

“I Didn't Mean It That Way”: Speaker Intention and Sentence Implicature

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There is a phenomenon where people in conversation use a sentence that accidentally implies something that they did not mean. H.P. Grice gave us a framework of *implicature* to capture messages that are communicated implicitly, i.e. messages that are not a part of what a speaker explicitly said but can nevertheless be a part of what the speaker intended to communicate. Current theories of implicature in philosophy account for cases when a speaker means to communicate the implicature,¹ when a speaker's audience believes that the speaker meant to communicate the implicature² or when the sentence always carries an implicature barring any special circumstances.³ However these theories do not account for when a speaker uses a sentence that implies a message that the speaker does not intend to convey, the audience does not believe the speaker intended to convey, and the sentence does not usually convey. In this essay, I show how each of the theories mentioned above fails to capture the cases I am interested in, then I provide a theory of implicature to account for cases when a sentence does not always carry an implicature but, because of particular features of a context, a use of a sentence carries a certain implicature regardless of the intention of the speaker.

This theory can help to shed light on phenomena such as microaggressions. There are times when a seemingly innocuous comment by a speaker, such as “You're so eloquent”, can register as a microaggression by the audience; this can happen whether or not the audience believes that the speaker intended to imply an offensive or degrading message. There is often a disconnect between members of marginalized groups who experience such microaggressions and the members of privileged groups who may perpetrate these microaggressions. A speaker may wonder how she can implicitly communicate a message without intending to, especially a message that is antithetical to her avowed beliefs. With this paper I hope to help to show how harmful messages can be implicitly conveyed by speakers who have no malicious intent. This result is interesting for philosophy of language as well as questions about responsibility and blameworthiness with regards to these implicit messages.

¹ Grice, “Logic and Conversation” (1957).

² Saul, “Speaker Meaning, What is Said, and What is Implicated” (2002).

³ Grice *Ibid.*, Davis, *Implicature: Intention, Convention and Principle in the Failure of Gricean Theory* (1998).