

# Journal of Linguistics

<http://journals.cambridge.org/LIN>

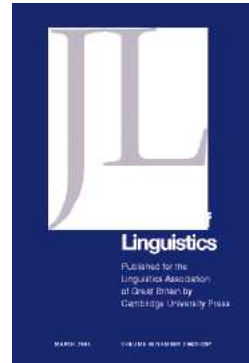
Additional services for *Journal of Linguistics*:

Email alerts: [Click here](#)

Subscriptions: [Click here](#)

Commercial reprints: [Click here](#)

Terms of use : [Click here](#)



---

## Stephen C. Levinson, Presumptive meanings: the theory of generalized conversational implicature. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2000. Pp. xxiii+480.

ROBYN CARSTON

Journal of Linguistics / Volume 40 / Issue 01 / March 2004, pp 181 - 186

DOI: 10.1017/S0022226703272364, Published online: 02 March 2004

**Link to this article:** [http://journals.cambridge.org/abstract\\_S0022226703272364](http://journals.cambridge.org/abstract_S0022226703272364)

### How to cite this article:

ROBYN CARSTON (2004). Review of Rens Bod, Jennifer Hay, and Stefanie Jannedy 'Probabilistic linguistics' Journal of Linguistics, 40, pp 181-186  
doi:10.1017/S0022226703272364

**Request Permissions :** [Click here](#)

- McCarthy, J. (1999). Sympathy and phonological opacity. *Phonology* 16. 331–399.
- Prince, A. & Smolensky, P. (1993). *Optimality theory*. Ms., Brandeis University & University of Colorado at Boulder.
- Pullum, G. K. (1976). The Duke of York gambit. *Journal of Linguistics* 12. 83–102.
- Selkirk, E. (1990). A two-root theory of length. *University of Massachusetts Occasional Papers* 14. 123–171.
- Author's address: Institut für Linguistik, Universität Leipzig, Beethovenstr. 15, 04107 Leipzig, Germany.*  
*E-mail: hall@rz.uni-leipzig.de*

(Received 2 June 2003)

*J. Linguistics* 40 (2004). DOI: 10.1017/S0022226703272364  
 © 2004 Cambridge University Press

**Stephen C. Levinson**, *Presumptive meanings: the theory of generalized conversational implicature*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2000. Pp. xxiii + 480.

Reviewed by ROBYN CARSTON, University College London

The basic thesis of this book is that there is a level of utterance-type meaning, which is distinct from, and intermediate between, sentence-type meaning and utterance-token meaning. That is, it is more than encoded linguistic meaning but generally less than the full interpretation of an utterance. Here are some examples, where (a) is a sentence and (b) is its utterance-type meaning:

- (1) (a) Some of the children passed the test.  
 (b) Some **but not all** of the children passed the test.
- (2) (a) Mary looked at John and he smiled.  
 (b) Mary looked at John and **then** he = **John** smiled.
- (3) (a) Nick was instrumental in lighting the fire.  
 (b) There was **something odd in the way** Nick lit the fire.
- (4) (a) Can you pass the salt?  
 (b) **I request** that you pass the salt.

The highlighted elements in each of the (b) representations are not derived by linguistic decoding but are pragmatically inferred.

In the Gricean pragmatics tradition, pragmatically inferred meaning is usually closely associated with context-dependence and with maxims or principles which are geared to the recovery of the speaker's intended meaning. However, while Levinson agrees that this is the right way to view the processes of full interpretation of an utterance token, he takes a quite different stance on the pragmatics of utterance-type meaning, which is a matter of preferred or default (or 'presumptive') interpretations, 'which are carried by the structure of utterances, given the structure of the language, and not by virtue of the particular contexts of utterances' (1). And while these default

interpretations are licensed by certain pragmatic principles or heuristics, they are ‘based *not* on direct computations about speaker-intention but rather on general expectations about how language is normally used’ (22). That is, they are generated automatically by default usage rules associated with certain linguistic expressions and structures. So, for instance, the quantitative term *some* in (1a) carries a default rule licensing the inference to ‘not all’ and the conjunction *and* in (2a) carries a default rule to the effect that the event described in the first conjunct preceded that described in the second conjunct. Since these are default inferences, hence defeasible, their results can be overridden, and this is where context does play a role: if the default output is inconsistent with the context, it is dropped. In the case of (1a), for instance, if there is a contextual assumption to the effect that all of the children passed the test then this will defeat the default inference given in (1b).

Levinson mentions a number of pragmatic phenomena, including illocutionary force (as in (4) above), conversational routines and presuppositions, which contribute to the level of utterance-type meaning, but the focus of the book is on a class of conversational implicatures, exemplified in (1b)–(3b) above. He makes a sharp distinction between these generalized conversational implicatures (GCIs) and conversational implicatures of a particularized sort (PCIs):

- (5) A: Did the children’s summer camp go well?  
 B: Some of them got stomach ’flu.  
 GCI: Not all of the children got stomach ’flu.  
 PCI: The summer camp didn’t go as well as hoped.

While the PCI of B’s utterance depends on the context provided by A’s question and would not arise in a different context (e.g. a context in which the issue is whether all the children were able to sit their exams), the GCI would arise quite generally across contexts. These two domains of pragmatic inference work in totally distinct ways: PCIs depend on some (unspecified) maxim of relevance which is responsive to particular contextual assumptions, while GCIs are underpinned by three informativeness principles (based roughly on Grice’s quantity and manner maxims), each of which licenses the hearer to employ a corresponding heuristic:

- (6) Q-HEURISTIC: What isn’t said to be the case is not the case.  
 I-HEURISTIC: What is said in a simple (unmarked) way represents a stereotypical situation.  
 M-HEURISTIC: What is said in an abnormal (marked) way represents an abnormal situation.

The Q-heuristic has to be relativized to a relevant scale of lexical alternates, e.g. *<all, some>* for (1) and (5) above. The I-heuristic and the M-heuristic are responsible for the implicatures in (2b) and (3b), respectively. As Levinson

acknowledges, this system is similar to that of Horn (1984), with the effects of the I- and M-principles reflecting his 'division of pragmatic labour': two coextensive expressions differing in formal markedness tend to become associated with complementary subsets of the original extension (e.g. *kill* and *cause to die*).

These, then, are the core ideas explored in the book, which is organized into a short introduction, four long chapters and a short epilogue. The first big chapter sets out to make the case that GCIs comprise a distinct domain within pragmatics. It traces the Gricean background within which the distinction between generalized and particularized conversational implicature arose and argues that an approach like Relevance Theory (RT; Sperber & Wilson 1986/1995), which does not give the distinction any theoretical weight and employs the same communicative principle and comprehension procedure in the derivation of all conversational implicatures, cannot do justice to the nature of these generalized inferences. The case for GCIs is given empirical support by the observation, again from Horn, that languages do not lexicalize the meanings 'not all', 'not always', 'not both' (as opposed to 'none', 'never', 'nor'). The idea is that this is because each of these meanings is inferred by default from the words *some*, *sometimes* and *or*, respectively.

The second chapter explores the three species of GCI in considerable detail. Levinson provides a wealth of examples of each kind and candidly acknowledges that some of them raise problems for his account. For example, the scales at issue in the generation of scalar Q-implicatures may be context-dependent (e.g. a scale consisting of celebrities ordered in terms of their popularity) rather than a matter of semantic entailment (as in the cases of *all/some*, *and/or* and the number terms), so that this kind of Q-inference crosscuts the generalized/particularized distinction. A quite disparate range of phenomena fall in the class of I-based inferences, including conjunction buttressing, bridging inferences, some cases of pronominal reference resolution as in (2) above, lexical narrowings, and possessive interpretations. Several of these can have more than one outcome and so don't seem to be cases which have a default/preferred interpretation after all. The chapter ends with a discussion of the potential conflicts among the three principles and resolves the problem by imposing an order of priority on them: first Q-inferences, then M-inferences and finally I-inferences.

The third chapter is, to my mind at least, the most interesting, as it is here that Levinson confronts the role of pragmatic inference in determining the truth-conditional content of an utterance. That pragmatics plays this role is widely acknowledged nowadays by pragmatists across various frameworks, but it tends still to be resisted by advocates of a truth-conditional semantics for natural language, as it causes obvious problems for a compositionality principle conceived in truth-conditional terms and calls into

question the traditional semantics/pragmatics distinction. Although he doubts that it will ultimately work, Levinson would like to ‘limit the damage’ with the hypothesis that it is just his chosen domain of pragmatic inferences, GCIs, that can affect truth conditions. They can do this in a range of ways, including playing a role in processes of disambiguation and reference resolution, but most significantly, there are certain situations in which their own content is actually composed into the truth conditions of the utterance. This occurs in the class of what he calls ‘intrusive’ constructions (which include negations, conditionals, disjunctions and comparatives). He calls them intrusive because they have the property that ‘the truth conditions of the whole expression depend on the implicatures of some of its constituent parts’ (213–214):

- (7) (a) If both teams got three goals the game was a draw.  
 (b) If both teams got **exactly** three goals the game was a draw.  
 (8) (a) It’s better to drive home and drink a bottle of wine than to drink a bottle of wine and drive home.  
 (b) It’s better to drive home and **then** drink a bottle of wine than to drink a bottle of wine and **then** drive home.

For (7a), the GCI of the embedded sentence *both teams got three goals*, namely ‘at most three goals’, is composed with the encoded semantics ‘at least three goals’ to give the truth conditions in (7b); similarly, mutatis mutandis, for (8).

Thus, what is a non-truth-conditional element (an implicature) of the simple sentence becomes part of the truth conditions of the more complex sentence in which the simple one is embedded. This seems barely coherent and leads to the prediction that the intuitively valid argument in (9) is invalid, since the truth conditions of premise 2 don’t match those of the antecedent of the conditional in premise 1:

- (9) Premise 1: If both teams got three goals then the game was a draw.  
 Premise 2: Both teams got three goals.  
 Conclusion: The game was a draw.

Relevance theorists, on the other hand, predict the intuitive validity of (9), since they take the view that utterances of the complex sentences in (7a) and (8a) AND utterances of the simple sentences on their own are equally likely to be pragmatically enriched; this is not a matter of implicature in either case but of pragmatic development of the schematic encoded logical form of the utterance (see Carston 2004). For a recent bid to save the traditional semantic picture by limiting the truth-conditional effects of pragmatics to the saturation of linguistically given variables, see King & Stanley (2004).

The fourth chapter argues for the very interesting hypothesis that the three Binding Conditions of generative grammar can be reduced to a single grammatical condition, with the effects of the other two being secured by default pragmatic inferences of the Q and M variety.

There is no space here for detailed assessment of Levinson's important project, which challenges much received thinking. (For a recent thoughtful critique, see Bezuidenhout 2002.) However, as a relevance theorist, I am bound to issue the following caveat: readers not well-acquainted with relevance theory will get a rather skewed view of it from this book. Levinson repeatedly claims that, since RT is a theory of context-sensitive inference, it is inherently incapable of accounting for generalized inferences such as those above – he gives NO argument to substantiate this serious allegation. He makes other claims about RT: '[A]ccording to [Sperber & Wilson] all inference involved in implicature derivation is deductive, hence the inferences must be monotonic' (56); 'Relevance theorists propose that there is a special kind of implicature, an explicature, that embellishes logical forms in limited ways' (238); 'Wilson and Sperber ... have argued that pragmatics amounts to nothing more than central reasoning processes applied to linguistic stimuli' (371). The first claim here is false, the second a distortion, and the third, which did appear in an early RT paper, has long since been superseded (see any RT publication since 1994, in particular Sperber & Wilson 1995, Carston 2002, Wilson & Sperber 2003).

The issue of whether or not default inferences of the sort that Levinson proposes are, in fact, carried out in the on-line process of utterance interpretation is currently one of the main foci of work in the newly-developing field of experimental pragmatics (see, in particular, Bott & Noveck 2003, Katsos et al. 2003). Bott & Noveck asked adult subjects to respond with 'true' or 'false' to utterances of underinformative sentences such as 'Some robins are birds' or 'Some elephants are mammals'. Subjects who respond on the basis of linguistic meaning alone will say 'true' while those who have performed the pragmatic scalar inference, giving 'some but not all robins are birds', etc. will say 'false'. Responses were given under one of two conditions: (a) with a short time lag (900 milliseconds) between presentation of the sentence and subjects' response, and (b) with a longer time lag (3 seconds). The point of this was to control for the amount of processing effort subjects could expend before giving their response. The default inference account predicts that the inference is drawn automatically and only subsequently cancelled when checked against context (general knowledge that all robins are birds, etc.), so that one would expect fewer 'true' responses in the short time condition than in the longer time condition. The reverse is predicted by RT, which does not assume any automatic default pragmatic inferences: the pragmatically enriched interpretation (prompting the response of 'false') should take longer than

the encoded logical response. The results were statistically significant: 72% of the subjects responded 'true' in the short time-lag condition, while only 56% responded 'true' in the longer time-lag condition. This is at odds with the view that the pragmatic interpretation arises from an automatic default inference which is only subsequently cancelled. The authors conclude that there is no evidence that *some* has a default interpretation of 'some but not all'. Needless to say, much more empirical testing of the predictions of different pragmatic theories is needed before final judgement is made, but the GCI theorist cannot take heart from the results so far.

Finally, although much of the material in this book has been around in some form or other for well over a decade, it is very useful to have it all collected together in one volume. There are many interesting and provocative lateral thoughts to be found in the notes to the chapters, and the short epilogue sets out issues which will be debated in pragmatics for many years to come.

## REFERENCES

- Bezuidenhout, A. (2002). Generalized conversational implicatures and default pragmatic inferences. In Campbell, J., O'Rourke, M. & Shier, D. (eds.), *Meaning and truth: investigations in philosophical semantics*. New York: Seven Bridges Press. 257–283.
- Bott, L. & Noveck, I. (2003). Some utterances are underinformative: the onset and time course of scalar inferences. Ms., Institute of Cognitive Science, Lyon.
- Carston, R. (2002). *Thoughts and utterances: the pragmatics of explicit communication*. Oxford: Blackwell.
- Carston, R. (2004). Truth-conditional content and conversational implicature. In Bianchi, C. (ed.), *The semantics/pragmatics distinction*. Stanford, CA: CSLI Publications.
- Horn, L. (1984). Toward a new taxonomy for pragmatic inference: Q- and R-based implicature. In Schiffrin, D. (ed.), *Meaning, form, and use in context*. Washington, DC: Georgetown University Press. 11–42.
- Katsos, N., Breheny, R., Williams, J. & Lee, M. W. (2003). Are generalised conversational implicatures generated on-line by default? Ms., Research Centre for English and Applied Linguistics, University of Cambridge.
- King, J. & Stanley, J. (2004). Semantics, pragmatics, and the role of semantic content. In Szabo, Z. (ed.), *Semantics vs. pragmatics*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Sperber, D. & Wilson, D. (1986/1995). *Relevance: communication and cognition*. Oxford: Blackwell. [Second edition with new postface 1995.]
- Wilson, D. & Sperber, D. (2003). Relevance theory. In Horn, L. & Ward, G. (eds.), *Handbook of pragmatics*. Oxford: Blackwell. 607–632.
- Author's address: Department of Phonetics and Linguistics, University College London,  
Gower Street, London WC1E 6BT, U.K.  
E-mail: robyn@ling.ucl.ac.uk*

(Received 12 June 2003)