

Individual Paper Session 14
Pragmatics
Wednesday, July 5
4:15-4:45pm

The place of ‘intention’ in the interpretation of implicature

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It is commonly assumed in linguistic pragmatics that the interpretation of implicature involves the addressee making inferences about the ‘intention(s)’ of the speaker. In Gricean and neo-Gricean implicature theory (Grice 1975, 1989; Levinson 1983, 2000), relevance theory (Carston 2002; Sperber and Wilson 1995), and indirect speech act theory (Searle 1969, 1975), for example, the speaker’s ‘intention’ plays a crucial role in ascertaining ‘speaker meaning’, and thus what is communicated by the speaker. However, closer examination of the way in which ‘intention’ is conceptualized in linguistic pragmatics, and the implicit notion of communication underlying this conceptualization, reveals a number of problems with this assumption.

The paper begins by first drawing attention to the ambiguity that surrounds the epistemological and ontological status of the ‘intentions’ underlying communication (Heritage 1990/91), and thus the interpretation of implicatures. Other challenges for an intention-based approach to implicature are also considered, including the way in which meaning ‘emerges’ from interaction as opposed to being ‘communicated’ in the traditional sense (Arundale 1999, Haugh forthcoming), the importance of default inferences (Jaszczolt 1999; Levinson 2000), and the greater role the speaker’s and listener’s own, egocentric knowledge plays in communication (Barr and Keysar 2005), and thus in the interpretation of implicature.

The implications of this somewhat theoretical discussion for the acquisition of implicature by learners of second languages are then considered. Consistent with the above argument, it is suggested that learners acquire implicatures primarily through the implicit connections that form between utterances, contexts, and implied salient meanings (Kesckes 2002, 2005), rather than from *post facto* reflections about speaker intentions.