

Original Paper

Are Conversational Implicatures Cancellable? A Critical Review of Grice's Cancellability Test

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Abstract

Recent years have witnessed a rather vibrant debate about Grice's cancellability test. To demonstrate the validity of Grice's cancellability test, this essay provides a critical review of the debate, covering the sarcasm objection, the intentionality objection and the entailment objection. It is found that the bone of contention of cancellability versus non-cancellability concerns its approach, scope and feasibility, and the cancellability test survives these objections relatively unscathed.

Keywords

conversational implicature, Gricean pragmatics, cancellability test, non-cancellability

1. Introduction

As is often the case, what we speak up underdetermines what we intend to communicate by our utterances. Aiming at developing a systematic account of such phenomena, H.P. Grice (1975) proposed the notion of conversational implicature in his article *Logic and Conversation*, which settled the line between “what is said” and “what is implicated”. In addition, the fundamental properties of conversational implicature are outlined: defeasibility or cancellability (Note 1), non-detachability, calculability, non-conventionality, reinforceability, universality and indeterminacy (see also Levinson, 2000; Huang, 2014; Grice, 1989 for further discussion), among which, cancellability is the one that is often used as the main test for classifying speaker's meaning as implicit (Jaszczolt, 2009, p. 259).

In the decades after the theory of conversational implicature was put forward, cancellability of conversational implicature gets its support from Levinson et al. (1983, pp. 114-116), Leech (2016), and Huang (2014, p. 39). Contrary to philosophical and linguistic orthodoxy, however, compelling criticisms of the cancellability test date back at slightest to Sadock (1978) as well as Wilson and Sperber (1986), and modern questions around its precision and viability proceed to emerge. A few indeed contend that the cancellability test ought to be surrendered (Carston, 2010, 2008; Weiner, 2006).

Nonetheless, “cancelability itself is a phenomenon rarely looked at” (Mayol & Castroviejo, 2013, p. 85). Given the significance of this concept in Gricean pragmatics, the doubts of the cancellability is unquestionably a challenge to the conversational implicature theory.

Therefore, a critical review of Grice’s cancellability of conversational implicature is presented in this essay. The setup of this essay is as follows. The next section starts with an introduction of Grice’s criterion of cancellability. Section 3 critically assesses the voice of non-cancellability, involving the sarcasm objection, the intentionality objection, and the entailment objection. Section 4 is the core part of this essay, in which I follow the thread of upholders for Grice’s cancellability (Borge, 2009; Colonna Dahlman, 2013; Haugh, 2013) and rebut arguments of non-cancellability point by point. On such a structure, the purpose of this paper is twofold. Firstly, to rectify the inconsistency between the pro and con sides of Grice’s cancellability test. The second objective is to demonstrate that recent criticism do not really suffice to endanger Grice’s cancellability test.

2. The Notion of Grice’s Cancellability Test

Cancellability, as I see it, interrelates with other properties of conversational implicature. In the light of the co-operative principle, conversational implicatures can be calculated from the observation or flout of Grice’s submaxims, leaving it indeterminate and open-ended. Apart from calculability and indeterminacy, conversational implicatures features non-conventionality, which means conversational implicatures relies on the saying of what is said but it does not constitute what is said (Grice, 1989, p. 39; Huang, 2014, p. 31). Defined thus, conversational implicature does not affect the truth value of the sentence, hence canceling implicature does not collide with what is said, or lead to “logical absurdity” (Grice, 1981, p. 186) or “linguistic offense” (ibid.). Grice (1989) then extended the cancellability to all conditions, that is to say, all kinds of conversational implicatures can be canceled (i.e., what is implicate, including generalized conversational implicature and particularized conversational implicature). Nonetheless, notice that defeasibility is a necessary yet not a sufficient condition for conversational implicatures (Horn, 2007, p. 40).

So how can we identify conversational implicature from parallel concepts? Grice’s answer is that there are certain tests which can be utilized for distinguishing conversational implicatures, that is, the so-called Grice’s Cancellability Test (see Huang, 2014, pp. 39-43). The elaboration of the cancellability of conversational implicatures can be found in the following quotation from Grice:

(...) a putative conversational implicature that *p* is explicitly cancellable if, to the form of words the utterance of which putatively implicates that *p*, it is admissible to add *but not p*, or *I do not mean to imply that p*, and it is contextually cancellable if one can find situations in which the utterance of the form of words would simply not carry the implicature (Grice, 1989, p. 44).

Obviously, from Grice’s description, conversational implicature can be canceled in two ways, either be explicitly canceled “by the addition of a clause that states or implies that the speaker has opted out”; or be contextually canceled “if the form of utterance that usually carries it is used in a context that makes

it clear that the speaker is opting out” (ibid., p. 39). For instance:

(1) It’s hot in the room, but I don’t want you to turn on the air conditioner.

(2) Bob ate some of the cake. (said when later it was found that no cake was left on the table.)

In example (1), the particularized conversational implicature “please turn on the air conditioner”, generated by the utterance “It’s hot in the room”, is explicitly canceled by the clause “but I don’t want you to turn on the air conditioner”, and does not give rise to a contradiction. While in example (2), the general conversational implicature of the utterance “Bob ate some of the cake” is “Bob did not eat all of the cake.” Even if there is no cake left on the table, this sentence does not contradict the context. To be sure, the conversational implicature of this sentence is cancelled in the context.

Taken together, the explicit and contextual ways of cancelling implicatures form the cancellability test, which is validated as the most credible criterion for distinguishing conversational implicature from other linguistic phenomena—such as conventional implicature, semantic entailment and semantic presupposition (Blome-Tillmann, 2008, p. 156).

As noted earlier, Grice provided a definitive answer with the distinction between conversational implicature and other linguistic phenomena. Nonetheless, why can we cancel conversational implicature without causing contradictions in discourse (e.g., (1) and (2))? There is no accurate answer in Grice’s work. As far as I am concerned, there are two possible reasons: one is that implicatures are non-truth-conditional content, namely, it does not serve as a component of the truth-conditional content of the utterance (what is said). In this sense, the cancellation of conversational implicature cuts not much ice with truth value of the original proposition. The other is that conversational implicature is subject to the cooperative/uncooperative speakers, in which case, the speakers can always choose not to observe with co-operative principles, thus blocking the realization of implicatures. In the words of Liu et al. (2020, p. 35), Grice’s cancellability test is a test based on “one standard and three objects”:

“One standard” refers to that cancellation of conversational implicatures will not bring about logical contradiction or semantic conflict within the utterances;

“Three objects” include conversational implicature, what is said and conventional implicatures. (The first one is defeasible, while the latter two are indefeasible.)

3. Objections to the Grice’s Cancellability Test

3.1 Problem One: Sarcasm

Objectors employ counterexamples containing a sarcastic statement to repudiate the cancellability of conversational implicatures, arguing that not all conversational implicatures are explicitly cancellable, and inferred that Grice’s familiar cancellability test “does not help determine when an implicature is present” (Weiner, 2006, p. 129). Weiner (ibid., p. 128) proposes a train case to prove the failure of the Grice’s Cancellability Hypothesis: (“+>” stands for “conversationally implicate”).

Assume that Alice and Sarah are on a packed train; Alice, who is clearly able-bodied, is spread across two seats, while Sarah is left standing. Sarah addresses Alice with the utterance:

(3) “I’m curious as to whether it would be physically possible for you to make room for someone else to sit down.”

+> Alice should make room.

Assume now that Sarah adds: “Not that you should make room; I’m just curious” (ibid., p. 128).

The added sentence has the form of an explicit cancellation of the implicature [but not p]. Yet ‘I’m just curious’ only strengthens the request instead of canceling the request. It’s more reasonable to understand the canceling utterance as emphasizing the urge that Alice should make room, than the initial remark as conveying kind of weird curiosity. At that particular point, there is no cancellation of the implicature conveyed by the first statement since the added utterance is non-literal (the speaker actually is not really curious). Generally, Weiner argues, no performance of cancelling exists when there is sarcasm or the cancellation phrase is not to be taken literally.

3.2 Problem Two: The Speaker’s Intention

Drawing support from intentionality of implicature, dissenters of cancellability deemed that solid intention can’t be undone once expressed and projected, thus disputed the cancelable nature of particularized implicatures and explicatures (Note 2) (Burton-Roberts, 2010; Capone, 2009; Feng, 2013; Sun, 2010). Researchers such as Burton-Roberts (Burton-Roberts, 2010, p. 10) accept that particularized conversational implicatures cannot be canceled without inconsistency of what is intended. This relates with the instinct that the more notable a speaker’s intention to implicate, the less cancellable the implicature will be. On one account of the speaker’s definite intention toward particularized implicatures, compulsory cancellation will make Grice’s theory deadlocked (Capone, 2009, p. 60). In the same vein, cancellation of explicature is coherently inconceivable and observationally off base. Instead, it ought to be thought of as clarification of speaker’s intended explicature (Burton-Roberts, 2010, p. 138). Moreover, Feng (2013) and Sun (2010) primarily denied the ontology of cancellability test. Together with “what is said”, implicature rests with the speaker’s intention, which cannot be retracted. In this sense, the Grice’s cancellability remains as a hypothesis rather than what actually exists. A case in point is as follows:

(4) A: Have you ever gone to America?

B: I have never been abroad all my life.

+> B has never been to America.

It will lead to **self-contradiction** if the conversational implicature is forcibly canceled.

B: I have never been abroad all my life, but I have been to America./but I don’t mean that I have never been to America.

3.3 Problem Three: Entailment

It is normally expected that what a speaker implicates in articulating a sentence can’t be entailed by the sentence itself. To be beyond any doubt, most implicatures (by speakers) are not entailments (by sentences expressed by speakers), yet there are exceptions (Bach, 2006; Davis, 1998, p. 6). Entailment is a type of semantic relation between propositions (p and q), where p entails q ($p \Vdash q$), and whenever p

is true, q is also true. By contrast, if p is false, nothing is said about the truth value of q (Huang, 2014, p. 20; Levinson et al., 1983, p. 174). In some cases, conversational implicature is derived from our utterances, such an implied entailment produced by an irrevocable logical inference can neither be explicitly canceled nor canceled by the context. For example,

(5) Adam: Does John drink slivovitz?

Bob: He doesn't drink any alcohol.

+> John does not drink slivovitz.

|| John does not drink slivovitz.

(Carston, 2008, p. 139; Wilson & Sperber, 1986, p. 61)

Here Bob is clearly implicating that "John does not drink slivovitz". Meanwhile, this is entailed by the fact that slivovitz is one kind of alcohol. That is to say, example (5) appears to be the instance of implicated entailments. Such a case demonstrate that "non-contradictory cancellability isn't a necessary property of implicatures" (Carston, 2008, p. 40).

4. Arguments in Favour of Cancellability Test

In the first place, the sarcasm objection actually cavils about the way that conversational implicature can be canceled. What's need to be defined is that explicit cancellation and contextual cancellation are disjunctive rather than conjunctive, namely, the conversational implicature can be cancelled if one of the two criteria is met. Borge (2009) and Colonna Dahlman (2013) refuted Weiner's (2006) train case on the way of cancellation. Weiner's argument only shows that if the speaker doesn't tend to cancel the conversational implicature, the implicature will not be cancelled, and even be reinforced. Defined thus, the Grice's classical cancellability of conversational implicature has not been overturned, instead, multiple choices are open to speakers to cancel implicature.

To be fair, some of my allies against the non-cancellability side have probably misread the Grice's cancellability test, albeit they agreed that all conversational implicature can be cancelled (Åkerman, 2015; Blome-Tillmann, 2008). Blome-Tillmann insists that the explicit and contextual way should be met at the same time, while Åkerman regards explicit cancellation as a necessary condition of conversational implicature. The interpretation of Borge (2009) is in line with Grice's classical theory: cancelable is the defining feature of conversational implicature, and if one of the two cancellation conditions is met, the cancellation test can be passed (Yao, 2019).

Second, the intentionality objection adopts the perspective of the speaker, and takes the difficulty of cancellation in dynamic communication into consideration. As thus, the speaker's commitment to the meaning of utterances becomes the prerequisite of "what is implicate" (Blome-Tillmann, 2008; Feng, 2013). To my knowledge, however, Grice's cancellability criteria are built upon the utterance content rather than the real context where the speaker uses the sentence (Walczak, 2016). As the matter of fact, cancellability test serves as a demonstrative for scholars to conduct semantic/pragmatic analyses, far from what is called "speaker cancellation" (Burton-Roberts, 2010, p. 9) holded by backers for

non-cancellability, who utilizes this device in real on-line communicative circumstance and equates it to the process that a speaker clarifying the intended meaning for the listener (Carston, 2010, p. 234). In a word, the Grice's accepted cancellability test is never confined by specific communicative intentions. Third, the entailment objection actually generalizes about the non-cancellability of implicature from isolated incidents of "implicated entailments". The perspective that repudiates the cancellability of implicature for the coincidence of entailment and implicature in a single sentence, overemphasizes the certainty of implicature. Compared with the entailments, involving a strictly defined and fixed set of assumptions (Haugh, 2013, p. 5), the interpretation of implicature is depended on pragmatic relationship, which changes with the context. To be sure, the implicated entailment can be "removed" through an "except for" clause, like the slivovitz case that was discussed in section 2. For example, Bob could subsequently add something like "except for the odd tot of slivovitz" without contradiction of what is said, thereby "removing" the entailment relation between his utterance and what would have been implied without this proviso (i.e. "John does not drink slivovitz") (ibid., p. 13). Even Carston, who has called the necessity of cancellability into question, latter acknowledged that "the concept of entailment and the concept of implicature belong to different explanatory levels, in fact different sorts of theory-the one a static semantic theory which captures knowledge of linguistic meaning, the other an account of the cognitive processes and representations involved in understanding utterances" (Carston, 2004, p. 644). To sum up, although there are the cases when the implicature of an utterance happens to be the same as its entailment, the distinction between the two concepts can not be confused. Consequently, we can't negate the defeasibility of implicature for the entailment's reason.

Debate above on whether conversational implicature can be cancelled, lies on the premise that the pros and cons have a shared understanding of the relevant notions. On the ground of reviewing the opposing points in the previous section, this section makes an attempt to defend the Grice's cancellability test by clarifying the bone of contention. It is found that the three objections, ranging from sarcasm, intentionality and entailment, are different views on the approach, scope, limitation and even misinterpretation of Grice's cancellability test in essence.

5. Conclusion

Recent years have witnessed more vibrant debate about the cancellability of conversational implicature, some argue that Grice's assertion of cancellability is vulnerable to counterexamples and that the test is unreliable. Others have noted that, while Grice's assertion can be supported against the cases in issue, the test isn't as useful as some have anticipated. In a nutshell, the dispute on Grice's cancellability hypothesis covers multifarious issues. First, the divergence of research perspectives (the Gricean theory versus the communication theory), and disparate opinions of the application of cancellability test (i.e. a demonstrative for semantic/pragmatic analyses versus a device in real on-line communication). Second, different perceptions of the speaker's intention arise (i.e., the irrevocability of speaker's intention). Last but not least, there are ambiguities about the scope of implicature cancellation, and even

misinterpretations of correlative concepts (i.e., implicature versus entailment, and the disjunctive relation between explicit cancellation and contextual cancellation). On the ground of an overview of the recent controversy on the Grice's cancellability test, this essay suggests a way forward. For one thing, further discussion on the cancelable implicature shall take various types of implicature into consideration, also re-examine the position of the speaker's intention in implicature generation. For another, there is an irresistible trend of empirical and experimental studies in the field of pragmatics (Li, 2021), which can further certify the efficacy of cancellability test (Liu & Zhu, 2015).

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Notes

Note 1. Cancellability is also called defeasibility, and these two terms will be used interchangeably throughout the whole paper without any difference.

Note 2. An explicature is a pragmatically inferred, explicitly communicated component of the Gricean notion of what is said (though what is said is abandoned in relevance theory) (Huang, 2012; Huang, 2017).