

Dynamic pragmatics, or, why we shouldn't be afraid of embedded implicatures

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In the last decade or so, the semantics literature has taken up with great interest the topic of embedded scalar implicatures, a phenomenon brought to the attention of this community by Chierchia's now well-known paper on this subject, published in 2004. The discussion of this topic has become focused on what can be characterized as the localist/globalist debate, with the localists advocating the view that scalar effects are the results of a syntactic/semantic operation which is part of grammar, and globalists arguing that (most) apparently local scalar effects are in fact global and can be accounted for by standard Gricean reasoning. There is fairly broad agreement that local implicatures, if they exist, cannot be explained by any standard Gricean mechanism (but see Geurts 2010, whose view will be discussed in the talk).

The topic of embedded implicature has in fact been a major talking point in the broader pragmatics literature since the 1970's, since Cohen 1971 raised the issue as a problem for Grice's theory of implicature. Since Cohen, the topic has been taken up by (amongst others), Carston 1988, Recanati 1989, Bach 1994 and Levinson 2000. These authors have looked beyond local scalar implicature to a much broader phenomenon of local pragmatic effects. But they too largely take it as axiomatic that local effects, if they exist, cannot be explained by a Gricean mechanism.

My aim in this paper is to broaden current debate, in two ways. I'll start out by surveying the range of local pragmatic effects that have been noted in the pragmatics literature, some of which seem rather clearly to rely on extra-grammatical processes. Second, I'll make a plausibility argument for the idea that Gricean principles could apply at the embedded level. I'll offer a way of looking at embedded clauses as discourse acts which makes such an application reasonable. And I will suggest that this way of thinking about the function of embedded clauses is entirely compatible with the dynamic view of sentence meaning.