

Implicature: Intention, Convention, and Principle in the Failure of Gricean Theory, by Wayne A. Davis. Cambridge, UK, and New York, NY: Cambridge University Press, 1998. Pp. viii + 206. H/b £ 30.00.

The phenomenon itself is familiar enough: speakers often mean things which they do not actually say, and nonetheless hearers have no trouble recovering information that is not itself given by the literal meanings of the words uttered. Terminological niceties aside, this is just common sense. It is commonly supposed that one of Paul Grice's contributions is his having provided a framework for *understanding* 'implicature'. ('Implicature' is Grice's term for what a speaker does not say but rather communicates, suggests, implies, etc., in virtue of saying what he does; it also refers to the *fact* of something's being so communicated.) In outline, Grice's proposal is this: Parties to a communicative exchange can be presumed to be engaged in a cooperative enterprise such that, *ceteris paribus*, their conversational contributions can be expected to be truthful, relevant, informative, and so on. (Speakers can be expected to observe the 'Cooperative Principle', CP, and the various maxims it subserves. 'Presumption' is Bach and Harnish's term: *Linguistic Communication and Speech Acts*, Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1979, pp. 62-5.) When taking an utterance at face value would have the speaker violating this presumption, the hearer uses this result, together with whatever other relevant information he has available to him, to figure out what (beyond whatever the sentence uttered literally expresses) that utterance was meant to convey on the occasion in question. In this way, the speaker exploits the cooperative presumption, that presumption is borne out, and the speaker's communicative intention is fulfilled. Not that those involved must be consciously aware of the exact mechanisms whereby this communicative feat is pulled off. (Hence its being possible for Grice's proposal to have something *revelatory* about it.) But that the Gricean story 'rings true' for many cannot be discounted; it constitutes evidence, however inconclusive, for the idea that Gricean theory does indeed describe the general character of linguistic communication – that communication is a kind of coordination game (see Kent Bach, "Conversational Implicature", *Mind & Language* Vol. 9, No. 2, 1994, p. 155) in which something like the CP -- or, better, the cooperative presumption --

plays an essential role.

Again, the foregoing is just a rough sketch of the Gricean view. And disputes can, and do, arise within the Gricean camp -- disputes about whether Grice's distinction between what is said and what is implicated is exhaustive, whether Grice's conception of 'what is said' isn't too restrictive, whether there really is such a thing as what Grice calls 'conventional' implicature, whether a speaker's communicative intentions are best construed as reflexive or as iterative, and whether adherence to the CP doesn't require, say, conformity merely to the maxims of quality and relation and thus simply that one's contribution be truthful and relevant. According to Wayne A. Davis, however, such in-house disputes are a waste of time, as they presuppose that Grice's theory is basically on the right track. Davis, by contrast, suggests that 'Gricean theory' is a "near-complete failure" (p. 1): it does nothing to advance our understanding of the generation and recovery of implicatures, and an adherence to the theoretically "barren" (p. 3) Gricean framework stands in the way of a genuine understanding of the data in question. Lest anti-Griceans such as Dan Sperber and Dierdre Wilson (see their *Relevance: Communication and Cognition*, Cambridge, MA: Blackwell, 1986) take heart in this result and regard Davis as their ally, Davis claims that the problems he identifies arise for any 'principle-based' theory of implicature, including Sperber and Wilson's own 'relevance theory'. (More on this below.)

Obviously, then, Davis' *Implicature* is an ambitious book: he seeks to discredit the widely-accepted Gricean approach to implicature and to institute a new way of understanding the phenomenon. In a review of this length it is not possible to do justice to many of the subtler aspects of Davis' discussion. So I shall confine myself here to giving a general sense of Davis' case against Grice, outlining the character of the theory he proposes to put in its place, and indicating how a Gricean is liable to respond to Davis' arguments.

Having (in Chapter 1) set out the basic Gricean apparatus and briefly indicated the theoretical importance of the *phenomenon* of implicature -- its existence is not something Davis denies --, Davis develops the following main lines of argument against 'Gricean theory'. First (Chapter 2), if it is really the CP and its sub-maxims and/or the cooperative presumption which is

responsible for the generation of implicatures, we should expect similar implicatures to be present when, in fact, they are not. Here, the non-universality of quantity, tautology, and conjunction implicatures (Sections 2.1-2.3) are notable. For instance, if it is the maxim of 'quantity' which underlies the fact that certain tautologies ("War is war" is one) can be informative, why doesn't an utterance of "Tomatoes are tomatoes", e.g., give rise to an implicature as well? Second (Section 2.5 and Chapter 4), in addition to such 'false positives', Gricean theory gives rise to many 'false negatives' -- cases in which an implicature exists even though, for example, the cooperative presumption is alleged to be entirely absent. Third (Chapter 3), simply in virtue of their generality, Grice's CP and the associated maxims won't suffice to enable "rigorous derivation" (p. 2) of specific implicatures. There are, for example, *all sorts* of ways in which a speaker may be observing the CP, consistent with his saying what he does. Thus, even supposing Gricean principles to be in effect, they radically under-determine (in both the constitutive and epistemic senses of that term) any supposed implicatures. The same goes for *any* general 'psycho-social' principles, including Sperber and Wilson's principle of relevance (Section 3.12.) Finally (Sections 4.4-4.6), Davis suggests that Griceans have taken the cooperative presumption to be responsible for the generation of implicatures only because they have tended to conflate speaker meaning and communication: as Davis sees it, implicature is "a species of speaker meaning and implication" (p. 126); and while conversational principles might play a role -- albeit an "inessential, indirect, and nonunique" one: p. 131 -- in the *recovery* of implicatures (and so in communication), surely what another does or does not presume about me doesn't affect which intentions I'm able to form!

But if, for these reasons, Davis rejects the Gricean framework for understanding implicature, what does he propose to put in its place? Here, Davis' distinction between speaker implicatures and sentence implicatures -- between what a speaker means but does not say, and what speakers using a sentence with its regular meaning would commonly use it to implicate (Section 1.1) -- comes to the fore. For Davis' really is a two-tiered theory. As to speaker implicature, it's Davis' view that Gricean theory under-estimates how far it is a matter of the

speaker's specific intentions, rather than of any general 'psycho-social' principles such as the CP. Accordingly, Davis proposes that since "speaker implication is a special case of speaker meaning" and (p. 121) "what a speaker means or implies is determined by what he intends" (p. 114), the question of how speaker implicatures are generated belongs squarely within the philosophy of mind, alongside other questions pertaining to the nature of propositional attitudes (p. 131). Similarly, the question of how speaker implicatures are identified by hearers is really just the question of how we recognize others' intentions, a question on which cognitive science may shed some light (*ibid.*).

Not that all implicatures are 'intentional' in this way, however. For Davis points out that there are definite regularities – albeit imperfect ones – in what certain sentences are used to implicate. Witness, e.g., the fact that utterances of sentences of the form "Some S are P" tend to implicate that not all S are P. What might explain this? Griceans, appealing to the maxim of quantity, might say that the implicature results from the expectation that if a speaker knew that all S were P, she'd have said that rather than the needlessly weak, "Some S are P". Davis, however, takes himself already to have shown that that cannot be right; for example, not every instance of this form of sentence carries the relevant implicature: again, there is a certain arbitrariness to what sentences standardly implicate which (Davis thinks) is fundamentally at odds with Gricean theory. Here Davis suggests that rather than trying to show how implicatures are somehow the product of some general principles governing communication as such, we must simply accept the conventionality of certain implicature phenomena: there are simply certain arbitrary social customs governing the relevant sphere of activity.

In Chapter 5 of his book Davis clarifies the notion of convention which his account requires, anticipates a number of objections to it, and identifies a number of candidate conventional ways of implicating things. In Chapter 6 he attempts to clarify the nature of implicature conventions. Along the way, Davis points out that while the existence of implicature in no way requires Gricean conversational principles, observing the former may contribute to one's being truthful, relevant, etc., thereby furthering our interest in not merely communicating,

but in doing so in a cooperative manner.

Davis' writing is almost always quite clear, and the book is densely packed with arguments and examples. *Implicature* is, to my knowledge, the only available book-length treatment of an important topic, and it brings together a number of questions and concerns about Gricean theory which are otherwise spread throughout the growing literature. For that reason alone, it is a good resource for anyone interested in the subject. In addition, *Implicature* ought to give pause to those who, in one way or another and against Grice's wishes, make "sloppy use of this philosophical tool" (Grice, "Presupposition and Conversational Implicature", *Radical Pragmatics*, P. Cole ed., New York: Academic Press, 1981, p. 187). I am less sure, however, that more responsible Griceans are going to find Davis' arguments compelling. Let me indicate why.

First, Davis' recasting of Grice's distinction between particularized and generalized implicatures as a distinction between 'speaker' and 'sentence' implicatures is dubious. For Grice, at least, it is always a speaker's *utterance* -- "the saying of what is said, or [the speaker's]... 'putting it that way'" (Grice, "Logic and Conversation", *Studies in the Way of Words*, Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1989, p. 39) -- which carries an implicature. (In Davis' words, "by definition, implicatures are generated by speech acts", p. 31.) So, as Stephen Neale observes, "[t]o call an implicature 'generalized' is just to acknowledge the fact that the presence of the implicature is relatively independent of the details of the particular conversational context" ("Paul Grice and the Philosophy of Language", *Linguistics and Philosophy* Vol. 15, 1992, p. 536). It is not to say that particularized and generalized implicatures -- in Davis' terminology, 'speaker' and 'sentence' implicatures -- are fundamentally different in kind, and therefore require different sorts of treatment.

Second, as Davis himself says, because intention implies expectation, there are limits to the intentions that a speaker might reasonably form (p. 186; cf. Neale, "Paul Grice and the Philosophy of Language", p. 552). When the intention is specifically communicative, the reasonable speaker will do well to take account of his audience's likely expectations. In this manner, what others presume about me -- for example, that I am undertaking a cooperative

attempt to communicate -- will, if I'm reasonable, affect the communicative intention(s) I form and what I utter in the effort to make that intention manifest. This casts doubt on the idea that Griceans are simply *conflating* meaning/intention and communication, rather than seeing the former as being shaped or constrained by speakers' interest in the latter; it also raises problems for the idea that 'speaker implicatures' are in no way dependent upon the cooperative presumption, say, for their generation (as does, of course, the observation that it is speakers' *utterances*, rather than their intentions themselves, which carry implicatures for Grice). At various points, Davis simply takes it as obvious, i.a.: that a speaker may implicate something even though he needn't be trying to make any sort of conversational contribution at all (e.g., p. 60), that what is implicated is wholly unconstrained by what is actually said, and that the speaker can be properly said to implicate something even though he has every reason to suppose that the audience will/would be unable to figure out whatever it is he 'has in mind' as he utters "S" (see the examples at pp. 60-1, 68, and 130-1). No doubt, there are all sorts of respects in which a speaker's psychology is unconstrained by factors such as those just mentioned. But it's hardly obvious that implicatures, properly so called, can or will be generated in the absence of such constraints.

Third, it seems to me that Davis much too quickly dismisses a widespread construal of Grice's views whereby the inferences involved in recovering implicatures are inductive – more precisely, *abductive* – rather than the "rigorous derivations" which Davis rightly regards as chimerical. (Only a page and a half or so is given to considering, and dismissing, this approach.) To say that there's no guarantee that abductive reasoning will generate a unique explanation for a speaker's uttering a certain sentence (p. 67), e.g., is simply to report a fact of life; it raises a special or insuperable problem for (abductivist) Griceans only if it is obvious (which it isn't) that in the relevant cases a completely determinant implicature is present. Similarly, Davis' claim that "the probability that S believes p given that S is observing the Cooperative Principle is influenced by a host of factors that are not determinants of implicature" (p. 68) seems to beg the question and/or to rely upon an overly-liberal conception of implicature: speakers can certainly

attempt to implicate something even where the audience is in the dark as to certain crucial background and contextual information, but that they can succeed in implicating what they intend in such circumstances will depend on what we take to be necessary for the generation of implicatures (see above). In fact, I believe the same is true of Davis' purported cases of implicatures arising in the absence of Gricean principles. To take just one such example, Davis endorses Kim Sterelny's claim that "pointedly refusing to obey the CP can generate implicature-like phenomena, for instance, abruptly and determinedly changing the subject" (p. 117). However, I would say that while at the level of 'what is said' the speaker might seem uncooperative, he is here exploiting the cooperative presumption in order to get across the point that, for whatever reason, he wants to take the conversation in a different direction. (Unfortunately, space doesn't permit more of a discussion of Davis' examples of allegedly 'non-Gricean speech'.)

Fourth, surely the arbitrariness of certain implicature phenomena is only to be expected since, contrary to what Davis at several points suggests, it was never claimed by Grice that utterances of grammatically similar sentences (e.g., tautologies), or of truth-conditionally equivalent sentences, can be expected always to give rise to the same or similar implicatures: contextual information and background knowledge can make a difference; and Bach and Harnish have stressed the extent to which something as seemingly arbitrary as precedent -- including, presumably, the sort of socio-historical practices which would underlie the conventions Davis posits -- can play a role as well (see, e.g., their contribution, including the "Postscript" by Bach, to *Pragmatics: Critical Concepts, Volume IV*, A. Kasher ed., London: Routledge, 1994, pp. 682-722). Grice strikes me as being, if anything, quite averse to hasty generalizations of the sort in question, which ride rough-shod over real differences between cases. And while some Griceans might hanker after a more complex systemization of the Gricean approach, I concur with Neale that "nothing could be further from the spirit of Grice's theory" than the positing of special pragmatic rules to explain the existence and derivation of implicatures (*Descriptions*, Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1990, p. 83).

Finally (a related point), a good part of Davis' case against Gricean theory, and more generally against the utility of an appeal to general principles in understanding implicatures, relies upon a particular conception of what such a theory aims to do. At no point does Grice assert, e.g., that implicatures can be "derived from" the maxims, together with the conventional meaning of the sentence uttered. It seems to me, rather, that Grice's claims about the CP and the associated maxims are intended to capture an important fact about the nature of our conversational exchanges, and that the claim that Grice thought that "implicatures could be *calculated* or *worked out* given sentence meanings" (p. 156; cf. p. 141), for example, is misleading at best. Grice isn't pretending to give some sort of calculus for implicatures, such that we can explain and predict specific implicatures *in abstracto*. Again, this might tell against the pretensions of certain over-zealous Gricean theorists; but so much the worse for those pretensions.

Granted, as one contemporary Gricean has said, to describe the general character of communication is not to explain fully how it works – it is not to explain, e.g., "how it is that certain information in a particular context emerges as mutually salient...so that it might be exploited by the hearer" in inferring a speaker's intended intention (Kent Bach, "Conversational Implicature", pp. 155-6). No doubt this is, as Davis suggests, "a fascinating [question] for cognitive scientists" (p. 131). But the important point is that insofar as this is a problem, it's a problem for *any* theory of communication. (Including Davis': surely, e.g., the mere existence of various implicature conventions won't fully account for a hearer's ability to correctly identify a speaker's communicative intention on any specific occasion.) Besides, what's at issue is not whether the cooperative presumption *considered as a descriptive generalization* is true (Davis, p. 190, grants that it is) but whether in particular cases the assumption that the speaker is being cooperative plays an essential role in hearers' inferences, and whether speakers anticipate and exploit this presumption in communicating things they do not say. (Compare Sperber and Wilson: "The principle of relevance...is a generalization about ostensive-inferential communication....It is not the general principle but the fact that a particular presumption of

relevance has been communicated...that the audience uses in inferential comprehension” [“Précis of *Relevance: Communication and Cognition*”, *Behavioral and Brain Sciences* 10, 1987, p. 704].) (Thanks to Kent Bach, Wayne Davis, and Marga Reimer for comments on an earlier draft of this review.)

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