Diagnosing conversational implicatures
Chris Potts, Ling 130a/230a: Introduction to semantics and pragmatics, Winter 2016
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1 Background

It is common, in investigations of linguistic meaning, to need to determine whether a given meaning is a semantic entailment of some kind or has the more tentative status of a conversational implicature. Section 3 of the ‘Conversational implicature’ handout discusses a number of important properties of conversational implicatures. The following are especially useful for identifying conversational implicatures in the wild:

- **Cancellation**: encoding semantically the *negation* of the target meaning. If the result seems consistent, then the target meaning is likely an implicature.
- **Suspension**: encoding semantically a *lack of knowledge* about the truth of the target meaning. If the result seems consistent, then the target meaning is likely an implicature.
- **Re-enforcement**: encoding semantically the target meaning itself. If the result seems non-redundant, then the target meaning is likely an implicature.

For re-enforcement, it is vital that one states *exactly* the target meaning. If one states something that *entails* the target meaning — something more informative than the target meaning — then the result will not seem redundant even for semantic entailments, because of the additional information.

2 Examples

(1) **Example**: Some of the puppies escaped.
   a. **Target meaning**: not all of the puppies escaped
   b. **Cancellation**: Some — in fact all! — of the puppies escaped.
   c. **Suspension**: Some, maybe even all, of the puppies escaped.
   d. **Re-enforcement**: Some, but not all, of the puppies escaped.

(2) **Example**: The play was good.
   a. **Target meaning**: the play was not excellent
   b. **Cancellation**: The play was good — in fact, it was excellent.
   c. **Suspension**: The play was good, maybe even excellent.
   d. **Re-enforcement**: The play was good, but not excellent.
Example: Everyone except Dr. Samuels has an alibi.

a. **Target meaning**: Dr. Samuels does not have an alibi
b. **Cancellation**: ?? Everyone except Dr. Samuels has an alibi — and we can confirm that he does too.

c. **Suspension**: Everyone except Dr. Samuels has an alibi — let’s find out whether he does too.

d. **Re-enforcement**: Everyone except Dr. Samuels has an alibi — Samuels does not!

2.1 Target meanings that seem to be conversational implicatures

Example: The food was palatable.

a. **Target meaning**: the food was not delicious

b. **Cancellation**: The food was palatable, in fact delicious!

c. **Suspension**: The food was palatable -- maybe even delicious.

d. **Re-enforcement**: The food was palatable, but not delicious.

Example: Carol tried to win the race.

a. **Target meaning**: Carol did not win the race

b. **Cancellation**: Carol tried to win the race, and succeeded!

c. **Suspension**: Carol tried to win the race, but she might not have won.

d. **Re-enforcement**: Carol tried to win the race, but she did not win.
2.2 Target meanings that seem not to be conversational implicatures

(6) Example: Carol failed to win the race.
   a. Target meaning: Carol did not win the race
   
   b. Cancellation: # ... and she did win.
   
   c. Suspension: # ... and she might not have won.
   
   d. Re-enforcement: # ... and she did not win.

   NOT RE-ENFORCEMENT: Carol failed to win the race, and felt sad about it.

(7) Example: Carol managed to win the race
   a. Target meaning: Carol won the race
   
   b. Cancellation: # ... but she didn’t win.
   
   c. Suspension: # ... but/and she might have won.
   
   d. Re-enforcement: # ... and she did win.
2.3 Unclear cases

(8) Example: Sam refuted the hypothesis that Jesse stole the cookies.

a. Target meaning: Jesse didn’t steal the cookies

b. Cancellation: ... but Jesse did in fact steal them.

c. Suspension: ... but we don’t know whether Jesse actually did steal them.

d. Re-enforcement: ... and Jesse is in fact innocent of the crime.

(9) Example: Carol wishes that she could juggle

a. Target meaning: Carol cannot juggle.

b. Cancellation: ... but she can in fact juggle

c. Suspension: ... and she might be unable to juggle

d. Re-enforcement: ... and she can’t.