

Incomplete Utterance and Relevance

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English

Abstract

In this paper, we will be concerned with the hearer's interpretation of the elements which the speaker left unsaid in the case of an incomplete utterance and will consider how the hearer develops such an unfinished sentence into a relevant enough proposition for its interpretation. We will argue that even when the speaker breaks off in the middle of a sentence, the hearer will complete what the speaker intended to communicate and interpret it as explicit content of the utterance based on the principle of relevance.

1. Introduction

Since Grice (1975) with his distinction between *what is said* and *what is implicated*, a considerable number of studies have been conducted over the past few decades on the distinction between *explicitly* and *implicitly* communicated meanings of an utterance. Although it is generally agreed that there is such a distinction, there seems to be little agreement among Gricean linguists, philosophers, speech-act theorists and relevance theorists as to the nature of each aspect and how this distinction should be drawn. Some analysts may argue that explicit communication is just a matter of decoding, so no pragmatic inference is involved. Others may argue that explicit communication involves both decoding and inference, and inference may (or may not) play a major role in the recovery of the explicit content of an utterance.

This paper will be concerned with grammatically incomplete sentences which are often observed in colloquial language, based on the relevance-theoretic approach to explicature. We will analyze how the hearer supplies the missing words in order to arrive at the intended interpretation, and whether the nature of such recovery is *explicit* or *implicit*.

2. Explicit / Implicit Distinction

In the following sections, we will compare Grice's *what is said* and *what is implicated* with Sperber and Wilson's relevance-based *explicature* and *implicature*, and show that the latter's explanation is more plausible.

2.1. Grice and *What Is Said / What Is Implicated* Distinction

According to Grice (1975, 1989), *what is said* is identified by *decoding process* which yields the conventional meaning of the sentence uttered and *pragmatic inference* which includes disambiguation of any ambiguous expressions and reference assignment to any referring expressions. So explicit communication involves both decoding and inference, though what is explicitly communicated is the minimal proposition obtained by inferentially disambiguating and assigning reference to decoded sentence meaning. On the other hand, the identification of *what is implicated* depends on *Co-operative Principle* and *Maxims*¹. Consider the following example :

- (1) a. Hanako : I'd like to go to Shikishima Park.
 b. Taro : The park is some distance from where I live.

For Grice, *what is said* in (1b) would be obtained by linguistic meaning plus reference assignment to *the park* and *I* such as (2) below :

- (2) Shikishima Park is some distance from where Taro Yamada lives.

This result of (2), which is obtained from his explanation, however, does not accord with our intuitions about what the speaker was asserting. It may be true that there is a distance between Yamada's house and Shikishima Park, but what the speaker really intended to communicate, and what the hearer understands is more than that. What the speaker asserted would be something like (2'a, b) which Grice considered not as the explicit content of (1b) but as its implicature.

- (2') a. Shikishima Park is further away from where Taro Yamada lives than Hanako Tanaka thinks.
 b. Shikishima Park is not walkable distance from Taro Yamada's house.

Then what is the explicit content of an utterance within the relevance-theoretic framework? We will see it in detail in the next section.

2.2. Relevance Theory and *Explicature* / *Implicature* Distinction

2.2.1. *Explicature* and *Implicature*

For Sperber and Wilson and other relevance theorists, explicit communication involves both decoding and inference, but they argue that the explicit content of an utterance is much richer and more inferential than Grice thought, and define *explicitness* as below:

Explicitness :

An assumption communicated by an utterance *U* is *explicit* if and only if it is a development of a logical form encoded by *U*. (Sperber and Wilson 1986/1995²: 182)

Development in the definition above includes three inferential subtasks² such as *reference assignment*, *disambiguation* and *enrichment*, all of which contribute to the explicit aspect of communication, so that “any assumption communicated, but not explicitly so, is implicitly communicated: it is an *implicature*” (Sperber and Wilson 1986/1995²: 182). Consider the following example:

- (3) a. Mary: How is John feeling after his first year at university?
b. Peter: He didn't get enough units and can't continue.

In order to arrive at the speaker's intended interpretation of (3b), not only assigning reference to *John* and disambiguating the word *units*, the hearer has to *enrich* some constituents as arguments of *continue*. Within the relevance-theoretic framework, this pragmatic context-dependent process of *enrichment*, as well as reference assignment and disambiguation, are relevance-based and are necessary tasks to retrieve the explicature. Therefore, the resulting explicature of (3b) in a given context would be as follows:

- (4) John Smith did not pass enough university course units to qualify for admission to second year study and, as a result, John Smith cannot continue with university study.

So (2'a, b) above, which are derived from (1b), are not the implicature of (1b) but its explicature, since they are the results of the development (or enrichment) of its linguistic meaning.

Including this process of enrichment in the explicit side of communication is the one of the differences between a relevance-theoretic approach and a Gricean one. Note also that these three inferential tasks to recover the explicature are all relevance-oriented. The hearer develops the linguistic meaning, following a path of the least effort, and when the hearer finds the interpretation which yields enough cognitive effects to satisfy the hearer's expectation of relevance, then he/she stops developing it³.

2.2.2. Degree of Explicitness

As we have seen, the hearer's task to obtain explicature of an utterance is to develop the linguistic meaning recovered from an utterance into the fully propositional form which is worthwhile processing. The degree of explicitness of linguistically decoded elements however may be more or less explicit. And since explicature is derived from a combination of linguistically decoded meaning and pragmatically inferred meaning, sometimes linguistically decoded meaning may contribute much to the determination of the explicature, and sometimes may play a very small role. This *degree of explicitness* is defined as follows:

Degree of Explicitness :

The greater the element of decoding involved in the recovery of an explicature, the greater the degree of explicitness. (Wilson 2002 : 6)

So some linguistic expressions such as (5a-d) are used in order to communicate one and the same explicature in different situations. Consider following examples in (5) :

- (5) a. Mary Jones put the book by Chomsky on the table in the downstairs sitting room.
 b. Mary put the book on the table.
 c. She put it there.
 d. On the table. (Carston 2000 : 13)

Each of them may communicate the same explicature, though (5a) is highly explicit while (5c) is much less so and (5d) is even less. In these latter two, the determination of the explicature relies heavily on the hearer's inference, since not only reference assignment, but also much enrichment to the linguistic meaning are needed. In the recent relevance-based analyses, a highly explicit utterance such as (5a) is called *strong explicature* ; on the other hand, less explicit ones such as

(5c, d) are *weak explicature*.

Regardless of the degree of the explicitness, the speaker's task is to linguistically encode what is necessary for the hearer in order to arrive as effortlessly as possible at the intended meaning. Thus the degree of explicitness varies depending on the hearer's context to access and his capacity, so in some circumstances a highly explicit utterance like (5a) is relevant for the hearer, and depending on the cases less explicit ones such as (5c) and (5d) are also so. The hearer's task is to retrieve the explicature by developing what is linguistically encoded by the speaker into the interpretation which is consistent with the principle of relevance.

3. Incomplete Utterance and Weak Explicature

3.1. Incomplete Utterance⁴

As shown in (5a-d), within the relevance-theoretic framework, the main concern of the explicitness is grammatical phrases and sentences and how they are developed into fully relevant proposition. Then, how about the case of an incomplete sentence which breaks off in the middle and so is considered ungrammatical? Such unfinished utterances are pervasive in spoken language and we are good at completing them and understanding what they intended to communicate. Consider the following examples:

(6) "If we bring flowers—" Marian began and then fell silent. She had almost said that if Campfire Girls brought flowers to the Old Ladies' Home, the visit would count one extra point, and if they took a Bible with them on the bus and read it to the old ladies, it counted double. (E. Welty, "A Visit of Charity")

(7) "I knew you when you were the most innocent, charming child; it seems incredible that you of all people...."

He stopped, but she knew what he had in mind; it seemed incredible that she of all people should have become the mistress of causal vagabond.

(S. Maugham, *Up at the Villa*)

In (6), Marian brings flowers to the Old Ladies' Home as a volunteer, and in (7), Mary confides in Edger about the scandal with which she was involved. In both examples the speaker breaks off the utterance, but, for example in (7), the hearer understands pieces of discourse which the speaker left unsaid.

In the following two examples, the speaker also abandons her utterance in the middle course

of a conversation with discourse connectives such as *but* and *so*. Example (8) is from an interview with Demi Moore, a famous actress, about her experience at boot camp in order to study how to play the role of a Navy SEAL in the movie *G.I. Jane*. And (9) is from an interview about Japanese baseball players' popularity in the Major Leagues.

- (8) I had had an opportunity to go and experience hell week with trainees, starting at the first hour, seeing 'em at 12 hours, seeing 'em at 4 1/2 days of no sleep and constant physical and, y...you know, mental...I don't want to say "torture," *but*...

(CNN Showbiz Today)

- (9) **JANE**: Shigetoshi Hasegawa in Anaheim, and, now with, uh, Kazuhiro Sasaki and Ichiro that, uh, will, will start catching on across the country, *so*...

(*English Journal*, September 2000)

Grammatically speaking, discourse connectives such as *but* and *so* do not appear at the sentence final position in isolation⁵, so there must be some elements which are unsaid following these connectives.

According to the relevance-theoretic analysis, discourse connectives such as *but* and *so* convey *procedural information*⁶ as below, and using such clues, the hearer would infer what the speaker intended to communicate.

Procedural Information Encoded by BUT :

Process the following utterance as contradicting an expectation raised by the first part of the utterance.

Procedural Information Encoded by SO :

Process the following utterance as a contextual implication (or conclusion).

These examples (6-9) which we have seen so far are strictly speaking ungrammatical, and hence unanalyzable by grammatical rules, but we normally arrive at the intended interpretation without having any difficulty from the context. And this fact strongly supports the claim that communication includes not only decoding process but also inferential process. Then, how does the hearer supply the missing words in order to understand what the speaker intended to say, and what is the nature of such recovery, *explicit* or *implicit*? These questions are taken up in the next section.

3.2. Weak Explicature or Implicature ?

We will now look more carefully into the nature of the hearer's completion of the unfinished utterance. What the hearers recover from incomplete utterances in (6-9) (slightly changed and repeated below) are roughly (6'-9') respectively :

- (6) If we bring flowers—
- (6') If Campfire Girls brought flowers to the Old Ladies' Home, the visit would count one extra point, and if they took a Bible with them on the bus and read it to the old ladies, it counted double.
- (7) It seems incredible that you of all people....
- (7') It seemed incredible that she of all people should have become the mistress of causal vagabond.
- (8) I don't want to say "torture," but....
- (8') I don't want to say "torture," but the training is almost torture.
- (9) Hasegawa, Sasaki and Ichiro will start catching on across the country, so....
- (9') Hasegawa, Sasaki and Ichiro will start catching on across the country, so Japanese baseball players will become even more popular in the U.S.

In (6'), for example, assigning reference to *we* as *Campfire Girls*, and enriching to *the Old Ladies' Home* will affect the determination of the explicature. Then how about the rest of (6') that is, *the visit would count one extra point, and if they took a Bible with them on the bus and read it to the old ladies, it counted double*? Is this development considered as an explicit content of (6) or as implicit one?

These completions need much enrichment to the linguistic meaning than (5) which is considered as a typical example of enrichment in the relevance-theoretic analysis. In (7'), the whole predicate of the *that*-clause would have to be enriched. Moreover in (9'), as we have seen above, the utterance which follows discourse connective *so* is contextual implication (or conclusion), so it might seem that this recovery is not concerned with the explicit communication.

However, it cannot reasonably be assumed that these developments (6-9) into (6'-9') are involved in implicit communication. There are good reasons for thinking that such development does not fall in the category of implicit, but on the explicit side of communication or explicature of the incomplete utterance.

First, since these unfinished sentences in (6-9) are incomplete, they do not express the full

proposition. In order to understand what the speaker is saying, the hearer will have to develop them into relevant enough propositional form which is worth processing for himself. This enrichment is relevance-oriented and is concerned with the proposition expressed, that is explicature of the utterance⁷.

In the light of this viewpoint, the incomplete utterances in (6-9) can be regarded as communicating very weak explicature, as well as (5c, d), and the hearer would enrich these unfinished sentences into relevant enough propositions. And if the hearer finds a relevant interpretation for himself, then he stops developing. So for example in (6), the hearer would not identify the whole sentence (6') as an explicature, but just stop developing on half way as "If Campfire Girls brought flowers to the Old Ladies' Home, the visit would count one extra point," if this is relevant enough for the hearer.

It is worthwhile noting that since the speaker leaves the utterance uncompleted and communicates very weak explicature which encodes few little linguistic clues, the inference by the hearer plays a major role. This fact leads to the case where the hearer cannot understand what the speaker intended to communicate by an incomplete sentence as in (10) below :

- (10) "Just about. Mares are a little more sensitive. Sometimes, if it's wrong, you have to—" he paused.
 "Have to what, Billy?"
 "Have to tear the colt apart to get it out, or the mare'll die."

(J. Steinbeck, "The Promise")

Note also that it is not true that the hearer always understands what is unsaid as explicit content of the unfinished sentence. In the next example (11), the participants are talking about who is going to start talking.

- (11) "Who is going to start?" said Joyce. "I think there is no doubt as to that," said Dr Pender, "when we have the great good fortune to have such a distinguished man as Sir Henry staying with us—" He left his sentence unfinished, making a courtly bow in the direction of Sir Henry. The latter was silent for a minute or two. At last he sighed and recrossed his legs and began. (A. Christie, *The Tuesday Night Club*)

Let us consider Dr Pender's utterance in the above example. As the author writes "He left his sentence unfinished," Dr Pender intended to communicate more than what he actually said, such

as “Sir Henry, would you start talking?” but left it implicit. In this case, however what is abandoned is not a part of explicature but should be treated as implicature of his utterance. First of all, let us see the nature of implicature in the relevance theory.

Sperber and Wilson argue that the main difference between explicature and implicature is that the former involves an element of decoding, whereas the latter is wholly inferred. Consider the following example :

(12) Student : Did I get invited to the conference?

Professor : Your paper is too long.

From the professor’s utterance, the student might derive the enriched form of (13a) as explicature. Then combined (13a) with contextual assumption such as (13b), the student arrives at the conclusion such as (13c) :

- (13) a. The article that the student has written is too long for the conference.
 b. If your paper is too long for the conference you will not be invited.
 c. The student did not get invited to the conference.

In the framework of the relevance theory, there are two types of implicature ; one is *implicated premise* such as (13b) and the other is *implicated conclusion* such as (13c).

Then consider the example (11) again. From Dr Pender’s utterance, the hearer might derive (14a) as an explicature. This (14a), combined with the implicated premise such as (14b), derives the conclusion (14c) as implicature.

- (14) a. We have the great good fortune to have such a distinguished man as Sir Henry staying with us.
 b. If we have the great good fortune to have a distinguished man, he should start talking.
 c. Sir Henry should start talking.

So in this case at least, it is clear that what Dr Pender intended to communicate should be treated as implicature, and the hearers (including Sir Henry) will understand what is left implicit, hence as shown in the following discourse of (11), Sir Henry started talking.

With the argument so far in mind, we will consider the reason why the speaker breaks off

his utterance in the middle of the utterance. There seem some reasons; (a) the speaker thinks that the hearer will understand what the speaker intended to communicate even without saying the rest of all; (b) the speaker thinks that he should not say something in order to avoid embarrassment or unpleasant consequences; (c) someone (or something) interrupts the utterance; and lastly (d) in order to attract the hearer's interest⁸.

Examples (8, 9) would fit the situation (a) above. For example in (9), there is previous discourse as (15) below, so that the hearer recovers what is abandoned after *so* without difficulty. In order to avoid repeating what is manifest for the hearer, the speaker reduces the hearer's processing effort.

(15) **INTERVIEWER**: Do you think Japanese players are being welcomed in the major leagues in America?

JANE: I think definitely, and I think it's growing. I think on the west coast, I think it's very popular here. Shigetoshi Hasegawa in Anaheim, and, now with, uh, Kazuhiro Sasaki and Ichiro that, uh, will, will start catching on across the country, *so*....

Examples (6, 7) would be in accordance with the reason (b); though, in these cases, there seems to be no intention of the speaker to communicate what is abandoned. If so, this is an accidentally transmitted message, so it cannot be examined on the same lines as above. Though these examples can be considered as intended communication from the author to the readers:

We have not shown any example of which hold the reason (c), since in such a case, the speaker has no intention of breaking off his utterance. Consider (16) below:

(16) A: I don't think we're getting anywhere in this discussion, we've gone over the same arguments all morning. I think the best thing probably is that we should all—

B: Yes, all have a break for lunch. (Wales: 1989)

The speaker B interrupts and takes over A's utterance, and completes the rest of the dialogue. This kind of examples is called *blending* (or *anacoluthon*) in stylistics. Then what kind of examples would fit the situation (d)? We will consider some in the next section.

3.3. Incomplete Utterance, Suspense and Weak Explicature

The examples we have looked at so far communicate very weak explicature, and the hearer

develops them into relevant proposition from the precedence context based on the principle of relevance. Then how about examples of incomplete utterance which appear at the beginning of a story? Since it is the first line of the discourse, there is no context for the readers. How do the readers find the missing words and understand what the author intended? Additionally, it is argued that the ellipsis in the discourse initial position “heightens *dramatic effects*”⁹ (Ikeda : 1992), but then what is this *dramatic effect*? Consider the following example which appears at the top of an article about drug and sex :

(17) “Mum, when you were young, did you ever...?”

Here come the questions you dread : did you ever get high? Sleep with someone other than Dad? (Reader’s Digest, April 2001)

As apparent from the following context, the reader will complete the missing words when he reaches at the second line as below :

(17) a. Mum, when you were young, did you ever get high ?

b. Mum, when you were young, did you ever sleep with someone other than Dad ?

This discourse initial example of (17) would fit the reason (d) in the previous section, and also in this kind of example the unfinished sentence is considered as expressing only weak explicature. We will deal with this example using the notions of *suspense* and *retroactive effects*¹⁰ which are introduced by Uchida (1998) as follows :

Suspense :

The readers are left in a state of ‘suspense’ throughout the time in which they cannot identify or specify the ‘deviant’ relationships in the text.

Retroactive Effect :

The more the effort, the stronger the retroactive effect. (Uchida 1998 : 164)

When the reader encounters the unfinished sentence at the beginning of the discourse, the reader cannot identify what elements are missing in such sentence, since there is no context for him. So the reader is kept in an indefinite state of *suspense* until he finds the missing words and completes the utterance.

To put the reader in the state of suspense means to increase the processing effort. Given the

presumption of optimal relevance, there should be no gratuitous processing effort, so that there should be extra contextual effects which offset such extra processing effort. This extra contextual effect is gained retroactively and is what Ikeda calls *dramatic effects*. And when the reader finds the missing words, and is set free from the state of suspense, he will backtrack to the top of the discourse where he was initially placed in suspense and will reinterpret the text again in the light of newly obtained assumption. But in this example, it is doubtful whether the reader needs much effort to understand what is missing and is put in the state of suspense.

4. Conclusion

In this paper, we have examined incomplete utterances from the relevance-theoretic point of view. It is concluded that even when the speaker breaks off his utterance in the middle of the sentence, the hearer can find the missing words and complete the utterance, based on the principle of relevance. The speaker only expresses weak explicature; though the hearer develops it into a relevant enough proposition as a part of the explicit content of the utterance. Since such utterances give only very little linguistic information as a clue for the interpretation, hearer's inference plays a major role for the recovery of the explicature.

Notes

1. See Grice (1975, 1989).
2. Note that in recent discussion within the relevance-theoretic framework, this *development* to obtain explicature includes *disambiguation*, *saturation*, *free enrichment*, and *ad hoc concept construction*. For detail, see Carston (1988, 2000, 2001 and 2002).
3. Sperber and Wilson argue as follows:
At every stage in disambiguation, reference assignment and enrichment, the hearer should choose the solution involving the least effort, and should abandon this solution only if it fails to yield an interpretation consistent with the principle of relevance. (Sperber and Wilson 1986/1995²: 185)
The communicative principle of relevance is defined as follows:
Communicative Principle of Relevance:
Every utterance communicates a presumption of its own optimal relevance. (Sperber and Wilson 1995²: 260)
4. We will use the term *incomplete utterance*, but it is also called *anacoluthon* in stylistics. It "refers to syntactic break in the expected grammatical sequence within a sentence, as when a sentence begins with one construction and remains unfinished" (Crystal 1991: 17). Also it is called *blending*, *syntactic blends*, or *syntactic break*. See also Biber *et al.* (1999) and Quirk *et al.* (1985).
5. See Uchida (2000: 25).
6. For procedural information and discourse connectives, see Wilson and Sperber (1993) and Blakemore (1992).

According to Wilson and Sperber (1993), expressions in a language encode two kinds of information, *conceptual* and *procedural* information. Nouns and verbs encode concept; on the other hand discourse connectives encode procedural information which constrains the inferential phase of comprehension by guiding the hearer towards the intended interpretation and contextual effects, hence reducing the overall effort required.

7. The enrichment is not involved in the identification of the explicatures of the examples below :

(18) [I] Beg your pardon?

(19) [I'm] Divorced and drink too much. [It's a] Bad combination. [I'm] British here.

(H. E. Bates, "Mrs Eglantine")

(20) Flying back tomorrow.

(S. Maugham, *Up at the Villa*)

(21) March 20. Long talk with Cranly on the subject of my revolt.

(J. Joyce, *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*)

These identifications of the subject *I* and *it* in these examples such as in common expression (18), in colloquial style (19), in telegram (20), in diary (though this is not the case of real communication) (21), depends on the relevance-oriented task which is called *saturation* in the recent relevance-theoretic analysis.

8. Biber *et al.* (1999 : 1063-1064) argue that there are four main situations where the speaker starts to utter a grammatical unit and fails to finish it :
- Incompletion where the speaker abandons and 'repairs' by starting anew ;
 - Incompletion where the speaker is interrupted by another speaker, or (sometimes) by another event ;
 - Incompletion where the hearer rather than the speaker 'repairs' the utterance—by finishing it ;
 - Incompletion where none of the conditions above holds. (This is the case where a speaker simply abandons an utterance, with no interruption or attempt at repair. It could be that the speaker loses the thread of what he or she is saying, or decides to abandon a remark that no one is listening to, or breaks off by design to avoid embarrassment or some other unpleasant consequence.)
9. Ikeda (1992 : 355) calls the discourse initial ellipsis *stylistic ellipsis* and cites example which is the opening passage of the story such as below :
- (22) London. Michaelmas Term lately over, and the Lord Chancellor sitting in Lincoln's Inn Hall. Implacable November weather. (C. Dickens, *Bleak House*)
10. Using these concepts of suspense and retroactive effects, the same argument would apply to the cataphoric example of (23) below :
- (23) Since Brian won't [], I expect I'll have to do the dishes. (Wilson 2000 : 38)

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