificity’ rather than a conversational implicature generated by its obvious falsity. But the argument against Gricean explanations above depends not on *which* maxim is violated (truth vs. specificity) but rather the very idea that the fact that the speaker means the relevant proposition *p* depends upon the speaker’s believing, of some maxim or other, that the audience believes that the speaker’s thinking *p* is required to bring the speaker into conformity with that maxim (whatever it is). So it seems as though the present objection works as well against a view which explains my having conveyed the restricted proposition as a conversational implicature as against the more orthodox Gricean explanation in terms of Quality implicatures.

This argument against Bach rests on the view that conversational implicatures are generated by a process similar to that which generates conversational implicatures: (i) by a speaker’s being presumed to be cooperative, (ii) by the assumption that the speaker believes the proposition conveyed being needed to bring the speaker’s utterance into conformity with some norm of conversation, and (iii) by the speaker and the audience having the right sorts of beliefs about (ii). On this interpretation, the only difference between conversational implicature and conversational implicature is a difference between the norms of conversation which generate the proposition conveyed. This interpretation is suggested by the discussion in §4 of ‘Conversational Implicature’, where he explains the difference between conversational implicature and implicature. Bach says that the point of contrast is that ‘Implicatures go beyond what is said, but unlike implicatures, which are additional propositions external to what is said, implicatures are built out of what is said.’ Bach does not mention, in addition to this difference, a difference of kind in the principles which generate implicatures and implicatures. Further, Bach after all does call implicatures ‘*conversational implicatures*’; so it’s reasonable to think that, as on the above interpretation, their generation, like the generation of conversational implicatures, should have something to do with rules of conversation. (This is also suggested by the contrast between implicature and implicature as it is drawn in ‘Quantification, Qualification, and Context.’ There Bach says that ‘the operative pragmatic anomaly here is not obvious falsity but lack of relevant specificity’ (268). But if this is right, then the aspect of utterances which generates implicatures — lack of specificity — must be on par with the aspects of utterances which generate implicatures — i.e., *prima facie* violation of some conversational norm.) However, Bach never explicitly endorses this view of how conversational implicatures are generated.

The argument suggested against the Gricean explanation of quantifier domain restriction is simple: (i) quantifier domain restriction happens in uses of language in thought as well as in communication, (ii) the phenomena appear to be the same, and hence deserve a unified explanation, (iii) the Gricean explanation does not apply to cases of quantifier domain restriction in uses of language in thought, therefore (iv) the Gricean explanation fails to explain instances of quantifier domain restriction in communication as well.

## 2 TWO TESTS FOR CONVERSATIONAL IMPLICATURE

A Gricean might challenge this argument by disputing (ii). Exactly what phenomenon is supposed to occur in both uses of ‘Every bottle is empty’? Surely in conversation I manage to *communicate* the restricted proposition that every bottle in the apartment is empty; but it is not as though I am communicating anything when I use this sentence in thought. To answer this challenge, we will have to be a bit more specific both about the theoretical role of conversational implicature, and about the sense in which the above uses of ‘Every bottle is empty’ in thought and communication are instances of the same phenomenon.

I think that there are two ways to do this. The first involves the notion of speaker’s meaning. One standard use of the mechanism of conversational implicature is to explain how speakers can mean certain things by their utterances. On this picture, there are several different ways for a speaker to mean  $p$  by an utterance. One way is for the speaker to literally *say*  $p$  (in Grice’s sense); another is for the speaker to conversationally implicate  $p$ .<sup>4</sup> If we accept this view of the role of conversational implicature, then what are we trying to explain when we use conversational implicature to explain instances of quantifier domain restriction? Presumably, we are trying to explain the fact that speakers regularly use sentences of the form ‘All  $F$ s are  $G$ ’ to mean propositions which would literally be expressed by some sentence of the form ‘All  $F$ s which are also  $R$  are  $G$ ’. As with any attempted explanation of some linguistic phenomenon, this explanation should be judged, in part, by its generality; that is, by whether it can explain all, or almost all, cases of speakers using quantified sentences in which the domain of quantification is not explicitly restricted to mean restricted propositions such as the proposition, in our example above, that every bottle in the apartment is empty. But by now it should be clear that the proposed explanation fails this test. Speakers can mean things by using sentences in thought, and the example above shows that speakers can, and standardly do, mean restricted propositions (like the proposition that every bottle in the apartment is empty) by using unrestricted quantified sentences (like ‘Every bottle is empty’) in thought.

---

The above argument does not count against a view, which is in many ways similar to Bach’s, on which my conveying the restricted proposition is a phenomenon of ‘conceptual strengthening’ to be explained by pragmatic principles which are not specific to uses of language in communication. More on this possibility below.

<sup>4</sup>This view of how conversational implicature fits into a theory of speaker’s meaning is consistent with the view that speakers can mean things which they neither strictly say nor conversationally implicate; Saul (2002) (§1) argues convincingly that this is possible. This use of conversational implicature to explain certain instances of speaker meaning fits less well with the view that speakers can conversationally implicate things without meaning them. A plausible example of this is the utterance of a disjunction. In many cases, it seems plausible that the agent will conversationally implicate that he does not know which of the disjuncts is true without his meaning by his utterance that he does not know which of the disjuncts is true.

This argument suggests the following test for when an instance of speaker meaning can be explained as a conversational implicature:

Speaker Meaning/Implicature Principle

The fact that a sentence  $S$  may be used in conversation to mean  $p$  can be explained as a conversational implicature only if  $S$  cannot be used by an agent in thought to mean  $p$ .

This principle is justified by the theoretical role of conversational implicature described above — namely, that it is one of several ways in which speakers can mean things by their utterances, and so is used to explain some instances of speaker meaning — along with standard requirements of generality on explanations of linguistic phenomena.

This way of running the arguments rests on the view that facts about what speakers mean by their utterances constitute a class of linguistic phenomena which is such that (i) it includes both uses of language in thought and in communication and (ii) a role of conversational implicature is to explain some members of this class. A committed Gricean might, therefore, respond to this argument by denying either that speakers can mean things by using sentences in thought or that conversational implicature can be used as an explanation of speaker meaning. Since the first seems implausible, let's suppose that the Gricean takes the latter course. One might think that conversational implicature should be used, not to explain how speakers can mean certain things by their utterances, but rather how they manage to communicate, convey, or assert certain things to their audiences. And this might seem to block the above argument, since, although speakers can mean things by sentences used in thought, speakers cannot use sentences in thought to convey, communicate, or assert things.

While this is correct as far as it goes, it isn't the end of the story. Just as certain sorts of acts can only be performed by uses of language in communication, so certain sorts of acts can only be performed by uses of language in thought; by using a sentence in thought, an agent can make a judgement or think a thought. Further, there are clearly some analogies between the communication-specific propositional attitudes of assertion and communication and those specific to thought. In particular, it is often the case that for some sentence  $S$  (or class of sentences) and proposition  $p$  (or class of propositions), uttering  $S$  in conversation will typically count as the assertion of  $p$ , and using  $S$  in thought will typically count as a judgement with content  $p$ . This is clearest when the sentence is a simple, non-indexical one and the relevant proposition is the semantic content of the sentence; but there are other cases as well. We've already seen an example: just as, typically, the assertoric utterance in conversation of some unqualified quantified sentence ('Every bottle is empty') will result in the assertion of some restricted proposition (e.g., that every bottle in the apartment is empty), so, typically, the use in thought of such an unqualified sentence will count as the agent making a judgement, or thinking a thought, whose content is such a restricted proposition.

But in the case of other sentences and propositions, this parallel does not hold. To take a variant of one of Grice's original examples, writing 'The student has excellent penmanship' as the sole sentence in a letter of recommendation for graduate study in philosophy will typically be a way of communicating (conveying) the proposition that the student is not a very good candidate. But now consider uses of this sentence in thought. Could an agent, just by saying to himself 'The student has excellent penmanship', make the judgement (think the thought) that the student is not a very good candidate for graduate school? It seems not. Someone could, of course, say this sentence to himself; but,

setting aside the case where one really is just interested in the student's penmanship, this only makes sense if the agent in question has already made the judgement, or entertained the thought, that the student is not a very good candidate. The use of 'The student has excellent penmanship' cannot itself be a way of making this judgement, or thinking this thought.<sup>5</sup>

This is a point of disanalogy with the sentence 'Every bottle is empty' and the proposition that every bottle in the apartment is empty. In that case, we had a parallel between communication and thought: the sentence could be used in conversation to convey a certain proposition, and could be used in thought to think that very same proposition. But in the case of 'The student has excellent penmanship', this parallel is absent. This needs some explanation: why, in the case of some sentence/proposition pairs, is there a parallel between uses of the sentence in communication to convey that proposition and uses of the sentence in thought to judge that proposition, but not in others? This question has an obvious and natural answer: the explanation of why utterances of 'The student has excellent penmanship' (in the relevant contexts) convey the proposition that the student is not a good candidate for graduate study should be given in terms of principles specific to uses of language in conversation, whereas the corresponding explanation in the case of 'Every bottle is empty' should not.

This is based on the same sort of unexceptional requirement of generality on explanations invoked above. Where we have a parallel between thought and conversation of the sort noted with respect to 'Every bottle is empty' and the proposition that every bottle in the apartment is empty, it seems clear that we should have a unified explanation of this phenomenon. This leads us to the following principle:

Communication/Implicature Principle

The fact that a sentence  $S$  may be used in conversation to communicate (convey, assert)  $p$  can be explained as a conversational implicature only if  $S$  cannot be used by an agent in thought to judge (think)  $p$ .

Above I noted that a committed Gricean could respond to the argument from the Speaker Meaning/Implicature Principle by disavowing any attempt to explain facts about what speakers mean by their utterances in terms of conversational implicature. The natural retreat is to the view that conversational implicature is fit to explain not what speakers mean by their utterances, but rather what speakers convey (communicate, assert) by their utterances. The Communication/Implicature Principle is designed to show that this retreat position does not provide a satisfactory response to the argument.

If principles like Speaker Meaning/Implicature and Communication/Implicature are correct, they provide a powerful tool for the evaluation of attempts to explain various linguistic phenomena using conversation-specific Gricean principles. They straightforwardly show that attempts to explain quantifier domain restriction in terms of such principles are incorrect. Parallel argument shows that Russell's theory of descriptions cannot be squared with intuitions about the truth-values of sentences involving incomplete descriptions by claiming that these intuitions are tracking the truth-values of propositions which are conversationally implicated by uses of such sentences.<sup>6</sup>

---

<sup>5</sup>Obviously, matters are different if one says to oneself something like 'The only good thing I can say about this student is that he has excellent penmanship.' But no one would think of explaining the use of this sentence to say that the student is not very good by means of the theory of conversational implicature.

<sup>6</sup>For an independent argument for this conclusion, see Soames (2005). I should note that I have in

### 3 MILLIANISM, SUBSTITUTION FAILURES, AND CONVERSATIONAL IMPLICATURE

These principles can also be used to show that certain combinations of views about proper names must be wrong. A Millian about proper names holds that the semantic content of a simple proper name is the object to which the name refers. As is well-known, Millians face an obvious problem: if the meaning of a simple name is its referent, then any two names with the same referent must also have the same meaning. But then it seems unavoidable that the Millian will have to treat pairs of sentences like ‘Hesperus is Hesperus’ and ‘Hesperus is Phosphorus’ as having the same meaning. This has seemed to many to be implausible, for reasons including the following:

- (i) Pairs of sentences like these differ in their content since, for example, in the above case, the former sentence is trivial and uninformative, whereas the latter is non-trivial and informative.
- (ii) Pairs of sentences like these are not substitutable in propositional attitude contexts; for example, it might be that ‘John believed that Hesperus is Hesperus’ is true, whereas ‘John believed that Hesperus is Phosphorus’ is false.

One response sometimes offered on behalf of Millianism is that both (i) and (ii) are false, and that our tendency to think that they are true rests on our tendency to confuse propositions which sentences are standardly used to conversationally implicate with the propositions which are the semantic contents of those sentences. On this view, the only interesting differences between sentences which differ only in the substitution of coreferential names are differences in what those sentences are used by speakers to conversationally implicate.<sup>7</sup>

What sorts of propositions might uses of sentences involving names standardly implicate? Here there are a number of options. One might hold that a sentence like

Hesperus is Phosphorus.

is standardly used to implicate a meta-linguistic proposition, such as that expressed by

The referent of ‘Hesperus’ is the referent of ‘Phosphorus.’

or a descriptively enriched proposition, like that expressed by

Hesperus, the brightest star visible in the evening, is Phosphorus, the brightest star visible in the morning.

Similarly, a Millian of the sort we are considering might hold that a belief ascription like

---

mind here our intuitions about attributive uses of incomplete descriptions; referential uses of incomplete descriptions are not instances of this sort of quantifier domain restriction, and require a different treatment. See below for a discussion of the referential/attribution distinction.

<sup>7</sup>This is a view more often ascribed to Millians than defended by them. Contrary to what is often said, classic defenses of Millianism such as Salmon (1986, 1989, 1990); Soames (1988) do not contain any commitment to the view that the differences between sentences which differ only in the substitution of coreferential names are to be explained via conversational implicature. They do claim that the differences between any two such sentences will be pragmatic rather than semantic; but the assimilation of this to the view discussed in the text rests on the assumption that the only pragmatic principles are Gricean conversational principles, which is hardly obvious. More on this below. For a statement of Millianism which does rely explicitly on the kind of use of conversational implicature argued against above, see Ludwig (1996), §5.

John does not believe that Hesperus is Phosphorus.

is standardly used to implicate the propositions expressed by any of the following ascriptions:

John does not believe that the referent of ‘Hesperus’ is the referent of ‘Phosphorus.’

John does not believe that ‘Hesperus is Phosphorus’ is true.

John does not believe that Hesperus, the brightest star visible in the evening, is Phosphorus, the brightest star visible in the morning.

But the kind of argument given above against a Gricean treatment of quantifier domain restriction is enough to show that Millianism plus a Gricean explanation of differences in informativeness and intuitions about the truth values of attitude ascriptions cannot be the whole story.

Consider first the difference in informativeness between ‘Hesperus is Hesperus’ and ‘Hesperus is Phosphorus.’ This difference in informativeness cannot be explained by differences in what uses of these two sentences conversationally implicate, since uses of these two sentences in thought also differ in informativeness, and, as we have seen, uses of sentences in thought do not conversationally implicate anything at all. It is not just when John is talking to other people that it seems to him that ‘Hesperus is Hesperus’ is trivial and true, and ‘Hesperus is Phosphorus’ is substantial and false.

Much the same point applies to apparent substitution failures in propositional attitude contexts. Our intuitions about the difference in truth-value between ‘John believes that Hesperus is Hesperus’ and ‘John believes that Hesperus is Phosphorus’ cannot be explained in terms of the fact that, for example, a use of the former in conversation would implicate the true proposition that John believes that ‘Hesperus is Hesperus’ is true, whereas a use of the latter in conversation would implicate the false proposition that John believes that ‘Hesperus is Phosphorus’ is true. I might be too polite to voice my doubts about John’s lack of astronomical knowledge out loud, and still think to myself, ‘John doesn’t know that Hesperus is Phosphorus.’ But this use of the sentence, for the reasons given above, doesn’t conversationally implicate anything at all.

Put in a form which makes explicit use of the Speaker Meaning/Implicature and Communication/Implicature Principles, the point is as follows. (I use identity sentences and descriptively enriched propositions for illustration; but the point could be made with any of the candidates for pragmatically conveyed propositions listed above.)

- Just as ‘Hesperus is Phosphorus’ can often be used in conversation by speakers to mean that Hesperus, the brightest star visible in the evening, is Phosphorus, the brightest star visible in the morning, so the sentence can often be used by speakers in thought to mean that Hesperus, the brightest star visible in the evening, is Phosphorus, the brightest star visible in the morning. So (by Speaker Meaning/Implicature) the former fact about speaker meaning cannot be explained as a conversational implicature.
- Just as ‘Hesperus is Phosphorus’ can often be used in conversation by speakers to convey (communicate, assert) that Hesperus, the brightest star visible in the evening, is Phosphorus, the brightest star visible in the morning, so the sentence can often be used by speakers in thought to judge (think) that Hesperus, the brightest

star visible in the evening, is Phosphorus, the brightest star visible in the morning. So (by Communication/Implicature) the former fact about what the sentence is used to convey or communicate cannot be explained as a conversational implicature.

So the Millian cannot explain our intuitions about informativeness and substitution failures in terms of a pragmatic theory which is limited to Gricean conversational principles.<sup>8</sup>

#### 4 GENERALIZED VS. PARTICULARIZED CONVERSATIONAL IMPLICATURES

This is a good place to consider an important objection to the kind of argument developed above. Proponents of Gricean explanations of quantifier domain restriction, or of apparent substitution failures of names in propositional attitude contexts, might note that Grice distinguished between particularized and generalized conversational implicatures (Grice, 1975, 37-38). On this view, a generalized conversational implicature arises from a pattern of particularized conversational implicatures. This might seem to help with the cases under discussion because it provides a way to view uses of language in thought as derivative from uses of language in communication. For example, a proponent of Gricean explanations of quantifier domain restriction might, using this distinction, hold that uses of quantified sentences in thought carry generalized conversational implicatures of the sorts of restricted propositions mentioned above, and hold that this is explained by the fact that uses of these sentences in conversation are typically particularized conversational implicatures of these restricted propositions.

To see why this claim is implausible, it is useful to compare it with Grice's example of a generalized conversational implicature. Grice suggested that sentences of the form '...an X ...' carry a generalized conversational implicature to the effect that 'the X does not belong to or is not otherwise connected with some identifiable person' (Grice (1975)). Whether or not this claim is plausible, it has one important virtue: it identifies a class of sentences based on their possession of a certain structural feature, and, given a sentence which has that feature, provides a way to arrive at the proposition which is said to be a generalized implicature of that sentence. It seems clear that any plausible candidates for generalized conversational implicatures must have this characteristic. After all, generalized implicatures are supposed to arise independently of special features of the context of utterance; it's precisely this feature which makes them plausibly applicable to uses of language in thought.

---

<sup>8</sup>Metaphorical uses of language are a more difficult case. On the one hand, in some cases it seems to be possible to use metaphorical language in thought to mean something, or judge something, other than the literal meaning of the sentence used metaphorically. For example, I might make the judgement that someone is difficult to control by saying to myself, 'So-and-so is a loose cannon.' Cases like this indicate that attempts to explain metaphorical uses of language via conversational implicature or some related device — e.g., Martinich (1984) — are incorrect. On the other hand, it is not clear that all examples of metaphor fit into this category. Consider Grice's example, 'You are the cream in my coffee.' It is not obvious that I could use this to *make a judgement* about my regard for you; rather, if I use this sentence in thought, this seems only to be intelligible against the background of such a judgement. Moreover, there seems to be something right about Grice's idea that I can use 'You are the cream in my coffee' to communicate my regard for you partly because an utterance of this in conversation involves flouting a conversational maxim. Perhaps this indicates that oft-used metaphors, like 'is a loose cannon,' should be treated differently than comparatively rare ones. If the latter are treated as conversational implicatures, then the former may be a case in which the notion of generalized conversational implicature (discussed below) has application. This would explain why the former but not the latter can be used in thought to make judgements. As Steven Davis has pointed out to me, similar issues seem to arise with ironic uses of language.

But the cases discussed above clearly do not have this feature. Take sentences involving two distinct coreferential names  $m$  and  $n$ . Can we say anything about what generalized implicatures will be carried by uses of, for example, sentences of the form ‘ $A$  believes that ...  $m$  ...’ and ‘ $A$  believes that ...  $n$  ...’, just in virtue of their having this form? It seems not. The same goes for cases of quantifier domain restriction. Given a sentence of the form ‘All  $F$ s are  $G$ s’, can we say anything about what generalized implicature will be carried by every use of the sentence? Again, it seems not; some uses will carry no implicature, and when there is one, it will be dependent on particular features of the context of utterance, and not just on the form of the sentence. For this reason, the proponent of the Gricean explanations criticized above cannot get around the arguments by appealing to generalized rather than particularized conversational implicatures.

## 5 THE REFERENTIAL/ATTRIBUTIVE DISTINCTION AND CONVERSATIONAL IMPLICATURE

One might worry, however, that the argument to this point proves too much. Surely, after all, conversational implicature should have some role to play in a worked-out theory of language; but it may seem that, if we accept the Speaker Meaning/Implicature and Communication/Implicature Principles, we’ll have the materials to argue against the use of conversational implicature to explain *any* linguistic phenomenon.

This worry is misguided; the framework developed above for evaluating Gricean explanations of linguistic phenomena can support as well as refute claims that a certain kind of linguistic phenomenon is best explained as a conversational implicature. To see this, consider the distinction between referential and attributive uses of definite descriptions. A powerful case has been made that this distinction is to be explained, not by complicating the semantics of definite descriptions, but rather by adopting a uniform Russellian semantics along with a Gricean pragmatic story sufficient to explain our intuitions about referential uses of sentences involving definite descriptions as tracking facts about what speakers mean by their utterances of sentences which go beyond what the sentences uttered mean.<sup>9</sup> As suggested above, we can evaluate this claim by asking: can we get referential uses of definite descriptions in thought, as well as in communication?

The clearest way to test this is by considering a case of misdescription, in which a speaker uses a description ‘the  $F$ ’ to pick out some object which, as it turns out, fails to satisfy the description. Suppose, to adapt Donnellan’s example, that one person at a party says to another, as both look at a man in the corner with a martini glass in hand, ‘The man in the corner drinking a martini is interesting.’ Suppose that the man in the corner, John, has water in his glass. As above, we have an uncontroversial phenomenon — that the speaker succeeded in conveying to his audience that *that man*, John, is interesting — and two competing sorts of explanations of this phenomenon. As above, the two explanations are, first, a semantic explanation, according to which the reference of ‘the man in the corner drinking a martini’ on this occasion of use is John, despite the fact that he is not drinking a martini, and, second, a pragmatic explanation, which claims that the speaker has succeeded in conveying the proposition about John by uttering a sentence which means something else.

In the case of quantifier domain restriction, our two tests for conversational implicature

---

<sup>9</sup>See especially Kripke (1979). For a more explicit explanation of how the Gricean explanation might work in this case, see Neale (1990), Ch. 3.

counted against a Gricean version of the pragmatic explanation; in this case, we get a different verdict. Above we saw that agents can use sentences like ‘Every bottle is empty’ in thought to judge that every bottle in the room is empty; and this counts against Gricean explanations of uses of this sentence to convey this proposition. But can an agent use a sentence like ‘The man in the corner drinking a martini is interesting’ to *make the judgement* that that man, John, is interesting? It seems not; indeed, the choice of this sentence in conversation to convey this thought is only intelligible against the background of the *prior* judgements that John is interesting, and that John is the man in the corner drinking a martini. Since this kind of use of the sentence relies on those background beliefs or judgements, use of the sentence in thought can’t itself be a vehicle for making these judgements.

The point is clearer in cases where we have a more complicated description which is less directly connected with what I am perceiving at the time of the utterance. Suppose that we are having a conversation at a party with my friend Tom, who is wearing a blue and green striped sweater. Later, it is discovered that someone’s wallet was stolen at the party. Since I know that Tom has a history of doing things like this, I say to you, ‘I bet that the man we were talking to at the party in the blue and green striped sweater stole the wallet.’ Here I might use ‘the man we were talking to at the party in the blue and green striped sweater’ referentially, to single out Tom, and therefore might use the sentence in conversation with you to say of Tom that he stole the wallet. But it does not seem to me that I could use this sentence in thought to judge of Tom that he stole the wallet. Referential use of the description seems to require the temporally prior judgement that Tom stole the wallet.<sup>10</sup>

---

<sup>10</sup>It must be conceded that matters are not so clear in other cases. An anonymous reviewer suggested the following: a man walks into a party and sees a woman in what he takes to be a red dress, and says to himself, ‘I want to talk to the woman in the red dress.’ In saying this he expresses a desire — but what desire? It is natural, in at least some ways of filling out the case, to credit the speaker with a desire which would be fulfilled just in case the man talks to *that woman* — whether or not her dress is, as it appears to be, red. But doesn’t that indicate that this use of a description in thought — ‘the woman in the red dress’ — is referential, rather than attributive? And doesn’t this show that referential uses of definite descriptions can occur in thought as well as in communication?

I am inclined to think that it does not. I suggest that we think of this case as an instance of the following phenomenon: often, when someone asserts, judges, or bears some other attitude to two propositions  $p$  and  $q$ , and  $r$  is an obvious consequence of  $p$  and  $q$  which the speaker knows to be an obvious consequence of those propositions, and  $r$  is relevant to the purposes at hand, we are inclined to count the speaker as having asserted (judged, claimed)  $r$  as well. Suppose that someone says (asserts, judges) that the Reds are the baseball team from Cincinnati and that the baseball team from Cincinnati is the first professional baseball team; it does not seem wrong to describe them as having said (asserted, judged) that the Reds are the first professional baseball team. (It does not matter for my purposes whether we are correct in these sorts of attitude ascriptions, just that we are inclined to make them.)

Now, cases like the example of the party are most plausible when the description which seems to be used referentially expresses some property  $F$  which the speaker perceives the relevant object to have at or near the time of the ascription. Given this, we assume that the speaker has the background *de re* belief of the object  $o$  that it is  $F$ . But if the speaker has the background belief that  $o$  is  $F$  and says to himself that the  $F$  is  $G$ , this is enough to explain why we are inclined to take the speaker as having made the *de re* judgement that  $o$  is  $G$ . After all, the proposition that  $o$  is  $G$  is an obvious (and, in the above case, relevant) consequence of the propositions that  $o$  is  $F$  and that the  $F$  is  $G$ . So we do not, on this view, need the hypothesis that the description is used referentially in order to account for the intuitions that the speaker has said (claimed, judged) of that woman that he wants to dance with her.

Some evidence for this way of viewing the matter is given by the fact that our intuitions are dependent on the speaker having the relevant perceptual belief. Suppose that in the example above the man who walks into the party does not believe of the woman that she is wearing a red dress — even if it appears red, or is in fact red. Then can we imagine the man making saying to himself ‘I want to talk to the woman in the red dress’ as a way of making the *de re* judgement that he wants to talk to that woman? I

In this sense, referential uses of definite descriptions are like the example of ‘The student has excellent penmanship’ discussed above. Just as this sentence can be used in communication (in certain contexts) to convey the thought that the student is not fit for graduate study but not in thought to think this proposition, so sentences involving definite descriptions can be used in communication (in certain contexts) to convey singular propositions about objects which may or may not satisfy the description, but cannot be used in thought to think these propositions.<sup>11</sup> The phenomenon of referential usage of definite descriptions is one which occurs only in uses of language in communication. Therefore, our two tests for conversational implicature above do not rule out the claim that referential uses of definite descriptions are to be explained via the theory of conversational implicature, or some similar account.

We can put the point in a stronger fashion. We have observed that some linguistic phenomena can, and others cannot, occur in uses of language in thought. It is reasonable to think that this deserves some explanation; more specifically, it is reasonable to think that if some linguistic phenomenon — such as, for example, referential uses of definite descriptions — cannot occur in uses of language in thought, then an account of that phenomenon should be given in terms of principles governing conversation. For if this account of the phenomenon in question made no use of conversation-specific facts, it would be a mystery why it cannot occur in uses of language in thought. This suggests that the sort of argument sketched above works in both directions. Just as the possibility of the occurrence of some phenomenon in thought shows that it *cannot* be explained via conversational implicature, so the impossibility of some phenomenon’s occurring in thought shows that it *must* be explained via conversational implicature (or some set of principles similarly specific to communication).<sup>12</sup>

---

suggest that we cannot — even though it is easy to imagine such a situation in which he would use that sentence in communication to assert, convey, or communicate the *de re* proposition that he wants to talk to that woman.

<sup>11</sup>This way of putting the point makes use of the Communication/Implicature Principle; we can make an analogous argument using the Speaker Meaning/Implicature Principle.

<sup>12</sup>This might seem to conflict with the previous conclusion that uses of incomplete definite descriptions, like other cases of quantifier domain restriction, *cannot* be explained via conversational implicature — after all, aren’t many referential uses of definite descriptions also uses of *incomplete* definite descriptions? This conflict is only apparent. The distinction between definite descriptions which are incomplete and those which are not is a distinction between those descriptions which are satisfied by more than one thing and those which are not. The distinction between referential and attributive uses of definite descriptions marks out a distinction in the intentions of users of those descriptions. On one plausible view, it is the distinction between — for simple sentences of the form ‘The *f* is *g*’ — cases in which there is some object *o* such that the speaker means by his utterance of such a sentence that *o* is *G* (referential) and cases in which no such object-dependent proposition is meant (attributive). (The characterization is from Neale (1990), §3.5.) But then it is clear that the referential/attributional distinction is orthogonal to the distinction between definite descriptions which are and are not incomplete, and an incomplete definite description (like virtually any definite description) may be used either attributively or referentially. Either sort of use of an incomplete definite description can be used to pose a challenge to Russell’s theory of descriptions. A problematic attributive use of an incomplete description might be the use of ‘the car’ in ‘The car is around the corner’; a problematic referential use might be the example of ‘The man drinking a martini’ discussed above. The present point can then be put by saying that these two classes of cases should be handled differently: the problem posed (for a Russellian theory of descriptions) by certain attributive uses of incomplete definite descriptions cannot be explained by appeal to conversational implicature (for the reasons given above in the discussion of quantifier domain restriction), though the problem posed by referential uses of incomplete description should be explained via conversational implicature (or some similar conversation-specific principles).

Does this argument show that linguistic phenomena which can occur in uses of language in thought — such as quantifier domain restriction — must be accounted for via the semantic, rather than the pragmatic, strategy? This only follows if the pragmatic mechanisms for generating propositions conveyed are limited to conversation-specific facts, such as a speaker’s beliefs about what the conversational maxims require in a certain case, or a speaker’s beliefs about his audience. But there seems to be no reason for thinking that pragmatic mechanisms must take this shape. Indeed, if one is convinced by arguments that quantifier domain restriction must be a pragmatic rather than a semantic phenomenon,<sup>13</sup> then the above can be construed as an argument for the conclusion that there must be pragmatic principles which both (i) can explain how the utterance of a sentence which, in the context, means  $p$  can convey some distinct proposition  $q$ , and (ii) are not couched in terms specific to conversations or uses of language in communication, so that they can also explain how by saying to oneself some sentence which, in the context, means  $p$ , one can think, judge, or say to oneself some distinct proposition  $q$ .

This might seem like an abuse of terminology; isn’t pragmatics, by definition, the study of uses of language in communication? On some conceptions of the semantics/pragmatics divide, this may be so. But the present point can be made without appealing to any particular view of what should or should not fall under the label ‘pragmatics.’ Suppose that we begin with some reasonably intuitive view of semantic content (i.e., the meaning of a sentence in a given context), such as the view that the semantic content of a sentence is what the various literal uses of that sentence have in common.<sup>14</sup> Given such a view, we can then note that in many cases what a speaker means by an utterance of a sentence will go beyond the semantic content of that sentence in the context, and we will then want to come up with principles which explain this sort of phenomenon. The present point is just that one plausible moral of the above argument is that these principles cannot be limited to Gricean principles which have to do with norms of conversation (or audience-directed intentions, or any sort of facts specific to communicative uses of language), since some of these principles will have to explain linguistic phenomena which can occur in thought as well as in communication.

Department of Philosophy  
University of Notre Dame

---

<sup>13</sup>Bach makes a plausible case that instances of ‘so-called’ quantifier domain restriction should be assimilated to other cases of implicit qualification in his ‘Quantification, Qualification, and Context’, §§1-2. Soames (2005) argues that quantifier domain restriction in the case of incomplete definite descriptions cannot be explained semantically.

<sup>14</sup>On one way of making this more precise, the semantic content of a sentence is a proposition (or part of a proposition)  $p$  which is such that, for every literal use of that sentence, some proposition is asserted which either is identical to  $p$  or is an enrichment of  $p$ . For one way of working this out, see Soames (forthcoming).

## REFERENCES

- Kent Bach, 1994. Conversational Implicature. *Mind and Language* 12:124–162.
- Kent Bach, 2000. Quantification, Qualification, and Context: A Reply to Stanley and Szabó. *Mind and Language* 15:262–283.
- Steven Davis (editor) 1991. *Pragmatics: A Reader*. Oxford University Press.
- Paul Grice, 1975. Logic and Conversation. In Grice (1989), 22–40.
- Paul Grice, 1989. *Studies in the Way of Words*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard U.P.
- Saul Kripke, 1979. Speaker’s Reference and Semantic Reference. In *Definite Descriptions: A Reader*, edited by Gary Ostertag, 225–256. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.
- Kirk A. Ludwig, 1996. Singular Thought and the Cartesian Theory of Mind. *Noûs* 30:4:434–460.
- A. P. Martinich, 1984. A Theory for Metaphor. *Journal of Literary Semantics* 13:35–54. Reprinted in (Davis, 1991, 507-518).
- Stephen Neale, 1990. *Descriptions*. MIT Press.
- Nathan Salmon, 1986. *Frege’s Puzzle*. Atascadero, CA: Ridgeview Publishing Company.
- Nathan Salmon, 1989. How to Become a Millian Heir. *Noûs* 23:211–220.
- Nathan Salmon, 1990. Illogical Belief. *Philosophical Perspectives* 3:243–285.
- Jennifer Saul, 2002. Speaker Meaning, What Is Said, and What Is Implicated. *Noûs* 36:2:228–248.
- Scott Soames, 1988. Direct Reference, Propositional Attitudes, and Semantic Content. In *Propositions and Attitudes*, edited by Nathan Salmon and Scott Soames, 197–239. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Scott Soames, 2005. Why Incomplete Definite Descriptions do not Defeat Russell’s Theory of Descriptions. *Teorema* 24(3).
- Scott Soames, forthcoming. The Gap Between Meaning and Assertion: Why what we literally say often differs from what our words literally mean. In *Asserting, Meaning, and Implying*, edited by Martin Hackl and Robert Thornton.
- Jason Stanley and Zoltán Gendler Szabó, 2000. On Quantifier Domain Restriction. *Mind and Language* 15:219–261.