

**CHARLES LASSITER**  
Gonzaga University

# Implicating without intending on the Gricean account of implicature

## ABSTRACT

*The aim of this article is to support the position that what is implicated is not determined by speaker intention, a claim which runs counter to the widely accepted position that what is implicated is determined by speaker intention. This article argues for the conclusion that communication of conversational implicatures can be unintended by presenting three examples in which Grice's criteria for the completion of conversational implicature are satisfied but the speaker does not intend to implicate anything. The article ends with the suggestion that rules governing implicatures are importantly normative and that linguistic communal norms account for their normativity.*

## KEYWORDS

Paul Grice  
speaker meaning  
speaker intention  
conversational  
implicature

In his work on speaker meaning and implicature, H. P. Grice (1989b, c, d) argues that speaker intention determines speaker meaning. Speaker meaning is divided into *what is said* and what is meant but unsaid – that is, *what is implicated*. Because speaker intention determines speaker meaning and speaker meaning is divided into what is said and what is implicated, it follows that speaker intention determines what is implicated. Contra this conclusion, the aim of the present article is to show that speaker intention need not determine what is implicated, that is, that speakers may implicate a proposition

unintentionally. This conclusion is reached by way of examples in which the speaker counts as conversationally implicating some proposition *p* but the speaker lacks the corresponding intention to implicate *p*.

The present article further suggests thinking about implicatures as normative: given an utterance in a context, there is some proposition that hearers ought to take the speaker to be implicating. And, this normativity of implicatures is grounded in the communicative norms of the linguistic community.

In Section 1, Grice's (1989b, d) accounts of speaker meaning, what is said and what is implicated, are briefly covered. Also, the concept of *unintentional conversational implicature* is explicitly introduced. In Section 2, three cases of unintended conversational implicature are presented. In Section 3, I suggest that implicature is importantly normative and that linguistic communal norms can ground instances of implicature.

### 1. SPEAKER MEANING, IMPLICATURE, AND WHAT IS SAID

For a speaker to mean something by an utterance of *x* for some audience *A*, *S* utters *x* to *A* with the intention of (i) *A* producing a particular response *r* – like the belief that *p*, (ii) *A* recognizing that *S* intends *A* to produce *r*, and (iii) *A* producing *r* for the reason that *S* intends *A* to produce *r*. For *S* to mean the beans are too spicy by an utterance of '*the beans are too spicy*' to *A*, *S* utters '*the beans are too spicy*' with the intention of (i\*) *A* believing that the beans are too spicy, (ii\*) *A* recognizing that *S* intends *A* to believe that the beans are too spicy, and (iii\*) *A* believing the beans are too spicy for the reason that *S* intends *A* to believe the beans are too spicy.

When speakers utter *x* and mean *p*, *p* can either be the truth-conditional content of *x* – Grice's favoured sense of what is said – or *p* can be some other meant but unsaid message, i.e. what is implicated. When figuring out what is implicated, a hearer supposes that the speaker is being cooperative because communication is a species of rational, coordinated activity. Communicators, then, are presumed to obey the Cooperative Principle: make conversational contributions as is required by the purpose of the talk exchange in which one is engaged.<sup>1</sup>

A conversational implicature is an implicature in which what is implicated is calculated from one or more of Grice's conversational maxims.<sup>2</sup> Grice defines what it means for a speaker to conversationally implicate some proposition to a hearer:

A man who, by (in, when) saying (or making as if to say) that *p* has implicated that *q*, may be said to have conversationally implicated that *q* provided that (i) he is to be presumed to be observing the conversational maxims, or at least the Cooperative Principle; (ii) the supposition that he is aware that, or thinks that, *q* is required in order to make his saying or making as if to say *p* (or doing so in those terms) consistent with this presumption; and (iii) the speaker thinks (and would expect the hearer to think that the speaker thinks) that it is within the competence of the hearer to work out, or grasp intuitively, that the supposition mentioned in (ii) is required.

(Grice 1989b: 31)

For example (Grice 1989b: 32), *A* says to *B*, 'I am out of petrol' and *B* responds, 'There is a garage around the corner.' While *B* does not say that *A* can get gas

there, B would be infringing on the maxim 'be relevant' unless B thinks that A can get gas there. A has implicated that B can get petrol at the garage around the corner.

The numbered claims in the above passage from Grice list the conditions for a speaker to implicate a proposition *q* in uttering *p*: (i) The speaker must be presumed to be observing the conversational maxims or at least the Cooperative Principle. (ii) The supposition that the speaker believes that *q* is required to make the speaker's uttering *p* consistent with the assumption in (i). And finally, (iii) the speaker thinks that the hearer can work out the supposition in (ii) and the speaker thinks the hearer thinks that the speaker thinks that the hearer can work out the supposition in (ii). A speaker implicates a proposition, on Grice's account, when these three conditions are satisfied.

A speaker *unintentionally conversationally implicates* a proposition *q* in uttering *p* when clauses (i)–(iii) are satisfied *and* (iv) the speaker does not intend for her audience to believe that *q*. The concept of an unintended conversational implicature is not widely endorsed in the literature on Gricean accounts of meaning and implicature.<sup>3</sup> For example, Neale (1992) claims that conversational implicatures must be meant. He highlights a passage from Grice's work 'The Causal Theory of Perception' (Grice 1961) in which Grice suggests that conversational implicatures must be intended by the speaker. However, as Saul (2002b) points out, the passage in question was omitted by Grice from his collection *Studies in the Way of Words* (1989). And, Grice claims that the presentation in what remains of 'The Causal Theory of Perception' in his *Studies in the Way of Words* is largely the same as in the later papers in the collection. This suggests that the work without the omitted passage is closer to the main themes of his project than the work with the passage. Consequently, Neale's cited passage does not definitively indicate that implicatures must be intended.

Saul's (2002b: 242) *audience-implicature* comes closest in the philosophy of language literature to the concept of an unintended conversational implicature. In cases of audience-implicature, the audience has authority over what is implicated by some utterance. Saul defines an audience-implicature by retaining clause (i) of Grice's definition of conversational implicature and changing clauses (ii) and (iii) to read:

- (iia) *The audience believes that* the supposition that he is aware that, or thinks that, *q* is required in order to make his saying or making as if to say *p* (or doing so in those terms) consistent with this presumption [...]
- (iiaa) *The audience takes the speaker to believe that* it is within the competence of the hearer to work out, or grasp intuitively, that the supposition mentioned in (ii) is required

(Saul 2002b: 242, original emphasis)

It is important to see that Saul's audience-implicature is importantly different from the notion of an unintentional conversational implicature. Saul's audience-implicature modifies slightly Grice's characterization of conversational implicature and is neutral with respect to speaker intention. The above characterization of unintentional conversational implicature retains Grice's characterization of implicature and takes the stance that speaker intention is not always necessary to implicate a proposition.

Saul (2002b) concludes that when a speaker implicates, she has *made available* her message to her audience. The audience may fail to pick up on the message, but the speaker has fulfilled her communicative responsibilities

in abiding by communicative norms to make the message available for audience uptake. Saul's conclusion and the conclusion of this article agree that implicature is importantly normative; however, her conclusion differs from the conclusion of this article on the issue of speaker intention. This article concludes that speakers need not intend to implicate whereas Saul is much more guarded on that issue.

There are three worries to address before looking at cases of unintentional conversational implicatures: first, a worry expressed by Wayne Davis (1998) about a feature of Grice's account that is central to the present aim of generating support for unintentional conversational implicatures; second, a worry about the present article's interpretation of Grice's theory; and third, a worry about the construction of meaning by the audience.

The worry expressed by Davis (1998: 62–74) focuses on the key feature of an implicature's *calculability*: an implicature is calculable when the implicature is capable of being figured out from the utterance using, among other things, background information and conversational maxims. Calculability is an essential feature for an implicature to go through:

[a] conversational implicature must be capable of being worked out; for even if it can in fact be intuitively grasped, unless the intuition is replaceable by an argument, the implicature (if present at all) will not count as a conversational implicature.

(Grice 1989b: 31)

From the utterance in the context, the hearer, if the utterance is to conversationally implicate, must be able to work out the implicated message. Notice, however, that the implicature does not have to be worked out in the course of the conversation; it has to be able to be worked out by the hearer.<sup>4</sup> One way to interpret the requirement that an implicature be calculable is that some plausible set of reasons can be given for how the hearer arrives at the implicated content of the utterance. As long as some set of reasons can be given that relies on, among other things background information, conversational maxims, and the standard meaning and references of the lexical items used, then the implicature is calculable.

Davis's worry is that the sort of calculability required for Grice's theory is deeply problematic (Davis 1998: 62–74). For Grice, a speaker implicates something determinate. For example, when Romeo utters 'Juliet is the sun', there is some proposition Romeo means by his utterance. Davis's objection is that a number of other implicatures are calculable from Romeo's utterance. The conversational principles postulated by Grice are simply insufficient for figuring out what a speaker intended to convey by an utterance. There are just too many ways of satisfying the second condition of conversational implicature (that the speaker must be supposed to believe that p in order to make her utterance consistent with the supposition that she is adhering to the Cooperative Principle) for the conversational maxims to be of any real use.<sup>5</sup> The problem, then, is that the account requires the speaker's implicature to be determinate, but there is more than one implicature that can be calculated from the speaker's utterance, making what is implicated indeterminate. Davis suggests, as part of his larger project that need not sidetrack the present article, that the calculability requirement be abandoned.

The response here to Davis's concern denies his assertion that there are too many ways of satisfying the requirement that an implicature must be able

to be worked out.<sup>6</sup> Suppose there is a group of super-pragmatists in the future who exhaustively chart all the ways in which an utterance *U* in a context *C* can implicate a proposition *P*. It is possible that such super-pragmatists could generate a mapping from  $\langle U, C \rangle$  to  $\langle P \rangle$  for every ordered pair of *U* and *C*. If this is possible, then it is not the case that there is more than one implicature generated by an utterance in a context; the resulting function would tell us, for every utterance produced in a context, what proposition is implicated. Davis's problem with too many implicatures available for some utterance in a context is replaced by the worry about lack of exhaustive research into the relationships between utterances in contexts and the propositions that are implicated.<sup>7</sup>

Note that one does not have to accept that the study of implicature is nothing but the discovery of a function that takes the ordered pair  $\langle U, C \rangle$  as its input and generates  $\langle P \rangle$  as its output. The possibility of such an exhaustive mapping of utterances in context to propositions shows that Davis's argument appealing to the indeterminacy of implicatures is not a knock-down argument.

The second worry to address, about the interpretation of Grice's theory of implicature in this article, claims that the interpretation of the theory is being taken too literally. Grice is concerned with the 'total signification of an utterance' (Grice 1989b: 41), and taking the abovementioned criteria – found in 'Logic and Conversation' (1989b: 31) – as a finished set of necessary and sufficient conditions for instances of conversational implicature is taking the theory too rigidly. The argument of this article, which relies on this overly literal interpretation of Grice to show that speaker intention does not determine what is implicated, is problematic because it expects a level of precision in the theory that simply was never meant to be there in the first place.

In reply, the three examples below show that utterances can conversationally implicate without speaker intention even if one accepts Grice's conditions for a conversational implicature. In remaining close to Grice's formulation of conversational implicature, the aim is to avoid the criticism of not being faithful to Grice's actual account. However, in remaining too close, one may object that the above argument is pedantic and slavishly literal to Grice's presentation. This response gives a brief example that avoids such pedantry.

If one pulls back the lens and considers Grice's theory of implicature in a less precise fashion – Grice himself being concerned with the utterance's total signification – then it seems as though language is something that has, to speak loosely, a life of its own: in uttering *p*, someone may take me to think *q* though I do not actually think *q*. If I say to a friend who is sensitive about her appearance, 'You look nice today,' she may take me to implicate that she does not look good on other days. Even if I did not intend for her to think that I think that she does not look nice on other days, she may still take slight offence at what I said. Luckily, because communicative interactions are typically ongoing, these sorts of misunderstandings are rectified and avoided in future conversations. But, this does not take away from the fact that a hearer took me to think something that I do not actually believe but plausibly could, and the hearer's reasons for attributing such a belief to me may be perfectly rational, ones with which many agents could sympathize.

It could even be, in such a case, that I do hold the relevant belief but do not intend to implicate it. When I say to my friend, 'You look really good today,' I may in fact believe that she does not look good on other days; but, I do not intend to implicate this by my utterance, desiring to say something

about her appearance on that day. In this case, like the ones to be presented below, I may hold the relevant belief, my hearer may ascribe to me that belief, and I may even think that my hearer can work out the implicature; but, I did not intend to implicate the proposition whose content is the same as the content of the ascribed belief.

What this indicates is that a hearer may attribute a belief to the speaker – one which the speaker actually holds – on the basis of the speaker’s utterance without the speaker’s intending to implicate anything. That is to say, one may construct cases in which a speaker’s utterance implicates but the speaker does not intend to implicate anything by her utterance.

The third worry to address, concerning the construction of meaning by the audience, is that meaning is something that is built up by the hearers. It is the hearers who invest communicative gestures with meaning.<sup>8</sup> So, any attempts at understanding communicative meaning that do not begin with the construction of meaning by the audience is doomed to miss something essential about communication.

In response, on the Gricean account, what is meant by an utterance is not a matter of the audience’s constructing the meaning. Audiences do not construct meanings on the account of meaning that Grice endorses; though, to be sure, this does not mean that audiences are unimportant on Grice’s account – speakers produce some utterance-token *because* they want their audiences to form a specific belief (Grice 1989c: 213–23). Nonetheless, the concept of speaker meaning is theoretically primitive; the concept of semantic meaning is constructed out of speaker meaning. Speaker meaning, in turn, is determined by speaker intentions.<sup>9</sup>

So, to show that speakers can unintentionally implicate on a Gricean account of implicature, the task is to construct examples in which the account of implicature endorsed by Grice is satisfied but the speaker does not intend to implicate the relevant proposition; the task is *not* to emphasize the construction of meaning by the audience. To emphasize the role of the audience in constructing meaning in generating examples of unintentional conversational implicature is to beg the question against the orthodox Gricean account of implicature. Such examples would *presume* that speaker intention does not determine what is implicated, rather than show that speaker intention is not needed to satisfy Grice’s characterization of implicature.

## 2. UNINTENDED CONVERSATIONAL IMPLICATURES

In this section, three examples are presented in which the speaker performs some utterance which satisfies the three criteria – presented again here as a quick reminder of the account and found in (Grice 1989b: 31) – to conversationally implicate some proposition: (i) that the speaker is to be presumed to be following the Cooperative Principle and conversational maxims, (ii) that the speaker is aware that the supposition that *q* is required to make sense of the speaker’s utterance *p* into conversational context, and (iii) that the speaker thinks (and thinks that the hearer believes that the speaker thinks) that the supposition that *q* is required. In each example, however, the speaker does not intend to implicate that proposition. What the examples show, then, is that a speaker can satisfy Grice’s conditions for implicating some proposition without intending to implicate at all.

The first example involves a speaker’s predicting what a hearer will believe on the basis of an utterance but without intending the hearer to form that

belief. This example is centred on the possibility of the speaker's knowing what a hearer may think the speaker believes as a result of the speaker's utterance but not intending the hearer to believe whatever it is she believes about the speaker. The second example involves use of racial slurs.<sup>10</sup> This example illustrates that when a speaker utters a racial slur, she can be justifiably taken as holding a set of negative attitudes towards the offended group, even if the speaker's attitudes towards the offended group are unconnected with the speaker's use of the slur. The third example is founded on the sociolinguistic phenomenon of code-switching, which is the use of ways of talking – e.g. slang or a minority language – to indicate that one is a member of a social group. This example demonstrates that when one performs an utterance using a certain sort of code, hearers, on the basis of the utterance, can reasonably take the speaker to implicate some proposition on the basis of using that code.

In each case, the strategy is the same. Grice's criteria for conversationally implicating a proposition are shown to be satisfied in each case; but, the speaker does not intend to conversationally implicate. To show that the speaker in each case really does implicate some proposition, the implicature is shown to be *cancellable* – i.e. deniable without contradicting the implicating utterance. Cancellability is typically taken to be a characteristic feature of implicatures (Grice 1989a: 41); so, showing that the implicatures in each example are cancellable strongly suggests that the speakers really do implicate the relevant proposition.

There is a potential objection here concerning the possibility of unintentional conversational implicatures. One may contend that it is speakers who implicate, not utterances. An utterance of 'Juliet is the sun' can implicate Juliet is radiant when performed by one speaker and can implicate Juliet is warm and nurturing when performed by another speaker. This suggests that it is not the utterance 'Juliet is the sun' that implicates a proposition; rather it is the speakers who implicate a proposition through their use of the utterance 'Juliet is the sun'. And, because speakers – and not utterances – implicate, there can be no unintended conversational implicatures.

In reply, this objection is question-begging. If one assumes that only speakers implicate, then any example purportedly showing that there are unintentional conversational implicatures will be a nonstarter. The burden of proof for the advocate of this objection is to show that in cases of unintentional conversational implicature either nothing is implicated or that the speaker does intend to implicate.

*Example 1: Prediction without intention and unintended conversational implicature*

The speaker is Jane, a manager at a local bank, who is interviewing candidates for a teller position. Among the candidates for the position is Kevin, a long-time friend of Jane's, who has been unemployed for quite a long time. Kevin is a bit of a slob and is frequently late for appointments, and both Jane and Kevin know (and each knows that the other knows) that Kevin is both tardy and slovenly. In her evaluation of Kevin, Jane wants only to perform her duties as bank manager, giving as unbiased a report of the interview as possible. She does not wish to express any other opinions about Kevin to her co-workers because they know that Kevin is a friend of Jane's and Jane, a private person by nature, strongly prefers her co-workers' not knowing any details about Jane's and Kevin's relationship. Despite affectionate feelings cultivated by their long friendship, Jane is terribly upset with Kevin for not

doing his best to get this job. In her evaluation of Kevin with her co-workers, Jane utters (1):

1. 'The applicant's gross tardiness appeared insignificant only when considered next to his blatant disregard for personal appearance.'

Suppose further in this example that Jane's intention is for her audience to token a belief whose content is what is said by (1). That is, Jane intends for her audience to form the belief that the applicant's gross tardiness appeared insignificant only when considered next to his blatant disregard for personal appearance. If pressed, for example, on what she thinks about the applicant Kevin, she would only repeat her utterance (1) – perhaps with some minor variations (e.g. replacing 'gross' with 'incredible'). A hearer, on the basis of (1), comes to believe that Jane implicated (2):

2. Jane has a poor opinion of the candidate.

Jane is irate that Kevin didn't do more, like show up neatly dressed and on time, to get the job. But, her poor opinion of Kevin is unrelated to her intentions in performing her utterance of (1): she may hold a poor opinion of Kevin, but her intention in uttering (1) is for her audience to form the belief whose content is what is said by (1).

Nonetheless, Jane predicts that her hearers will form a belief whose content is the content of (2) – and rightly so since it is natural to think that someone who utters (1) can be taken to implicate (2) especially in an evaluative context like interviewing candidates to fill a position.<sup>11</sup> It is natural to take a speaker of (1) to implicate (2) in this context because, all other things being equal, an utterance of (1) *just is* a reliable indicator of the speaker's holding a poor opinion of the candidate.

Importantly, she may rightly predict that her hearers will believe that she has a poor opinion of the candidate, but, *ex hypothesi*, she did not intend for her audience to believe that she has a poor opinion of the candidate. She did communicatively intend for her audience to form a belief about what was said, not what was implicated by (1), even though she is able to foresee that her audience will have taken her to implicate (2).

Importantly, this scenario satisfies Grice's three criteria for a speaker to conversationally implicate a proposition: (i) Jane obeys the Cooperative Principle; (ii) Jane's belief that (2) is needed to make the utterance of (1) consistent with the presumption that Jane obeys the Cooperative Principle; and, (iii) Jane believes that the listener is capable of working out Jane's belief that (2) and the listener is aware that Jane thinks this. Hence, (2) is conversationally implicated by (1); and, since Jane never intended to implicate (2) in her utterance of (1), it makes the most sense to regard (2) as an unintended conversational implicature of (1).

The implicature (2) is also cancellable – Jane can assert (1) and the denial of (2) without fear of contradiction. She may, in fact, hold no opinion of the candidate, her only relevant belief being her evaluation of Kevin expressed by her utterance of (1). Because the (2) is cancellable given Jane's utterance of (1), this gives good reason to think that (2) is implicated by (1).

One worry about the strength of this example for suggesting the existence of unintentional conversational implicatures goes as follows. If the speaker believes and expects the hearer to be capable of working out the supposition,

then the speaker intends for that proposition to be conveyed. By analogy, if an agent believes that pulling the trigger of a gun will cause the gun to fire and expects that pulling the trigger will cause the gun to fire, then it seems right to regard the agent as intending to cause the gun to fire when she pulls the trigger. If Jane did not intend to implicate that *p*, it is difficult to see how Jane could have had such a complex set of propositional attitudes – believing that *p* and expecting her hearers to work out that she believes that *p* on the basis of her utterance – and yet fail to implicate that *p*.<sup>12</sup>

In reply to this worry, the case presented finds the speaker predicting that the audience will work out the implicature but never intends for the hearer to work it out: prediction without intention. Speakers, Jane in this case, can truthfully believe that hearers will work out the implicature on the basis of the utterance yet fail to intend for the hearer to work it out. As long as prediction of an outcome is separable from an intention to bring about that outcome, then cases like those in Example 1 avoid this worry.

There is an analogy to be drawn here with the Doctrine of Double Effect (DDE) from just war theory.<sup>13</sup> Discussions of the DDE are deep and subtle, and I will not attempt any detailed explication of them here; but, one point is worth making in the present context. The DDE draws the distinction between what agents intend to bring about by their actions and what is an unintended but foreseen consequence of their actions. The first example exploits this distinction between what is intended by an action and what is unintended but foreseen. In the case of Jane, she intends for her audience to believe that the applicant's gross tardiness appeared insignificant only when considered next to his blatant disregard for personal appearance. She foresees, but does not intend, that her audience will ascribe to her the belief that Jane has a poor opinion of the candidate as well as the belief that Jane expects her audience to work this out. So, while Jane can foresee the consequences of her communicative action, she does not intend them. It follows that Jane can implicate some proposition by her communicative action, and foresee that the proposition is implicated, without intending to implicate that proposition.

Another worry is that the second condition is not satisfied either since the supposition (2) is not required to make Jane's utterance (1) consistent with the supposition that Jane is obeying the Cooperative Principle, since the hearer can form a belief whose content is (1) and still regard Jane as obeying the Cooperative Principle.

There are two responses available. First, a feature of conversational implicatures is their indeterminacy: for some utterance, there are a number of different beliefs that could be ascribed to the speaker on the basis of the utterance and the content of each of these different beliefs is a potential implicature.<sup>14</sup> It could be that the implicature in the Jane/Kevin example is another example of indeterminacy of implicatures.<sup>15</sup>

Second, there is an ambiguity in 'required'. On the one hand, the supposition could be required in order for the hearer to make sense of what the speaker is getting at, i.e. the speaker's aim in producing the utterance in that way. This seems to be the case when we consider the petrol station example presented at the start of this article: the hearer has a difficult time making sense of what the speaker is getting at unless she supposes that the speaker of 'There's a station around the corner' believes that the hearer can get gas there. One could imagine, comically perhaps, the hearer replying to the speaker, 'Yes, I understand that there is a station around the corner, but where can I get some petrol?' On the other hand, the supposition could be required in

some other sense unrelated to making sense of what the speaker is getting at. This seems to be the case in other instances of conversational implicature. For example, if Eunice says ‘I have five children’ in response to the question, ‘How many children do you have?’ then she conversationally implicates, by the Maxim of Quantity, that she has no more than five. This supposition – that Eunice believes that she has no more than five children – is not required to make sense of what the speaker is getting at. It is far more difficult to imagine the questioner replying to Eunice, ‘Yes, I understand that you have five children, but how many children do you have?’

These two examples point toward different senses of ‘required’ in the second condition for conversational implicature. The sense of ‘required’ in the Jane/Kevin example may bear a greater similarity to the sense of ‘require’ in the Eunice example than the petrol example. But, the Eunice case is a standard example of a conversational implicature.<sup>16</sup> If the Eunice example satisfies the second condition of conversational implicature with its sense of ‘require’, then *prima facie*, the Jane/Kevin example does as well.

*Example 2: Racial slurs and unintended conversational implicature*

Let us say that Lina is brought up using the term ‘mick’, a derogatory term in American English to refer to people of Irish descent: while most use ‘Irish’ to refer to people of such ancestry, Lina uses ‘mick’. She uses it because it was the preferred term in her household during her formative years. Other than this quirk, Lina is a competent member of her linguistic community.

Typically, when a speaker S uses a racial slur, like ‘mick’, the sorts of beliefs ascribed to S are ones about the inferiority of members of the group to which the slur applies. So, someone who uses ‘mick’ or ‘wop’ is typically ascribed beliefs about the inferiority of people of Irish or Italian (respectively). This is just because racial slurs are typically used to express beliefs about the inferiority of the groups they target. And, competent members of a linguistic community where derogatory terms are derogatory just know this: it is part of their competency.

Now, Lina uses ‘mick’ just as most people use ‘Irish’. So, when she sees Jim, who is from Ireland, she utters (3):

(3) ‘Jim is a mick’

Lina also harbours racist beliefs, believing people of Irish stock to be inferior. On the basis of (3), a hearer ascribes to Lina the belief that Jim is inferior. Now, Lina does actually believe this, but she does not mean to express this belief through her use of ‘mick’. For Lina, ‘mick’ is what people of Irish ancestry are called; and, her belief in the inferiority of the Irish is disconnected from her use of ‘mick’.

Over years of conversations, she has learned that people will ascribe such a belief to her, and rather than explain that ‘mick’ is just what she was brought up saying but that she still holds racist beliefs, she just lets it go. She does not intend (at least in her utterance [3]) to convey her racist belief; but, she recognizes that her audience will ascribe to her such beliefs.

With this example, we can fill out the scheme for a conversational implicature. Lina (i) obeys the Cooperative Principle and appropriate maxims; (ii) is aware that the belief that Jim is inferior is needed in order to make her utterance consistent with the supposition in (i); and (iii) thinks (and expects her hearer to think that Lina thinks) that her hearer can work out that the supposition in (ii) is required.

Further, the implicature Jim is inferior is cancellable. One may utter 'Jim is a mick' and then follow up with 'But I don't think Jim is inferior; it's just that "mick" is what I was raised to use to refer to people of Irish descent.'

An objection to this analysis of the example claims that Lina's audience is irrational in ascribing such beliefs to Lina provided that they have the relevant background information about her upbringing. If the audience ascribes discriminatory beliefs to her even when they know the idiosyncratic convention, then it is they who are being irrational.

In response, in the face of a competent speaker's knowing that derogatory terms are derogatory, the background information about Lina's upbringing seems at worst irrelevant and at best merely another fact competing for inclusion in figuring out what Lina communicates. Since Lina is a competent speaker, she knows that 'mick' is derogatory. So, the audience is asked to weight which is more significant in calculating what Lina is communicating: Lina's linguistic idiosyncrasy or the communal norm that competent uses of derogatory terms indicate derogatory beliefs held by the speaker. It seems much more plausible that the communal norm has greater significance precisely because language is a social phenomenon and idiosyncratic uses are idiosyncratic precisely because they are abnormal occurrences against a vast background of widespread adherence to norms. It is not obvious that Lina's idiosyncrasies are more significant in calculating the implicature than communal norms. And, to say that deference is due because of Lina's communicative intentions is to beg the question against the argument being put forward in this article.

Another potential objection to the conclusion drawn from this example is that racial slurs do not conversationally implicate, but rather *conventionally implicate* – they implicate some proposition as a matter of convention. In conventional implicatures, the implicated content is neither inferred from conversational maxims nor is it part of the semantic content of the expression. And, notably, there is no inferential process from the utterance to the conventional implicature. For example, an utterance of 'Francis is tall but really bad at basketball' is truth-functionally equivalent to 'Francis is tall and Francis is really bad at basketball', though the conjunction 'but' indicates some contrast between Francis's being tall and his being really bad at basketball. As a result, an utterance of 'Francis is tall but really bad at basketball' implicates Francis is tall and really bad at basketball and there is a contrast between these claims.

Say, for the sake of the objection, that slurs do conventionally implicate. If slurs conventionally implicate then they do not conversationally implicate, which means they cannot be featured in examples of unintended conversational implicatures. This objection loses its force as long as a case can be made that they conversationally implicate, at least until further linguistic data comes in deciding one way or the other.

There is good reason for thinking that the derogatory meaning of racial slurs is conversationally implicated. First, as we have seen, at least some utterances of racial slurs can be followed up with an utterance cancelling the implicature of the racist utterance. So, if the implicature from an utterance of a racial expression is cancellable, then that gives us good reason to think that the implicature is conversational. Second, conversational implicatures, unlike conventional implicatures, are calculable; so, if some inference from an utterance containing a slur to the derogatory content is available, then the presence of such an inferential process gives good reason to think the derogatory content is conversationally implicated. It is at least plausible that a hearer has

to use the conversational maxims to arrive at the proposition Jim is inferior from Lina's utterance of 'Jim is a mick' – especially in cases where the hearer is a new speaker of the language. Since it is at least as plausible that utterances contain racial slurs conversationally, this objection does not succeed in undermining the argument.

*Example 3: Code-Switching and unintended conversational implicature*

Code-switching is a sociolinguistic phenomenon in which speakers in a talk-exchange move between two systems with differing grammatical rules in the course of their conversation.<sup>17</sup> For example, two Chicano professionals in California exchanging goodbyes may utter:

(4) A: Well, I'm glad I met you.

B: *Andale pues* [okay, swell].<sup>18</sup>

However, code-switching need not take place as turns in a conversation. In some speech communities, speakers can switch codes midway through an utterance:

(5) *Por eso cada* [therefore each] [...], you know it's nothing to be proud of, *porque yo no estoy* [because I'm not proud] of it, as a matter of fact, I hate it, *pero viene Viernes y Sabado yo estoy, tu me ve hacia mi, sola* [but come (?) Friday and Saturday I am, you see me, you look at me, alone] with a, *aqui solita, a veces que Frankie me deja* [here alone, sometimes Frankie leaves me], you know a stick or something.<sup>19</sup>

One effect of code-switching is to define 'in-groups' and 'out-groups' through use of 'we-codes' and 'they-codes'. In many bilingual communities, the minority, ethnically specific we-code is associated with informal activities and personal relations; the majority they-code is associated with formal activities and less personal relations.<sup>20</sup> In a Spanish-English bilingual community, the Spanish dialect employed may be the we-code and the English dialect the they-code. The Spanish dialect would be employed at family gatherings, playing games with friends, or conducting business transactions with others in that language-community. The English dialect would be used when conducting official business or speaking with English users from outside the linguistic community; these conventions can hold even when both speaker and listener speak both codes and this fact is mutually known. Notably, one effect of the use of we-codes is to strengthen feelings of solidarity.<sup>21</sup>

Suppose Noelia is a member of a Spanish-English bilingual community that uses the local Spanish dialect as the we-code and the local English dialect as the they-code. She has invited to the party an acquaintance, Oliver, who speaks the same dialects as Noelia. At the party, there are people with whom Noelia uses the we-code and people with whom she uses the they-code. In previous interactions, Noelia has used the they-code with Oliver; and, this party is the first such time that Noelia has been in a situation with Oliver in which she switches between the we-code and they-code.

We can imagine that Noelia thinks of Oliver as a friend but has never addressed him using the we-code. This could be because when they first met she addressed him in the they-code and this habit has simply continued on uncontested in their transactions. At this party, Noelia addresses Oliver using the we-code but she does not mean to do so; in switching back and

forth between codes, let us say, she accidentally slips into using the we-code with Oliver. Oliver now believes, on the basis of her addressing him in the we-code, that Noelia thinks of him as a member of the in-group to which she belongs, one with whom she is comfortable using the we-code. Noelia does not try to correct the unintentional use of the we-code but knows that as a result Oliver will believe that she thinks of him as a friend.

This case fulfils the three conditions for conversational implicature: (1) Oliver presumes Noelia to obey the conversational maxims and the Cooperative Principle; (2) Noelia is aware that the presumption that she believes Oliver to be her friend is needed in order to make her utterance in the we-code consistent with the presumption in (1); (3) Noelia thinks and expects Oliver to think that she thinks that he is capable of working out the supposition in (2). However, *ex hypothesi*, Noelia did not intend to communicate her belief that Oliver is her friend. It follows, then, that Noelia conversationally implicated Oliver is her friend but did not intend to do so.

As with the other examples, what is implicated by Noelia's utterance, *Oliver is my friend*, is cancellable. After using the we-code with Oliver, Noelia could say, 'We're not really that close, Oliver.'

In all three examples – prediction without intention, racial slurs, and code-switching – S's uttering p satisfies the criteria for implicating some proposition, but S never intends for her utterance to so implicate. Consequently, all three are examples of unintended conversational implicature. What this strongly suggests is that speaker intention does not determine what is implicated.

There is a worry, however, about the ubiquity of implicatures if speakers need not intend to implicate some proposition for the implicature to go through. Assume that speakers need not intend to implicate that p in order to implicate that p. What follows is that, plausibly, a multitude of implicatures can be calculated from any utterance using the conversational maxims. The result is that all utterances could be taken as implicating some proposition. This is an intolerable consequence. The best way to tame the resulting zoo of implicatures is to restrict implicatures to what speakers intend to mean by their utterances.

In reply, it is not the case that any implicature follows from some utterance. In the cases presented above, the speakers possess the relevant beliefs required for their utterances to implicate and are capable of predicting the beliefs their audience will hold as a result of the utterance. Possessing the relevant belief could be one restriction on what utterances implicate what propositions. Empirical work in implicature may uncover other restrictions on what utterances may implicate what propositions under what circumstances. But, it is not the case that the ubiquity of implicatures follows from the existence of unintended conversational implicatures.

### 3. UNINTENDED CONVERSATIONAL IMPLICATURE AND LINGUISTIC COMMUNAL NORMS

The argument of this article claims that speaker intention does not determine what is implicated. What, then, grounds what is implicated by an utterance? I suggest that rules governing implicatures be thought of as normative<sup>22</sup> and that norms of implicatures are grounded in linguistic communal norms. A necessary condition for a speaker to count as having implicated some proposition to a hearer in a linguistic community is that the speaker is a competent member of the linguistic community. The idea of a speaker being a competent

member of the linguistic community is that the speaker is recognized by other members of the community as being fluent in the dialect, that the speaker has no trouble understanding other speakers or being understood by them, that the speaker can clarify her beliefs when needed, that the speaker will cancel an assertion if her audience takes her to have meant something she did not really mean, the speaker will defer to others' usage of an expression when the others' usage is very widespread, and so forth. Consider the following variation on the above racial slur example.

Lina uses 'mick' to refer to anyone of Irish origins; but, unlike the original example, she does not hold any discriminatory beliefs about such people. It is just the term she was taught to use by the relevant members of her linguistic community. So, when Lina utters 'Jim is a mick' she means only to communicate that Jim is of Irish descent. She has this idiosyncratic use of 'mick' because her parents raised her to use 'mick' in place of 'Irish'.

Imagine, then, that Lina has, all her life, been disposed to utter 'mick' to refer to people of Irish descent, but Lina has never found herself in a situation in which she would utter 'mick' outside of her family. One day Lina utters to her friend Elle, 'Jim is a mick.' Elle, flabbergasted by Lina's racist expression responds, 'How could you say such a terrible thing? I had no idea you were so prejudiced.' I think it is plausible to imagine that Lina would be confused by Elle's response. Lina, as per the story given, has no idea that 'mick' is a derogatory term. I also think it is plausible that Lina would begin to rethink her use of 'mick' to avoid giving others the impression that she harbours racist beliefs, provided that this sort of experience was widespread and not localized to her interactions with Elle.

Lina, as a competent member of her linguistic community speaking to other competent language users in her community, ought to defer to the widespread usage of 'mick' as a derogatory term. She may not intend to use it in a derogatory way, but she ought to know, as a competent language user, what sort of responses she can expect when using such terms in utterances. Further, given her role as a competent speaker in her linguistic community, her audience ought to infer that she holds discriminatory beliefs about Jim if she persists in using 'mick' to pick out Irish people. Put somewhat strongly, the communal convention of expressing derogatory beliefs by use of racial slurs justifies the audience's ascription of discriminatory beliefs about the targeted group to the speaker – no matter what the speaker's intention in the use of such a term – provided that the speaker is a competent member of the linguistic community.<sup>23</sup>

Code-switching is another example of how linguistic communal norms ground implicature. In the Noelia/Oliver example from above, Noelia used the we-code with Oliver, implicating that she thinks of him as a friend. Given her use of the we-code and Noelia's and Oliver's roles as competent members of the linguistic community, this is an implicature that Oliver ought to have calculated from her utterance.

Imagine, however, that Oliver is a member of the bilingual community, but Noelia is not. Noelia can speak both Spanish and English, but she does not know about the we-codes and they-codes of Oliver's bilingual community. Importantly, she does not know that using the we-code with a member of the community indicates a close relationship with that person. Now, say that Noelia and Oliver are at the party as before, and Oliver knows that Noelia is not familiar with the norms of the community; then, Noelia's use of the we-code with Oliver will not be good reason for him to calculate the

implicature that she thinks of him as a friend. Oliver is unjustified in calculating that implicature because Noelia is not a competent member of his linguistic community and so is unfamiliar with the norms. It could be that Noelia really does think of Oliver as a friend; but, since Noelia is unfamiliar with the community's linguistic norms, her use of the we-code with Oliver is insufficient reason for Oliver to calculate that implicature from her utterance.

Oliver is justified in calculating the implicature that Noelia believes him to be a friend in cases where Noelia is a competent member of the linguistic community and is unjustified in cases where Noelia is not a competent member of the linguistic community. This suggests, much as the example above with racial slurs, that what is important in justifying calculating an implicature is linguistic communal norms.

In short, linguistic communal norms of language-use within a context are what justify an audience's ascription of a belief to a speaker that the speaker must hold in order to make the supposition that the speaker is following the Cooperative Principle. That work cannot be done by speaker intentions.

## CONCLUSION

In this article, I presented three examples in which speakers conversationally implicate a proposition but do not intend to do so. On the orthodox Gricean account, as discussed above, speaker intention determines what is implicated; and, if there are unintended conversational implicatures then speaker intention does not determine what is implicated. I suggested that one promising avenue of future research to accommodate unintended conversational implicatures into a theory of implicature is to justify belief-ascriptions by the audience to the speaker by the normativity of terms' use within a linguistic community.<sup>24</sup>

## REFERENCES

- Bokhorst-Heng, Wendy and Caleon, Imelda (2009), 'The Language Attitudes of Bilingual Youths in Multilingual Singapore', *Journal of Multilingual and Multicultural Development*, 30, pp. 235–51.
- Davis, Wayne (1998), *Implicature: Intention, Convention, and Principle in the Failure of Gricean Theory*. Cambridge, UK: CUP
- Davis, Wayne (2007), 'How Normative Is Implicature?', *Journal of Pragmatics*, 39, pp. 1655–72.
- Grice, Paul (1961), 'The Causal Theory of Perception', *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society*, Vol. 35, pp. 121–52.
- Grice, Paul (1989a), 'Further Notes on Logic and Conversation', *Studies in the Way of Words*, Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, pp. 41–57.
- (1989b), 'Logic and Conversation', *Studies in the Way of Words*, Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, pp. 22–40.
- (1989c), 'Meaning', *Studies in the Way of Words*, Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, pp. 213–23.
- (1989d), 'Utterer's Meaning and Intentions', *Studies in the Way of Words*, Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, pp. 86–116.
- Gumperz, John (1982), *Discourse Strategies*, Cambridge, UK: CUP.
- Hom, Christopher (2008), 'The Semantics of Racial Epithets', *The Journal of Philosophy*, 105, pp. 416–40.
- Hudson, R. A. (1996), *Sociolinguistics*, 2nd edn, Cambridge, UK: CUP.

- Konidaris, E. (2004), 'Code-Switching Among Trilingual Montrealers: French, English, and a Heritage Language', *Journal of the National Council of Less Commonly Taught Languages*, 1, pp. 19–68.
- Levinson, Stephen (1983), *Pragmatics*, Cambridge, UK: CUP.
- McIntyre, Allison (2009), 'Doctrine of Double Effect', *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, <http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/double-effect/>. Accessed 29 June 2011.
- Neale, Stephen (1992), 'Paul Grice and the Philosophy of Language', *Linguistics and Philosophy*, 15, pp. 509–59.
- Nilep, Chad (2006), "'Code Switching" in Sociocultural Linguistics', *Colorado Research in Linguistics*, 19, [http://www.colorado.edu/ling/CRIL/Volume19\\_Issue1/paper\\_NILEP.pdf](http://www.colorado.edu/ling/CRIL/Volume19_Issue1/paper_NILEP.pdf). Accessed 10 January 2011.
- Nwoye, O. (1993), 'Code Switching as a Conscious Discourse Strategy: Evidence from Igbo', *Multilingua*, 12, pp. 365–85.
- Saul, Jennifer (2002a), 'Critical Study of Wayne Davis, Implicature: Intention, Convention, and Principle in the Failure of Gricean Theory', *Nous*, 35, pp. 630–41.
- (2002b), 'Speaker Meaning, What is Said, and What is Implicated', *Nous*, 36, pp. 228–48.
- (2010), 'Conversational Implicature, Speaker Meaning, and Calculability', in Klaus Petras (ed.), *Meaning and Analysis: New Essays on H. Paul Grice*, Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Searle, John (1969), *Speech Acts: An Essay in the Philosophy of Language*, Cambridge, UK: CUP.
- Tay, M. W. J. (1989), 'Code Switching and Code Mixing as a Communicative Strategy in Multilingual Discourse', *World Englisher*, 8, pp. 407–17.
- Tomasello, Michael (1999), *The Cultural Origins of Human Cognition*, Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- (2008), *Origins of Human Communication*, Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.
- (2009), *Why We Cooperate*, Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.

### SUGGESTED CITATION

Lassiter, C. (2012), 'Implicating without intending on the Gricean account of implicature', *Empedocles: European Journal for the Philosophy of Communication* 4: 2, pp. 199–215, doi: 10.1386/ejpc.4.2.199\_1

### CONTRIBUTOR DETAILS

Contact: Department of Philosophy, Gonzaga University, 502 E. Boone Ave.  
Spokane, WA 99258, USA.  
E-mail: [charles.lassiter@gmail.com](mailto:charles.lassiter@gmail.com)

Charles Lassiter has asserted his right under the Copyright, Designs and Patents Act, 1988, to be identified as the author of this work in the format that was submitted to Intellect Ltd.

---

### NOTES

1. Obviously, speakers may lie, mislead, omit important details, allow hearers' wrong inferences to go uncorrected, and so on. What is meant by the claim that 'cooperation is the distinctive feature of communication' is that cooperation is the norm and failure to be cooperative is

atypical. This is not only apparent through our own experiences, but also has roots in human phylogeny. See Tomasello (1999), (2008), and (2009)

2. Grice's conversational maxims are: quantity (be as informative as the conversation requires and no more), quality (say only that which is true and for which you have adequate evidence), relation (be relevant), and manner (avoid obscurity and ambiguity, and be brief and orderly).
3. Jennifer Saul (2002b) comes closest to supporting the idea, though she does not explicitly endorse unintended conversational implicatures, by showing some sympathy for the idea, cf. Saul (2002b: n. 28). Saul uses the term 'unmeant conversational implicatures'.
4. See Saul (2010) for discussion of *who* must be able to calculate implicature.
5. This is seen through a wide diet of examples provided by Davis.
6. Saul (2010) does an excellent job explaining this issue, especially in light of criticisms from Davis.
7. This is not to say that concerns about calculability and determinacy are wholly unproblematic. It is to say, however,
8. Thanks to an anonymous reviewer for bringing this point to my attention.
9. The sorts of intentions involved in determining speaker meaning are *communicative intentions* which have a recursive structure. If I communicatively intend for you to believe that p, then my communicative intention is: in uttering 'p', I intend for you to believe that I believe that you believe that p. That is, I think that you believe that p on the basis of my uttering 'p', and you believe that p on the basis of my uttering 'p'. Furthermore, both of these beliefs are mutually known by each of us. Cf. Grice (1989: 86–116).
10. A racial slur is a derogatory or pejorative term used to describe a racial group. In American English, 'nigger', and 'darky' are slurs against African Americans. There are, similarly, sexist slurs, ethnic slurs, homophobic slurs, ageist slurs, etc.
11. Thanks to an anonymous reviewer who brought this point to my attention.
12. It's worthwhile noting that this objection can extend to the other examples as well.
13. For an overview of the DDE, see McIntyre (2009).
14. Cf. Grice (1989b)
15. If this move is adopted, however, it does highlight a tension in Grice's account between the requirement that a speaker believe that p on the one hand and the indeterminacy of implicature on the other. We can rightly wonder in such a case how Grice might resolve this apparent tension.
16. Specifically, a quantity implicature. Cf. Levinson (1983).
17. See Gumperz (1982: 59).
18. Gumperz (1982: 59). Translations of non-English utterances will appear in brackets next to the text.
19. Labov (1971) quoted in Hudson (1996: 57).
20. Gumperz (1982: 59). Directly after this Gumperz writes that the association between communicative style and group identity is symbolic and does not directly predict actual usage. The empirical issue has little bearing on the argument being made here. All that is needed is that on some occasions a we-code is used to convey familiarity and a they-code unfamiliarity.
21. For empirical work in this area, see Bokhorst-Heng and Caleon (2009), Konidaris (2004), Nwoye (1993), and Tay (1989).
22. This suggestion is made in Saul (2002b) and critically discussed in Davis (2007).
23. I have in mind here everyday uses of slurs, not, e.g., their use in a theatrical piece, their use in a paper on slurs, their discussion in a linguistic course, etc.
24. Thanks to Allan Hazlett and Jennifer Saul for discussions on many of the points discussed in this article.



Copyright of Empedocles: European Journal for the Philosophy of Communication is the property of Intellect Ltd. and its content may not be copied or emailed to multiple sites or posted to a listserv without the copyright holder's express written permission. However, users may print, download, or email articles for individual use.