

Review of Wayne Davis, *Implicature: Intention, Convention, and Principle in the Failure of Gricean Theory*. Cambridge, 1998. 206 + viii pages.

I recall reading a critical notice of Grice's *Studies in the Way of Words*, in which the author remarked that while Grice's analysis of speaker meaning is the subject of considerable controversy, Grice's account of conversational implicature is, "...money in the philosophical bank."¹ This assessment was optimistic at best: Grice's remarks on implicature offer a program not a theory, and in relation to the amount of discussion it has received in philosophy and allied disciplines such as linguistics and psycholinguistics, rather little work has been done in cashing the approach out as a theory. At the same time, many objections to Grice have been raised and not many adequately fielded. Davis' is the first book-length treatment by a philosopher of the phenomenon of implicature (there have been books by linguists), and we could not have hoped for a more clearheaded and conscientious author willing to subject the Gricean treatment of implicature to rigorous and impartial scrutiny.

The aim of the book is twofold. First, Davis argues that while Grice and his followers have isolated an important phenomenon, conversational implicature, Grice's apparatus (including the Cooperative Principle and conversational maxims) aimed at predicting and explaining instances of this phenomenon does not succeed in doing so. Davis devotes roughly the first four chapters of the book to defending this claim. Second, Davis offers an alternative framework for predicting and explaining conversational implicature that is based on linguistic conventions that go beyond literal meaning. For Davis, certain sentences are governed by conventions to the effect that speakers use them to implicate certain contents. Empirical evidence and a theoretical framework are marshaled in support of this new approach, taking up Chapters Five and Six.

Back to the critical part. Davis construes the Cooperative Principle and the conversational maxims as "psychosocial principles", acknowledging that they have both normative and descriptive

¹ R. Fogelin, "Review of *Studies in the Way of Words*," *Journal of Philosophy* 88 (1991): p. 214.

force. Their descriptive force consists in their alleged use in predicting or explaining instances of conversational implicature. One of Davis' aims is to show that the standard apparatus for explaining implicature, and which includes these principles, fails. In some cases (such as those depending on apparent failures of relevance, utterances outside the context of any conversation, and those involving utterance of tautologies like "war is war") the apparatus fails to predict genuine cases of implicature; in others (such as so-called quantity implicature and other tautologies) it would lead one to expect implicature where we find none.

Davis gives many examples in support of these contentions. He also attempts to diagnose the problem that he finds after isolating some crucial tenets of a Gricean framework for explaining implicature. In a case in which a speaker S conversationally implicates a content in the presence of hearer H, these will include the *cooperative presumption* (the speaker in question is presumed to be observing the Cooperative Principle), *determinacy* (the supposition that S believes p is required to make S's contribution consistent with the Cooperative Principle), and *mutual knowledge* (S believes and expects H to believe that S believes, that H is able to discern that determinacy holds). Davis remarks that Grice and his followers adhere to a

Generative Assumption: Conversational implicatures exist because of the fact that the cooperative presumption, determinacy, and mutual knowledge conditions hold. (p. 17)

Davis characterizes speaker meaning (what he calls "cognitive speaker meaning") thus: S means that p by uttering U only if S uses U to express the belief that p. To express the belief that p one must do something with the intention of giving an indication of one's belief that p. Speaker implication (as opposed to sentence implicature) is indirect speaker meaning, in which S means some distinct p' by meaning that p. Speaker implicature is, as this gloss suggests, a matter of what a speaker intends (p. 114; 122; 130), and Davis infers from this that it does not depend at all upon, for instance, what she is presumed to intend or believe. So much the worse for the Generative Assumption. The cooperative presumption, determinacy, and mutual knowledge may aid us in detecting implicature

but cannot help constitute it. While the phenomenon of implicature is beyond doubt, Davis holds that the Gricean *theory* of that phenomenon fails because of its inability to accommodate this fact.

Davis' positive view of implicature has two facets. On one hand he considers cases of implicature involving only conventions governing the literal meaning of the words used (if such there be). What is implicated depends, as we have seen, on what the speaker intends. Discerning what is implicated does not require any principles specific to implicature but is a special case of the wider project of interpretation, involving the testing and rejection of hypotheses and in some cases deferring to the speaker's own testimony. (Pp. 127-31) On the other hand, after a plausible account of some general features of conventions, Davis argues that many sentence-frames and certain figures of speech are governed by *implicature conventions*: conventions to the effect that sentences of a certain class are normally used to convey a certain implicatum. As a result such sentences have two levels of conventionality: that governing their literal meaning and that governing what they are standardly used to implicate. In his final chapter Davis shows that the paradoxicality of the notion of convention-bound conversational implicature is apparent only, and explains how the study of the etiology of implicature conventions is a potentially fruitful common ground for philosophy and historical linguistics.

Davis' criticism of much of the literature on conversational implicature is well taken. The issue is whether the problems are due to particular formulations of the Gricean approach or whether that approach is irremediably flawed. Davis would opt for the latter claim, the core reason being his rejection of the Generative Assumption. As noted, he holds on the contrary that what a speaker implicates depends entirely upon what she intends, writing,

What S implicates cannot be due even in part to what others presume or know about S. To implicate something is to mean or imply it in a certain way. And as Grice...correctly observed, to mean or imply something is to have certain intentions. (p. 122).

This implies that for a speaker who gets her words out, intending to implicate that p is sufficient for

implicating that p. However, we observed that for Davis what a speaker implicates depends on what belief she (intentionally) expresses. What a speaker intends, and thus what she can do intentionally, is constrained by what she takes to be possible, and one cannot intend to express a belief unless one takes one's action to enable others to discern that belief. Indeed, as Davis has himself taught us², one cannot express an intentional state unless one's action makes such discernment possible. As a result speaker implicature requires that the speaker rightly take her action to make her beliefs public. Davis has not shown that one's evident adherence to the Cooperative Principle and conversational maxims cannot aid in this task. I have argued elsewhere that a natural way of reading Grice is as holding that one's violation or flouting of a conversational maxim, together with other contextual information, can express a speaker's belief or other intentional state.³ On this reading, the CP and the maxims are not just—as Davis himself holds (p. 127)—useful tools for the detection of someone's beliefs; they are precisely what make it possible to express our beliefs without explicitly avowing them. Davis' criticism of the Generative Assumption can thus be parried in light of facts about self-expression.

Davis can accept that context has some constitutive role to play in determining what a speaker implicates, while still denying that a presumption that she is following the Cooperative Principle has any work to do in this capacity. On his “lightly regimented” gloss of the definition of conversational implicature, one necessary condition appears as the speaker “S is presumed to be observing the Cooperative Principle” (p. 13). This allows Davis to attack the definition on the ground that what others presume about a speaker has no conceptual connection with what a speaker implicates. Davis' regimentation is, however, slightly but significantly different from Grice's own cognate condition, which reads, “[S] is to be presumed to be observing the conversational maxims, or at least the Cooperative Principle.” (p. 30) That a speaker is to be presumed to be observing the CP is a normative proposition that neither entails nor is entailed by propositions about what anyone

² W. Davis, 'Expression of emotion,' *American Philosophical Quarterly* **25** (1988): 279-91. Davis reverses this claim in 'Speaker meaning' (*Linguistics and Philosophy* **15** (1992): 223-53, but not, I believe, in a way that would crucially affect my contentions here.

³ “Grice's frown: On Meaning and expression,” forthcoming in *Facta Philosophica*.

actually presumes. This notion is also evidently a case of objective value that Grice is known to have held to be indispensable for all major areas of philosophy but that has not gained much attention from students of his work in pragmatics.⁴ Further, this objective norm may well be an appropriate requirement for implicature insofar as it points us in the direction of a speaker's *ostensibly* manifesting her state of mind. We have seen that one can express only what one publicizes. For all Davis has said it may yet be true that what one implicates depends in part on what may appropriately be presumed about her in light of what she makes public. Accordingly, whatever its merits, Grice's account of conversational implicature is different from the one discussed by Davis, who criticisms don't obviously hit their intended target.

Implicature is an insightful, meticulously researched and challenging work that no student of pragmatics can afford not to master. While I have expressed doubts that it undermines the Gricean paradigm as effectively as its author believes, it does oblige proponents of that paradigm to elucidate it with more care, and in particular with sensitivity to its commitments to such concepts as objective value and self-expression. By means of the notion of implicature conventions it also provides us with a new option for approaching implicature that is historically sensitive and culture-specific. Davis has accordingly raised the level of discussion of conversational pragmatics by challenging a smug paradigm and by introducing a newcomer to the neighborhood.

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⁴ One exception is S. Neale, "Paul Grice and the philosophy of language," *Linguistics and Philosophy* **15** (1989): 509-559.