
7 Expressive meaning

Summary 7.1 Conversational implicature. – 7.2 Conventional implicature. – 7.3 Presupposition.

The reconstruction of meaning in a discourse often goes beyond the simple lexical interpretation of the words or signs which compose a sentence. Natural languages are highly dependent on the pragmatic context in which they are used. The meaning that is not actually expressed, but is understood from the context, is commonly known as *expressive meaning*.

7.1 Conversational implicature


When interpreting a discourse, the addressee typically expects that the signer communicates in a cooperative way. According to the cooperative principle, participants in a conversation cooperate to achieve mutual conversational goals. Under this line of research, the signer is expected to obey a set of rules, known as conversational maxims. There are four cooperative maxims: quantity, quality, relevance, and manner. The maxim of quantity states that the quantity of delivered information must be appropriate. According to the maxim of quality, the delivered information must be true and supported by adequate evidence. The maxim of relevance consists in making contributions that are relevant to what has been said before. The fourth

maxim concerns manner: the delivered information must be brief, clear, and unambiguous.

In some cases, signers might decide to violate a maxim in a way that interlocutors clearly understand the violation. In such situations, a conversational implicature arises.


Importantly, implicatures are context-dependent: in the presence of different contexts, the same implicature might not arise.

Very common conversational implicatures are scalar implicatures, which are often related to a set of lexical expressions and are ordered by entailment, such as the quantifiers *SOME*, *MOST* and *ALL* [LEXICON 3.10.2]. The signer knows that, in the entailment scale, *SOME* is lower than *MOST* and lower than *ALL*. The choice to use a more specific item (e.g. *MOST*) suggests that the stronger characterisation (e.g. *ALL*) does not hold. An example of a sentence with the use of *MOST* is presented below.

STUDENT MAJORITY STUDY BE_ENGAGED 

‘Most of the students are engaged in studying.’


In the sentence above, the conversational implicature is that ‘not all the students are engaged’. However, if the signer adds a second utterance, such as in the example below, the previously established conversational implicature is cancelled.

STUDENT MAJORITY BE_ENGAGED STUDY PALM_UP ALL BE_ENGAGED 

‘Most of the students are engaged in study, actually all the students are engaged.’

Unlike conversational implicatures, conventional implicatures [PRAGMATICS 7.2] and presuppositions [PRAGMATICS 7.3] cannot be cancelled.

Another property of conversational implicatures is that they can be reinforced, as in the example below. Here we can see that the expression *MORE_THAN NOT* fulfils the function of reinforcing the implicature (“no more than the established number”).

GIANNI_a IX_a CAR TWO EXIST MORE_THAN NOT 

‘Gianni has two cars and no more than two.’

Conversational implicatures are also not detachable. Given a specific context and a specific proposition, the same implicatures will arise. As in the example below, where the conversational implicature enhances the possibility that tomorrow it will not rain.


TOMORROW RAIN MAYBE BE_POSSIBLE 

‘Maybe tomorrow it will rain.’

7.2 Conventional implicature

Differently from conversational implicatures, conventional implicatures are entailed by lexical and constructional meanings. Indeed, conventional implicatures are not context-dependent, namely their generation does not depend from the context. Conventional implicatures are closely related to the lexical meaning of the relevant linguistic expression. In the implicature exemplified below, the concept of being fat is felt in contrast with the concept of being agile and a skilled dancer.

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WOMAN IX_a FAT BUT DANCE GOOD_AT 

‘The woman is very fat, but she is good at dancing.’

Regardless of the context, conventional implicatures are attached to a specific linguistic meaning and for this reason it is not possible to cancel them by adding further sentences, such as in the case of conversational implicatures [PRAGMATICS 7.1]. For instance, it is not possible to cancel the contrast between being fat and being agile by adding a sentence which specifies that this contrast does not hold (i.e. ‘The woman is fat, but she dances well and no contrast exists between the fact that she is fat and that she dances well’).

7.3 Presupposition

The presupposition of an utterance concerns the part of encyclopaedic knowledge or the piece of information that the signer assumes in order for the utterance to be meaningful within a specific context. In the example below, the utterance presupposes that Gianni used to smoke before but he stopped doing it.

GIANNI SMOKE STOP 

‘Gianni stopped smoking.’

Similarly to conventional implicatures, presuppositions are triggered by specific lexical meanings. The main distinction between these two pragmatic phenomena is the fact that in presuppositions the additional meaning is relevant for evaluating the truth conditions of the utterance. It means that, in order to consider the descriptive meaning true (‘Gianni stopped smoking’), the interlocutor needs to assume that the presupposed meaning is true (‘Gianni used to smoke’).

Information on Data and Consultants

The descriptions in these sections are based on grammatical judgments. The video clips and images exemplifying the linguistic data have been produced by a LIS native signer coming from the northern part of Italy and involved in the SIGN-HUB Project.

Authorship Information

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