1 Background

The ‘Conversational implicatures’ handout suggests, as an exercise, characterizing and deriving the conversational implicature that B generates in the following example (number (22) on the handout; originally from Hirschberg’s (1985) corpus of radio call-in shows):

(1) A: Do you belong to a gun club?
   B: My husband belonged to one awhile back.

I believe the primary implicature is that B does not currently belong to a gun club (the “No” enrichment). Distinguishing this from the proposition that B does belong to a gun club (the “Yes” enrichment) is trickier than I expected it to be.

2 Pragmatic ordering

The concept we need is that of a pragmatic partial order: an ordering of information, not by entailment, but rather by more context-dependent criteria. In the present case, A's question makes salient an order of roughly the form in (2), with most informative at the top:

(2) B belongs to a gun club
    ↖ ↘
  B’s husband belongs to a gun club  B’s child belongs to a gun club
    ↘ ↙
  B’s friend belongs to a gun club
    ...

3 Conversational implicature derivation

(3) Conversational implicature of (1): B does not belong to a gun club
   a. Assume B is cooperative in the Gricean sense.
   b. Assume a context in which people know about all their club memberships.
   c. Assume the context makes salient the partial order (2).
   d. By (a) (quantity), the speaker will go as high on the scale (2) as is required.
   e. The proposition that B belongs to a gun club (call it p) is higher on the scale than the content of B’s actual utterance.
   f. By (a) and (d), something must be preventing B from saying that p.
   g. Since p is relevant and easy to express (manner), quality must be preventing B from expressing p.
   h. By (b), quality is preventing B from expressing p because p is false.
Comments

• Suppose we add the contextual assumption that if one’s spouse belongs to a club, then one
  belongs to that club as well. Then the “Yes” enrichment follows as a contextual entailment.

• Suppose we relax (3b), so that B need not be sure of all her memberships. Then we reach
  only step (3g), that is, we infer only that B has gone as high on (2) as her evidence allows,
  leaving open whether higher propositions are true.

• Another implicature of (1) is that B’s husband does not currently belong to a gun club. This
  can be derived in a manner similar to (3), if we assume the following:

  i. B has complete knowledge of her husband’s club memberships.
  ii. The context supplies a scale that makes the proposition that B’s husband *is* in a gun
      club more informative than the proposition that he *was* in a gun club (see (6) below).

4 Other examples

Here are a few related examples from Hirschberg 1985:

(4) A: So, is she married?
B: She’s engaged

(5) A: Do you speak Portuguese?
B: My husband does.

(6) A: Are you on your honeymoon?
B: Well, I was.

References