2. THE EXPLICIT-IMPLICIT DISTINCTION
University of Gent, November 2012

Deirdre Wilson
deirdre.wilson@ucl.ac.uk

1. Introduction

Basic intuition about communication:
What is communicated by the speaker of an utterance may be partly **explicit** and partly **implicit**.

1a. *Peter:* Let's ask Billy to see a film with us tonight.
1b. *Mary*: He has to finish a paper.
What Mary asserts: Billy has to finish writing a PAPER$_1$ soon.
What Mary implicates: They shouldn't ask Billy because he has to finish writing a PAPER$_1$ soon.

Substantive issues:
2a. How do hearers identify these two aspects of the speaker's meaning?
2b. Is implicit communication simply a way of saving the speaker's effort in conveying something that could equally well have been explicitly conveyed?

Terminological issue:
3. What should these two aspects of the speaker's meaning be called?

Today's aims:
4a. To show how relevance theory deals with the substantive issues in (2a-b).
4b. To discuss the terminological issue in (3).

2. Historical overview

Grice's notion of saying had two functions:
5a. It constituted the **semantic content** of a sentence uttered in context.
5b. It was part of the **speaker's meaning** (what was asserted as opposed to implicated).

This minimised the gap between sentence meaning and speaker's explicit meaning. For Grice, 'what was said' was determined by (a) sentence meaning, (b) **disambiguation** and (c) **reference resolution,** which he saw as determined by 'context', independently of speakers' intentions.

Problem: There is increasing evidence that the two functions of 'what is said' do not always coincide: what is asserted may be much richer, and more heavily dependent on pragmatic processes, than Grice wanted to allow.

6a. I've had breakfast.
6b. The old king died of a heart attack nnd a republic was declared.
6c. No-one came to the party.
6d. (*watching someone play the violin*): He plays well.

Sperber & Wilson's proposal (Wilson & Sperber 1981, Sperber & Wilson 1986/95):
Rather than add new senses of 'what is said', we introduce a new technical term, **'explicature'** (on the analogy of Grice's **implicature**) to cover what is explicitly communicated.

Explicitness/ explicature (Sperber & Wilson 1986/95: 182)
An assumption communicated by an utterance U is **explicit** [hence, an **explicature**] if and only if it is a development of a logical form encoded by U.

Implicature (ibid.: 182)
Everything else communicated by an utterance is an implicature.

Illustration
Expectation of relevance with which Peter approaches Mary's utterance (1b):
She will accept or reject Peter's proposal to ask Billy out that evening.
7a. **Highly accessible contextual assumption:** A good reason for not asking someone out is that they have to finish writing a PAPER$_1$ soon.
7b. **Explicature:** Billy$_i$ has to finish writing a PAPER$_1$ soon.
7c. **Implicature:** They shouldn't ask Billy$_i$ out because he$_i$ has to finish writing a PAPER$_1$ soon.

Tentative hypotheses about explicatures and implicatures are **mutually adjusted** (using the relevance-guided comprehension heuristic) so as to satisfy expectations of relevance.

Mutual adjustment:
The process of gradually revising (in parallel) tentative disambiguations, reference resolutions, contextual assumptions and implications until a **relevant enough** overall interpretation is found.

Hearer's goal: To find the best combination of **explicit content**, **context** and **implications**
8a. Explicit content and context together must **warrant** the implications derived.
8b. This may require inferential development at the explicit level (e.g. PAPER$_*$, SOON*)
8c. Several developments may be available (SOON*, URGENTLY*, TO A CLOSE* DEADLINE, etc.)
8d. The greater the range of possible developments, the **weaker** the explicature.
8e. Explicatures are partly **decoded** and partly **inferred.**

Degrees of explicitness (*Relevance*: 182)
The smaller the relative contribution of pragmatic inference, and the greater the relative contribution of decoding, the more explicit an explicature will be.

Illustration: The following responses to Peter's question in (1a) would have identical explicatures , which would be least explicit in (9a) and most explicit in (9d):

9a. *Mary*: He has to finish a paper.
9b. *Mary:* He has to finish writing a paper
9c. *Mary:* He has to finish writing a paper soon.
9d. *Mary*: Billy has to finish writing a paper soon...

Aim: To introduce a theory-neutral term that could be used in different pragmatic frameworks.

Effects:
10a. Proliferation of terminology, as some people continued to use 'what is said' in a new extended sense, while others proposed alternative technical terms (e.g. 'impliciture').
10b. Most pragmatic frameworks have adopted some version of this proposal, as sentence meaning and speaker's explicit meaning come increasingly apart.
10c. This pragmatic programme conflicts with the idea that the primary bearers of truth conditions as **sentences** (rather than **thoughts).**

Possible objections (Levinson 2000, etc.): How can we tell when an inference contributes to explicatures and when it contributes to implicatures? Do we need a distinction at all?

Relevance theory's answers:
11a. The explicature should be developed to a point where it warrants the derivation of enough implications/implicatures to satisfy the hearer's expectations of relevance, **and no further.**
11b. The results can often be confirmed by **embedding tests, denials,** etc. (e.g. 'That's not true')

3. An alternative view of explicitness

Bach's reasons for introducing the term 'impliciture' (Bach 1994)
I should point out that my use of the term 'explicit' is more restrictive than Sperber and Wilson's. They count as explicit anything communicated that is 'a development of the logical form encoded by U'. Thus they regard what I call expansions and completions as explicatures, as explicit contents of utterances. I find this use of the term misleading, inasmuch as the conceptual strengthening involved in expansion or completion is not explicit at all. Including the requisite lexical material would of course *explicate* what the speaker is communicating, but only then would what is being communicated be made fully explicit.

Worry: This seems to treat explicatures as pragmatically inferred **constituents** of propositions, rather than full communicated propositions which are partly decoded and partly inferred. But explicatures were defined as communicated **propositions** (or 'assumptions').

Bach's reformulated reason (Bach 2010: 131):
What [relevance theorists] regard as explicit is, in general, not fully explicit but partly implicit. Indeed, this is suggested by their term 'explicature', which is a cognate of 'explicate', not 'explicit'. To explicate something is to spell it out, and to spell out the explicature of an utterance would be to make fully explicit what has in fact been left partly implicit. That is why I call this partly implicit content an 'impliciture' (the term should not suggest that all of an impliciture is implicit).

Worries
12a. If 'impliciture' is an appropriate name for a communicated proposition that's partly explicit and partly implicit, why isn't 'explicature' equally appropriate?
12b. In fact, Sperber & Wilson don't describe constituents of propositions as either 'explicit' or 'implicit', since their explicit-implicit distinction applies only to communicated propositions. (One might describe unarticulated constituents as '**tacitly**' conveyed.)

Deeper issue
But there's clearly a deeper issue behind this apparent terminological dispute, which I think goes back to a more basic disagreement about the function of linguistic meaning and the relation between **sentence meaning** and **speaker's meaning**.

4. Two views of the relation between linguistic meaning and speaker's meaning

A: Encoding view: The function of linguistic meaning is to enable some or all of a speaker's meaning to be **encoded**.

Bach on sentence meaning (2001)
Semantic information is information encoded in what is uttered – these are stable linguistic features of the sentence – together with any extralinguistic information that provides (semantic) values to context-sensitive expressions in what is uttered…. Contextual information of the semantic kind … has its effect independently of the speaker's intention and the hearer's recognition of that intention. This sort of

contextual information is limited to a short list of [objective] parameters associated with indexicals and tense, such as the identity of the speaker and the hearer and the time of an utterance.

Bach on the relation between sentence meaning and speaker's meaning (Bach 2010: 129)
My main reason for thinking that at least some sentences express propositions is very simple. If none did, then none of our thoughts would be explicitly expressible. Indeed, it is arguable that all of our thoughts are explicitly expressible, in which case for every thought there is at least one sentence that would express it explicitly.

Bach's reasoning:
13a. At least some of our thoughts/meanings must be explicitly expressible.
13b. A thought/meaning is explicitly expressed only if it is recoverable by decoding alone.
13c. So some sentences must fully encode our thoughts/meanings.

For Bach, 'explicit' is an absolute term, like 'empty': anything less than 'fully explicit' is not explicit at all.

B: Evidential view: The function of linguistic meaning is not to encode some or all of the speaker's meaning but to provide **evidence** of it. (Utterances are clues to the speaker's meaning)

Wilson & Sperber on sentence meaning (2012: ix)
We have argued for a long time that [the encoding view] is too simple, and that utterances do not encode the speaker's meaning – not even some of it. The function of the linguistic meaning of an utterance is not to encode the speaker's meaning, but to provide *evidence* of her meaning.

Wilson & Sperber on the relation between sentence and speaker's meaning (2012: ix)
There are always components of a speaker's meaning which her words do not encode: for instance, the English word 'he' does not specifically refer to [e.g. Billy in (1b)]. Indeed, we would argue that the idea that for most, if not all, possible meanings that a speaker might intend to convey, there is a sentence in a natural language which has that exact meaning as its linguistic meaning is quite implausible.

Relevance theory's line of reasoning:
14a. Thoughts/speaker's meanings can be more or less explicitly communicated.
14b. Thoughts/speaker's meanings are **never** fully encodable.
14c. So explicit communication must involve a combination of decoding and inference.

For Sperber & Wilson, 'explicit' is both a classificatory and a comparative concept: any communicated proposition with a decoded conceptual constituent is explicit to some degree, and the greater the proportion of decoding to inference, the more explicit it will be.

For Sperber, Wilson and Carston, **any** utterance can be made more explicit, and there is no such thing as 'full explicitness'. Bach disagrees:

Bach on full explicitness (Bach 2011)
Even if [some short] sentences are semantically incomplete, and even if that showed that they are context sensitive, it does not follow that there aren't other, more elaborate sentences, one for each context, whose utterance would have made what the speaker meant fully explicit.

Problems for the view that elaboration reduces the role of pragmatics
15a. Adding more words to a sentence tends to **increase,** rather than diminish, the possibilities of interpretation. (Wilson & Carston 2007)

15b. There may be no lexical item or phrase that exactly encodes the speaker's meaning (e.g. in (1b, the relation between Billy and the paper, what type of paper it is, what would count as finishing it, how soon it has to be finished etc.). (Sperber & Wilson 1998)

Conclusion: Debates about the appropriateness of the term 'explicature' have their roots in a deeper disagreement about the role of linguistic meaning in communication. However, since it is generally agreed that 'explicatures' and 'implicitures' involve both decoding and inference, it is not legitimate to object to 'explicature' on the ground that it is partly explicit and partly implicit and simultaneously defend 'impliciture', which is also partly implicit and partly explicit.

5. <u>Relevance theory and implicatures</u>

Implicatures: wholly inferred **contextual assumptions** or **implications** added during the mutual adjustment process to achieve an overall interpretation that satisfies **expectations of relevance**.

'Accommodation' of implicated premises
16a. *Bill*: I hear you've moved from Manhattan to Brooklyn.
16b. *Sue*: The rent is lower.

17a. **Implicated premise:** Getting a lower rent is a good reason to move.
17b. **Explicature:** The rent in Brooklyn is lower than the rent in Manhattan.
17c. **Implicated conclusion:** Sue moved to Brooklyn because the rent there was lower.

[Bill may not have known in advance that Sue would move for this reason, but he can now assume she would, since her utterance wouldn't satisfy his expectations of relevance otherwise.]

Alternative premises that Bill might have supplied
18a. Getting a lower rent for an otherwise comparable residence is a good reason to move.
18b. Sue couldn't afford her Manhattan rent.
18c. Sue prefers to spend as little as possible on rent.
18d. The advantages of living in Manhattan weren't worth the high rent Sue was paying.

Sue's manifest intention:
That Bill should supply **some** such premise and derive **some** such conclusion, taking **some** of the responsibility for the particular conclusion he draws (cf. (1b)).

The greater the range of alternatives, the **weaker** the implicatures, and the greater the hearer's responsibility for the particular choices he makes. Conversely, the smaller the range of alternatives, the **stronger** the implicatures, and the more responsibility falls on the speaker.

Grice's view on the indeterminacy of implicatures (1989: 39-40)
'Since to calculate a conversational implicature is to calculate what has to be supposed in order to preserve the supposition that the Cooperative Principle is being observed, and since there may be various possible specific explanations, a list of which may be open, the conversational implicatum [implicature] in such cases will be a disjunction of such specific explanations; and if the list of these is open, the implicatum will have just the kind of indeterminacy that many actual implicata [implicatures] do in fact seem to possess.'

This aspect of implicit communication is generally idealised away:
'Because indeterminacy is hard to handle formally, I shall mostly ignore it in the discussion that follows. A fuller treatment of implicatures would not be guilty of this omission, which is really only defensible on formal grounds.' (Gazdar 1979: 40)

Question: Is implicit communication simply a way of saving the speaker's effort in conveying something that could equally well have been explicitly communicated? (Levinson 2000)

Relevance theory's answer: No. Often (as in jokes, poetry, etc.), increasing explicitness ruins the effect, precisely because implicit communication is generally **weak** communication.

Illustration A: jokes
19a. Two taxis collided and thirty Scotsmen were taken to hospital. (Woody Allen)
19b. Scotsmen are very mean and travel in overcrowded taxis to avoid paying full fare. Once two taxis containing thirty Scotsmen collided and the passengers were taken to hospital.

Illustration B: poetry and poetic style
20a. The fog came *on little cat feet.*
20b. The *fringed curtains of thine eyes* advance
      And say what thou see'st yond.

"In true poetry it is ... impossible to express the meaning in any but its own words, or to change the words without changing the meaning." (A.C. Bradley, *Oxford Lectures on Poetry*, 1909)

"The infallible test of a blameless style is its *untranslatableness* in words of the same language without injury to the meaning." (Coleridge, *Biographica Literaria*)

Illustration C: expressions of attitude
21. *Mary (reproachfully):* I've done all the shopping.

A reproachful tone of voice or facial expression clearly conveys something beyond what was linguistically encoded, and it's widely assumed that these expressive aspects of meaning are non-conceptual. The notion of weak implicature may help with analysing what is going on.

6. <u>Reanalysing some of Grice's examples of conversational implicature</u>

Examples involving overt, blatant maxim violation or clashes
22. At a genteel tea party, A says *Mrs X is an old bag.* There is a moment of appalled silence, and then B says *The weather has been quite delightful this summer, hasn't it?*

Grice describes this as blatant violation of the relevance maxim. We could say instead that B's utterance is the most relevant one compatible with her **preferences** (to conform to etiquette).

23. Miss X produced a series of sounds that corresponded closely to the score of 'Home Sweet Home'.

Grice describes this as a blatant violation of the brevity maxim, designed to implicate that Miss X's performance suffered from some hideous defect. We could say that it's the most relevant utterance compatible with the speaker's **abilities** (i.e. she can't truly describe the performance as 'singing') and **preferences** (i.e. she prefers not to say explicitly that the performance was bad)

24. Dear Sir, Mr X's command of English is excellent, and his attendance at tutorials has been regular. Yours etc.

Grice describes this as a blatant violation of the first Quantity maxim. "He cannot be unable, through ignorance, to say more, since the man is his pupil; moreover, he knows that more information than this is wanted. He must therefore be wishing to impart information that he is reluctant to write down." Note Grice's explicit reference to **abilities** and **preferences.** We could say just that this is the most relevant utterance compatible with the writer's abilities/preferences.

25. War is war.

Grice analyses this as a blatant violation of the first Quantity maxim (i.e. totally uninformative). But even uninformative utterances can be relevant as **reminders** of something the hearer has (allegedly) overlooked.

26. A. Where does C live?
    B. Somewhere in the South of France.

Grice analyses this as resulting from a **clash** between the Quantity and Quality maxims, with Quality ("the most important of the maxims") invariably winning out. We would say that B has produced the most relevant utterance compatible with his **abilities** (he doesn't know where C lives, so can't be more informative) or **preferences** (he knows, but is reluctant to tell).

Examples standardly treated as generalised implicatures
27. I left my window open and a burglar got in. ['through the window, as a result of my action']

Embedding test suggests that 'as a result of' contributes to the explicature (Carston 2002).
28. If you leave your window open and a burglar gets in, you have no right to compensation

7. <u>Concluding remarks</u>

Relevance theory in a nutshell (Sperber & Wilson 1986, Carston 2002)
29a. Utterances create **expectations of relevance.**
29b. Seeing the **intended relevance** of an utterance involves seeing its **intended implications**.
29c. Encoded sentence meanings (logical forms) are **fragmentary and incomplete**, and need to be inferentially **developed** (fleshed out) in order to yield any implications. Different fleshings out, combined with different **contextual assumptions,** yield different implications, and make the utterance relevant in different ways.
29d. The hearer is entitled to **follow a path of least effort** in (a) supplying contextual assumptions, and (b) **developing** the encoded sentence meaning until yields **enough implications** (at a low enough processing cost) to be **relevant in the expected way**.

References

Bach, K. 1994. Conversational impliciture. *Mind & Language* 9: 124-62.

Bach, K. 2010. Impliciture vs explicature: What's the difference? In Soria & Romero: 126-137.

Bach, K. 2011. Context dependence (such as it is). In M. Garcia-Carpintero & M. Kolbel (eds). *The Continuum Companion to the Philosophy of Language.*

Carston, R. 2002. *Thoughts and Utterances: The Pragmatics of Explicit Communication.* Blackwell.

Carston, R. 2010. Explicit communication and 'free' pragmatic enrichment. In Soria & Romero: 217-85.

Carston, R. 2009. The explicit-implicit distinction in pragmatics and the limits of explicit communication. International Review of Pragmatics 1: 35-62.

Carston, R. 2010. Explicit communication and 'free' pragmatic enrichment. In Soria & Romero: 217-85.

Carston, R. & Hall, A. 2011. Explicature and implicature. In H.-J. Schmid & D. Geerarts (eds.) *Cognitive Pragmatics*: 47-84. Mouton de Gruyter.

Gazdar, Gerald. 1979. *Pragmatics: Implicature, Presupposition and Logical Form.* Academic Press.

Hall, A. 2009. 'Free' enrichment and the nature of pragmatic constraints. *UCL Working Papers in Linguistics* 21: 93-123.

Levinson, S. 2000. *Presumptive Meanings: The Theory of Generalized Conversational Implicature*. MIT Press: Cambridge, MA.

Horn, L. 2004. Implicature. In L. Horn & G. Ward (eds) *The Handbook of Pragmatics.* Blackwell.

Horn, L. 2006. The Border wars: A neo-Gricean perspective. In K. Turner & K. von Heusinger (eds) Where Semantics Meets Pragmatics. Amsterdam: Elsevier.

Noveck, I. & Sperber, D. 2007/2012. The why and how of experimental pragmatics: The case of 'scalar inferences'. In N. Burton-Roberts (ed.) *Pragmatics.* Palgrave. In Wilson & Sperber 2012: 307-330.

Recanati, F. 2004. *Literal Meaning*. Cambridge University Press.

Recanati, F. 2010. *Truth-Conditional Pragmatics.* Oxford University Press.

Soria, B. & Romero E. (eds.) 2010. *Explicit Communication: Robyn Carston's Pragmatics.* Palgrave.

Sperber, D. & Wilson, D. 1995. *Relevance: Communication and Cognition.* 2nd edition. Blackwell.

Sperber, D. & Wilson, D. 1998/2012. The mapping between the mental and the public lexicon. In Wilson & Sperber 2012: 31-46.

Wilson, D. & Carston, R. 2007. A unitary approach to lexical pragmatics: Relevance, inference and ad hoc concepts. In N. Burton Roberts (ed.) *Pragmatics.* Palgrave.

Wilson, D. & Sperber, D. 1981. On Grice's theory of conversation. In P. Werth (ed.) *Conversation and Discourse* 155-78. London: Croom Helm.

Wilson, D. & Sperber, D. 2002/2012. Truthfulness and relevance. *Mind* 111: 583-612. In Wilson & Sperber 2012: 47-83.

Wilson, D. & Sperber, D. 2012. *Meaning and Relevance.* Cambridge University Press.