

The Cancellability Test for Conversational Implicatures

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Many people follow Grice in thinking that all conversational implicatures are cancellable. And often enough they use this insight as a test for conversational implicatures. If you want to find out whether something is a conversational implicature, the test has it, you should ask yourself whether the thing in question is cancellable; if you find that it is not cancellable, you can infer that it is not a conversational implicature. If you find that it is cancellable, you can infer that it might well be a conversational implicature and that you should now do further testing. Various philosophers and linguists have questioned the test however. Some have held that Grice's cancellability claim is subject to counterexamples and that the test is not reliable. Others have argued that even though Grice's claim can be defended against the examples in question, the test is not as informative as people have hoped. This article provides an overview of the recent discussion on the cancellability test and suggests a way forward.

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1 Introduction: the cancellability test

Paul Grice's influence on these days' philosophy and linguistics is broad and multifarious.¹ One, if not the major contribution is his conception of conversational implicatures, developed in this seminal paper 'Logic and Conversation' (1975, reprinted 1989). It is embedded in his unified theory of meaning and ascribes pragmatics a substantial and systematic role in human communication.² But conversational implicatures do not only play a key role in shaping current theories of communication. They have been proclaimed in basically all areas of philosophy—be it in epistemology to explain skeptical intuitions, in ethics and

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²Grice's theory of meaning parts what is said from what is implicated and divides what is implicated into what is conventionally implicated and conversationally implicated. For the various aspects of Grice's theory of meaning and communication, see, most prominently, the papers collected in Grice (1989).

aesthetics to account for moral and aesthetic disagreements, or in metaphysics to reconcile varying intuitions about what caused what, to name but a few.

To get an idea of what conversational implicatures are, consider the following exchanges:

NIGHT Hannah and Sarah have the following exchange over coffee:
Hannah: What did Mary do last night?
Sarah: She had dinner and went to the movies.

SINGLE Hannah and Sarah have the following exchange over coffee:
Hannah: Is Mary still single?
Sarah: She has been visiting New York quite a lot lately.

Now compare them to the following two:

NIGHT[†] Hannah and Sarah have the following exchange over coffee:
Hannah: What did Mary do last night?
Sarah: She first had dinner and then went to the movies.

SINGLE[†] Hannah and Sarah have the following exchange over coffee:
Hannah: Is Mary still single?
Sarah: She is not single anymore.

In one important respect, NIGHT and NIGHT[†], on the one hand, and SINGLE and SINGLE[†], on the other, resemble each other: in the first pair of cases, Sarah seems to convey that Mary first had dinner and then went to the movies; in the second pair, she seems to convey that Mary is not single anymore.³ Only in the non-daggered cases, though, Sarah conversationally implicates these propositions. In the other two, she semantically expresses what she wants to get across.

How do we find out whether something is a conversational implicature? Grice himself does not offer a definition of a conversational implicature (for what he calls a ‘characterization’ of conversational implicatures, see Grice (1989, 49f.)). But he sets conversational implicatures apart from other related phenomena. Like conventional implicatures and unlike the semantic contents, conversational implicatures are not part of the *truth conditional meaning* of the sentences in question.⁴ That is, the literal content of the sentence can be true even if the implicature is false. Unlike both conventional implicatures and semantic contents, however, conversational implicatures are not part of the *conventional*

³I am using ‘to convey that *p*’ in a broad sense similar to Grice’s ‘to (speaker) mean that *p*:’ one can convey that *p* by literally expressing that *p*, conversationally or conventionally implicating that *p*, presupposing that *p*, etc.

⁴For more on conventional implicatures, see Grice (1989, 24ff.) and Potts’s article in this journal: Potts (2007).

meaning of the relevant sentences either. They depend on a general assumption of cooperativeness as well as various contextual cues.

Based on these characteristics, Grice identifies a couple of necessary features of conversational implicatures that can be used to test for them. The possibility of cancellation is probably the best known such feature.⁵ To give you an idea of what cancellation amounts to, consider the following two examples:

NIGHT* Hannah and Sarah have the following exchange over coffee:
Hannah: What did Mary do last night?
Sarah: She had dinner and went to the movies. But I don't mean to imply that she first had dinner and then went to the movies. In fact, she did it the other way around.

SINGLE* Hannah and Sarah have the following exchange over coffee:
Hannah: Is Mary still single?
Sarah: She has been visiting New York quite a lot lately. But I don't mean to imply that she is seeing someone. She is still in love with her ex.

Compare them to the following two:

NIGHT†* Hannah and Sarah have the following exchange over coffee:
Hannah: What did Mary do last night?
Sarah: She first had dinner and then went to the movies. But I don't mean to imply that she first had dinner and then went to the movies. In fact, she did it the other way around.

SINGLE†* Hannah and Sarah have the following exchange over coffee:
Hannah: Is Mary still single?
Sarah: She is not single anymore. But I don't mean to imply that she is seeing someone. She is still in love with her ex.

⁵Whether cancellability *follows* from Grice's characterization of conversational implicatures is a matter of ongoing debate. See, e.g., Hirschberg (1985, p. 27) and Potts (2015, p. 183). Apart from cancellability, Grice lists non-detachability and calculability as necessary features. See, e.g., Grice (1989, ch. 2: 39f., ch. 3: 43ff., ch. 17: 270ff., 281) and also Grice (1981, p. 186). Of these three features, cancellability is often taken to provide the most useful test for conversational implicatures. See, e.g., Sadock (1978), Hirschberg (1985, p. 27), and Blome-Tillmann (2008, p. 156). Note, though, that in the first version of his paper 'Presupposition and Implicature', Grice takes calculability to be the 'final test' for conversational implicatures, see Grice (1981, p. 187). For criticism of the calculability test, see Davis (1998). Over the course of time, people have added further properties to the list of key features. For an overview, see, e.g., Potts (2015, sec. 3.2).

In NIGHT* and SINGLE*, Sarah cancels the conversational implicatures of NIGHT and SINGLE, respectively. In NIGHT[†]* and SINGLE[†]*, on the contrary, Sarah may try to cancel what she semantically expresses in NIGHT[†] and SINGLE[†]; but if she does so try, then she fails.

What exactly does the cancellability requirement amount to? We might be tempted to think of it as saying that if a proposition is a conversational implicature, it is cancellable. But this would be misleading, to say the least. NIGHT and SINGLE, on the one hand, and NIGHT[†] and SINGLE[†], on the other, show that it is not a proposition taken by itself that is or isn't a conversational implicature. It is a proposition *as conveyed at a context* that might be a conversational implicature. More precisely, it is a proposition *as conveyed by a speaker's use of a given sentence at a given context*. The proposition that Mary first had dinner and then went to the movies as conveyed by Sarah's use of 'She had dinner and went to the movies' in NIGHT is a conversational implicature; the same proposition as conveyed by Sarah's use of 'She first had dinner and then went to the movies' in NIGHT[†] is not. *Mutatis mutandis* for SINGLE and SINGLE[†]. So, strictly speaking, what the cancellability requirement amounts to is the following:

(Imp-Can) For all contexts c and propositions p such that p is conveyed by the speaker's use of a sentence s at c , the following holds: if p as conveyed by the speaker's use of s at c is a conversational implicature, then p as conveyed by the speaker's use of s at c is cancellable.

(Imp-Can) can be used as a test for conversational implicatures. Note, though, that since (Imp-Can) presents cancellability as a *necessary*, not a *sufficient*, condition for conversational implicatures, it can only be used to *disconfirm*, not to *confirm*, that something is a conversational implicature.⁶ That is, if you find that a proposition as conveyed at a given context is not cancellable, you can infer that it is not a conversational implicature. If you find that it is cancellable, you can infer that it might well be a conversational implicature and that you should now do further testing.⁷

However, various philosophers and linguists have questioned the test. Some have held that Grice's cancellability claim is subject to counterexamples so that the test is not reliable.⁸ Others have argued that even though Grice's claim can be defended against the examples in question, the test is not as informative as people have hoped.⁹

⁶In this vein, Grice says that one cannot regard the fulfillment of the cancellability requirement 'as decisively establishing the presence of a conversational implicature.' Grice (1989, p. 44)

⁷For an overview of all of Grice's tests for conversational implicatures, see Blome-Tillmann's article in this journal: Blome-Tillmann (2013).

⁸For the claim that some particularized conversational implicatures are non-cancellable, see Huitink and Spender (2004) and Weiner (2006); for the claim that all particularized conversational implicatures are non-cancellable, see Capone (2009) and Burton-Roberts (2010). For the claim that at least some generalized conversational implicatures are non-cancellable, see Sadock (1978), Weiner (2006), and Lauer (2014). For general criticism of the cancellability claim, see, e.g., Rysiew (2007, 646f.), Hazlett (2009, p. 597) and Hazlett (2012, 467ff.).

⁹See, most recently, Åkerman (2015).

In the following two sections we will look into these objections. In section 2, we will examine the *reliability* of the cancellability test. That is, we will investigate whether indeed all conversational implicatures are cancellable. In section 3, we will then reflect on the *informativeness* of the cancellability test. That is, we will investigate whether there is anything that it not cancellable.

Before I start, let me clarify two things. First, Grice did not merely hold that all conversational implicatures are cancellable. He held that they are cancellable in two different ways: they are explicitly cancellable and they are contextually cancellable.¹⁰ Like most people in the debate, I will focus on Grice's claim that all conversational implicatures are explicitly cancellable. So what I have in mind when I speak of cancellability is explicit cancellability. (I will come back to the distinction between the two kinds of cancellability in section 2.2.) Second, Grice doubted that propositions entailed by the (semantic content of the) sentence used can be conversationally implicated by the speaker who uses the sentence. Some people disagree: entailed propositions can be conversationally implicated, they hold.¹¹ And some of these people think that this already calls for a rejection of Grice's cancellability claim in its full generality.¹² Again, like many people in the debate, I will stay neutral on this point. Maybe one has to restrict Grice's cancellability claim to propositions that are mere conversational implicatures, i.e. conversational implicatures that are not semantically entailed. The concerns that I will be dealing with in the following arise nevertheless.

2 Is the test reliable?

Let us start with the reliability of the test. Is (Imp-Can) really true? To answer this question, we have to gain a clear understanding of what cancellability amounts to. Only then can we tell what is and what is not cancellable.

2.1 Focus on conveyance

So what does cancellability amount to? A widely shared assumption is that cancelled implicatures are not or no longer conveyed by the speaker. In what follows, I will outline two versions of a view of cancellability that are inspired by this thought. In section 2.2, I will then turn to an alternative view of cancellability. According to it, our felicity intuition takes center stage.

¹⁰See Grice (1989, ch. 2: 39, ch. 3: 44, ch. 17: 270f.). That Grice held that all conversational implicatures are both explicitly and contextually cancellable is the standard interpretation. See, for instance, Blome-Tillmann (2008), Blome-Tillmann (2013), and Geurts (2010, ch. 1.5). For skepticism, see Jaszczolt (2009) and Åkerman (2015). Contextual cancellability is sometimes also called *optionality*. See, for instance, Lauer (2014).

¹¹See Davis (1998, p. 6), Carston (2002, 139ff.), Bach (2006), Blome-Tillmann (2013, p. 172), and Haugh (2013, 4f.). For criticism, see Vicente (1998, 252f.).

¹²See, e.g., Carston (2002, 139ff.) and Blome-Tillmann (2013, p. 172). For dissent, see Haugh (2013, 4f.).

A first view of cancellability

The first version of a view of cancellability in which the idea of conveyance figures crucially has it that a proposition p as conveyed by the speaker's use of a sentence s at a context c is cancellable iff $\ulcorner s$. But not $p \urcorner$ or $\ulcorner s$. But I don't mean to imply that $p \urcorner$ can be felicitously used at an otherwise identical context c^* without conveying that p . More precisely, the view holds the following:¹³

(Can-1) A proposition p as conveyed by the speaker's use of a sentence s at a context c is cancellable iff there is a context c^* which

- (i) resembles c in all respects with the exception that it
- (ii) differs from c in that the speaker uses the cancellation clause \ulcorner But not $p \urcorner$ or \ulcorner But I don't mean to imply that $p \urcorner$,

such that

- (a) the speaker's whole utterance is felicitous, and
- (b) the speaker does not convey that p with her whole utterance.

Given this view, the conversational implicatures of NIGHT and SINGLE come out cancellable. The before-mentioned cancellation cases NIGHT* and SINGLE* seem to resemble the original cases in all respects except that Sarah attaches a cancellation clause (conditions (i) and (ii)), Sarah's whole contribution is felicitous (requirement (a)), and Sarah does not convey the relevant proposition (requirement (b)).

First problem: sarcasm

It has been argued though that not all conversational implicatures come out cancellable in the sense of (Can-1).¹⁴ Consider the following case containing a sarcastic statement, adapted from Weiner (2006):

SEAT Hannah and Sarah are in a crowded train, Hannah is sprawled across two seats and Sarah is standing next to her, sandwiched in a crowd of strangers. Sarah says to Hannah:

Sarah: I am wondering whether it would be physically possible for you to make room for another person to sit down.

¹³Even though this view seems to be very common, it is rarely explicitly stated. For discussion of a view of cancellability that comes close to (Can-1), see Blome-Tillmann (2008, p. 157) and Blome-Tillmann (2013, p. 171). See also Åkerman (2015, p. 466) who does not explicitly give a condition along the lines of (b), but who seems to tacitly assume it still—otherwise his assent to Weiner's counterexample to be presented shortly (a case of a conversational implicature that does not fulfill (b)) would be somewhat strange. Note that neither Blome-Tillmann nor Åkerman ultimately endorses a view like (Can-1).

¹⁴See Huitink and Spenader (2004) and Weiner (2006).

Weiner (2006, p. 128) assumes that, in this context, Sarah conversationally implicates that Hannah should make room. But it seems that there is no context that fulfills the conditions of (Can-1). In all contexts that resemble SEAT in every respect except that a cancellation clause has been used, Sarah still conveys that Hannah should make room. Consider the following case which seems to meet conditions (i) and (ii):

SEAT* Hannah and Sarah are in a crowded train, Hannah is sprawled across two seats and Sarah is standing next to her, sandwiched in a crowd of strangers. Sarah says to Hannah:

Sarah: I am wondering whether it would be physically possible for you to make room for another person to sit down. But I don't mean to imply that you should make room.

Weiner (2006, p. 128) seems to assume that, independently of how we further spell out SEAT*, Sarah conveys that Hannah should make room.¹⁵ We cannot help but hear Sarah as being sarcastic. Whether she goes on and says 'I'm just curious' or 'I don't mean this ironically, I really only want to know whether you could,' we have the feeling that Sarah simply reinforces her commitment to the proposition that Hannah should make room. It thus seems that there is no context that resembles SEAT in all respects except for the cancellation clause such that Sarah does not convey that Hannah should make room. Given (Can-1), the conversational implicature of SEAT therefore seems uncancellable.¹⁶

Second problem: no split minds

There seems to be a further problem. Conditions (i) and (ii) of (Can-1) taken together ask us to look for contexts c^* which resemble the original context c in every respect except that the speaker uses a cancellation clause. Since, in the original context c , the speaker uses the sentence s and thereby conveys that p , she has to do this in the modified contexts c^* as well. That is, in the contexts c^* , the speaker has to use s and thereby convey that p . But the requirement (b) of (Can-1) now asks us to check whether, in one of these contexts, the speaker does not convey that p . This, one might argue, is plainly absurd. Unless the speaker has a split mind, she either conveys that p or she doesn't. She cannot do both. Given (Can-1), we are thus not only faced with the problem that some

¹⁵For endorsement, see Hazlett (2009, p. 597).

¹⁶One might insist that there *are* contexts of the relevant kind in which Sarah does not convey that Hannah should make room. One way to establish this would be to resist the claim that one can only hear Sarah as being sarcastic in SEAT*. It might be most natural to hear her as being sarcastic, but one can still also hear her as being sincere and serious, the thought goes. Another way would be to argue that it can be the case that Sarah does not convey that Hannah should make room even if we can only hear her as being sarcastic. The idea here would be that whether Sarah conveys what she literally says with the cancellation clause solely depends on her (specifically, her intentions), not on us as onlookers. For responses that go in a similar direction, see Borge (2009) and Colonna Dahlman (2013).

conversational implicatures are non-cancellable. We have to conclude that in fact no conversational implicature is cancellable: no proposition as conveyed at a context c is such that we can find a context c^* that fulfills the conditions of (Can-1).¹⁷

A second view of cancellability

Here is a modification of (Can-1) designed to forestall the two objections. It loosens (Can-1)'s constraint on contexts c^* at which we have to test our intuitions. According to (Can-1), only contexts that are very similar to c are relevant (condition (i)). According to the modified view, contexts which resemble c only insofar as the speaker here too uses s and thereby conveys that p are also relevant (condition (i')). The modified view furthermore precisifies the original requirement (b). (Can-1) merely has it that the speaker of c^* does not convey that p with her whole contribution. The modified view makes clear that this is supposed to be the case because the speaker takes back her commitment to p by using the cancellation clause (requirement (b')). More precisely:¹⁸

(Can-2) A proposition p as conveyed by the speaker's use of a sentence s at a context c is cancellable iff there is a context c^* which

- (i') resembles c in that the speaker uses s and thereby conveys that p , and
- (ii) differs from c in that the speaker uses the cancellation clause 'But not p ' or 'But I don't mean to imply that p ',

such that

- (a) the speaker's the whole utterance is felicitous, and
- (b') the speaker takes back her previous commitment to p with her use of the cancellation clause.

(Can-2) forestalls the two objections outlined above. First, (Can-2) does not ask for contexts c^* in which the speaker has to convey and not convey that p at the same time. It only asks for contexts c^* in which the speaker first conveys that p and then takes back her commitment to p . Second, (Can-2) circumvents the somewhat tricky question of how to interpret Sarah in SEAT*. For, according to (Can-2), the following case, adapted from Blome-Tillmann (2008, 158ff.), proves the cancellability of the conversational implicature of SEAT already:

¹⁷Capone (2009, 56ff.) and Burton-Roberts (2010, 146ff.) reach a very similar conclusion via a closely related line of reasoning. Their argument runs as follows: if the speaker conveys that p by using s in our context c^* , she presumably conversationally implicates it. But if she conversationally implicates that p , then she intends to get across that p . This intention cannot be undone, though: 'EITHER the speaker intended by her utterance to implicate that P – and therefore did implicate that P – in which case she cannot undo (or 'cancel') it, OR she did not so intend, in which case there is no implicature to cancel in the first place.' Burton-Roberts (2010, p. 146)

¹⁸A view along these lines is proposed by Blome-Tillmann (2008, 159f.). See also Hazlett (2012, 467ff.).

SEAT** Hannah and Sarah are at the NASA training center. To make a couple of gravity tests, Hannah has been put in some kind of centrifuge. Due to the centrifuge force, she has been pushed into her seat so strongly that she gets sprawled across two seats. Sarah asks via intercom:

Sarah: I am wondering whether it would be physically possible for you to make room for another person to sit down. But I don't mean to imply that you should make room. I just need to know for my files.

Sarah here uses 'I am wondering whether it would be physically possible for you to make room for another person to sit down,' i.e. the same sentence as in the original case SEAT, and with that, one might hold, she conveys that Hannah should make room.¹⁹ Additionally, she uses a cancellation clause of the right kind, namely 'But I don't mean to imply that you should make room.' And, indeed, not only does her whole contribution seem felicitous; it also seems that, with it, she does not convey that Hannah should make room. We have no inclination to interpret her as being sarcastic. In other words, given (Can-2), the conversational implicature of SEAT comes out as cancellable after all.

Third problem: irony

(Can-2) does better than (Can-1), but it is not without problems either. Consider the following case containing an ironic statement, adapted from Åkerman (2015):

PRIZE Hannah and Sarah have the following exchange over coffee:
Hannah: Stephen King will win the Nobel Prize for Literature.
Sarah: And $2 + 2 = 5$.

Åkerman (2015, p. 469) assumes that, in this context, Sarah conversationally implicates that King will not win the Nobel Prize for Literature. But it seems that there is no context that fulfills the conditions of (Can-2). In all contexts that meet the first two conditions, Sarah's whole contribution is infelicitous. Consider the following case which seems to fulfill conditions (i') and (ii):

PRIZE* Hannah and Sarah have the following exchange over coffee:
Hannah: Stephen King will win the Nobel Prize for Literature.
Sarah: And $2 + 2 = 5$. But I don't mean to imply that King will not win the Nobel Prize for Literature.

Åkerman (2015, p. 469) assumes that, independently of how we spell out PRIZE*, Sarah's whole contribution is infelicitous. After cancellation of the conversa-

¹⁹For this claim with respect to a slightly different case, see Blome-Tillmann (2008, p. 159). I will take issue with this assumption in due course.

tional implicature, no sensible interpretation of the speaker's contribution remains. Given (Can-2), the conversational implicature of PRIZE therefore seems uncancellable.

Fourth problem: no change of minds

There seems to be a further problem. Condition (i) of (Can-2) asks us to look for contexts c^* in which the speaker uses s and thereby conveys that p . In line with that, requirement (b') asks us to check whether, in one of these contexts, the speaker takes back her commitment to p . This, in effect, makes cancellation a form of retraction. How plausible is this? Recall NIGHT* and SINGLE*. Does Sarah here first convey the proposition in question and then takes back the respective commitment? If she first conveyed the proposition, then she must have intended to get across this proposition. So does she first intend to get across the proposition but then changes her mind and takes back her commitment?²⁰ This looks like an unnatural description. It seems that Sarah never intended to get across that p to begin with. The cancellation clause only clarifies that this is so.²¹

Obviously, this is not a knock-down argument against (Can-2). But it still raises the question whether we were right to focus so much on what is being conveyed.

2.2 Focus on felicity

What reasonable alternatives to (Can-1) and (Can-2) are there? In what follows, I will outline a view of cancellability in which our felicity intuition plays the key role.

A third view of cancellability

Here is the view of cancellability I have in mind:

²⁰Does Sarah have to intend to get across that p if she conveys that p ? Recall that we assumed that conveying that p is roughly equivalent to speaker-meaning that p (see footnote 3). According to Grice at least, one has to intend to get across that p if one speaker-means that p . Note that even if one does not like the equation of conveying and speaker-meaning, it seems that Sarah has to intend to get across that p if she conveys that p . For if, in the cases at hand, she does convey the propositions in question, she presumably conversationally implicates them. It is commonly agreed that one has to intend to get across that p if one conversationally implicates that p (see, e.g., Burton-Roberts (2010, p. 138)).

²¹Note that my objection is different from Capone's. He writes (2009, p. 59): 'Implicatures only arise if intended and recognized if intended. But then it should be impossible to cancel an implicature: how would it be possible to withdraw/cancel what was intended to be implicated and was recognized as intended? An implicature could only be withdrawn/cancelled if it were NOT intended. But then it wouldn't BE an implicature (since implicatures by definition are intended); in other words, there would BE no implicature to cancel.' Unlike Capone, I do think that the speaker can withdraw what was intended to be implicated. But I also think that she can only do this if she changes her mind. It is this latter bit that I find implausible as regards the cases at hand.

(Can-3) A proposition p as conveyed by the speaker's use of a sentence s at a context c is cancellable iff there is a context c^* which

- (i'') resembles c in that the speaker uses s , and
- (ii) differs from c in that the speaker uses the cancellation clause 'But not p ' or 'But I don't mean to imply that p ',

such that

- (a) the speaker's whole utterance is felicitous.

(Can-3) loosens the constraints for the context c^* once again. According to (Can-2), we have to find a context in which the speaker first conveys that p (condition (i')) and then takes back her commitment to p (requirement (b')). But with (Can-3), no such requirement is in place. We just have to look for contexts in which the speaker's utterance of 's. But not p ' or 's. But I don't mean to imply that p ' is felicitous.

(Can-3) avoids all four problems outlined above. Given (Can-3), the speaker of c^* does not have to convey that p . (Can-3) thus neither demands that she both conveys that p and does not convey that p at the same time, nor that she takes back a commitment she has previously incurred and so has changed her mind over the course of her contribution.²²

Furthermore, given (Can-3), the conversational implicatures of the challenging cases SEAT and PRIZE come out cancellable. This is shown by SEAT** and the following case:

PRIZE** Hannah and Sarah have the following exchange over coffee:

Hannah: Stephen King will win the Nobel Prize for Literature.
 And Donald Trump will win the Nobel Peace Prize.

Sarah: And $2 + 2 = 5$. But I don't mean to imply that
 King will not win the Nobel Prize for Literature.
 It's just that Trump will never ever win the Nobel
 Peace Prize.

SEAT** and PRIZE** straightforwardly meet the conditions of (Can-3). Sarah uses the same sentences as in the original cases. Additionally, she uses a cancellation clause of the right kind ('But I don't mean to imply that you should make room' and 'But I don't mean to imply that King will not win the Nobel Prize for Literature'). And, as required by (a), her whole contributions are felicitous. Given (Can-3), the conversational implicatures of SEAT and PRIZE thus come out as cancellable.

Apart from the fact that it restores (Imp-Can), (Can-3) as an analysis of explicit cancellability nicely aligns with what Grice himself says. Take a look at the following quote:

²²So unlike Burton-Roberts (2010, 138ff.) who seems to think that cancellation and clarification are mutually exclusive phenomena, I think that conversational implicatures can be cancelled in the sense that they can be 'clarified away' by the speaker.

[A] putative conversational implicature that *p* is explicitly cancelable if, to the form of words the utterance of which putatively implicates that *p*, it is admissible to add *but not p*, or *I do not mean to imply that p*. (Grice, 1989, p. 44)²³

On Grice's view, cancellability is a matter of whether attaching a cancellation clause is felicitous (in the wording of the quote: admissible). It is not about taking back something one has previously conveyed.

(Can-3) has the further advantage of providing a clear-cut distinction between explicit cancellability and contextual cancellability. Take a look at what Grice says about the latter:

[A putative conversational implicature that *p*] is contextually cancelable if one can find situations in which the utterance of the form of words would simply not carry the implicature. Grice (1989, p. 44)

Explicit cancellability is all about felicity: whether adding a cancellation clause is felicitous. Contextual cancellability is all about conveyance: whether there is a context at which the speaker uses the sentence *s* without conveying that *p*. Thus, given (Can-3), explicit and contextual cancellability come out as independent. Not every explicit cancellation context is an contextual cancellation context and not every contextual cancellation context is an explicit cancellation context. An example of an explicit but not contextual cancellation context would be the before-mentioned case SEAT*. An example of a contextual but not explicit cancellation context would be one in which the implicature in question is not present and no cancellation clause has been used.

The above quotes also help to forestall a potential worry with the suggested interpretation of cancellability, namely, that some cancellation contexts are such that there was no implicature to be cancelled to begin with. To cancel something in Grice's terminology, the thing in question need not be or have been present. This is not only clear from what Grice says about explicit cancellability; it is especially clear from what he says about contextual cancellability. At a contextual cancellation context, the conversational implicature is not and never has been present. Still it is a context of cancellation.²⁴

²³See also: 'I did suggest, in the paper on implicature, two sorts of tests by which one might hope to identify a conversational implicature. [...] One test was the possibility of cancellation; that is to say, could one without logical absurdity, attach a cancellation clause. For instance, could I say *He took off his trousers and got into bed, but I don't mean to suggest that he did those things in that order?* If that is not a linguistic offense, or does not seem to be, then, so far as it goes, it is an indication that what one has here is a conversational implicature, and that the original meaning suggestion of temporal succession was not part of the conventional meaning of the sentence.' Grice (1981, p. 186).

²⁴For the claim that 'cancellability' can be considered a misnomer, see Hirschberg (1985, p. 29) and Geurts (2010, 20f.). For a strategy to avoid this, see Burton-Roberts (2010, 146ff.).

3 Is the test informative?

Let us now move on to the question of how informative the cancellability test is. (Can-3) is very weak. Far more propositions come out as cancellable than given (Can-1) or (Can-2). (Can-3) thus threatens to trivialize the cancellability requirement (Imp-Can).

It seems clear that, given (Can-3), it is not only conversational implicatures that come out cancellable. The semantic content of at least some ambiguous and context sensitive sentences come out cancellable as well.²⁵ Consider the following two cases, the first of which features an ambiguous expression ('bank'—which can mean credit institution and river bank) and the second of which contains a context-sensitive expression ('soon'—which picks out time spans of different length, depending on the context of use):

PICK UP Hannah and Sarah have the following exchange over coffee:

Hannah: Where do you meet your accountant friend?

Sarah: I'll pick her up at the bank.

INVITATION Hannah and Sarah invited Mary over for dinner:

Hannah: Should I put the pizza in the oven?

Sarah: Yes. Mary will arrive soon.

Arguably, Sarah here conveys that she will pick up her accountant friend at a credit institution and that Mary will arrive within the next 30 minutes or so, respectively. Consider now the following two cases:

PICK UP* Hannah and Sarah have the following exchange over coffee:

Hannah: Where do you meet your accountant friend?

Sarah: I'll pick her up at the bank. But I don't mean to imply that I'll pick her up at a credit institution. I'll pick her up at the river bank.

INVITATION* Hannah and Sarah invited Mary to spend Thanksgiving with them:

Hannah: Should I start preparing the turkey?

Sarah: Yes. Mary will arrive soon. But I don't mean to imply that she'll arrive within the next 30 minutes or so. In fact, I think that she won't be here within the next three hours. We should start preparing anyways.

Since Sarah's whole contributions sound felicitous, the propositions conveyed in the original cases come out as cancellable given (Can-3). It thus seems that

²⁵This has been pointed out as early as Sadock (1978). See also Wilson and Sperber (1981, p. 159) and Miller (2016, 543f.)

sometimes at least the semantic content of a sentence passes the cancellability test as well.

What about the semantic contents of unambiguous and context insensitive sentences? What about semantic presuppositions and conventional implicatures? Do they come out cancellable as well? Assuming (Can-3), one might think that they do. Consider the following case:

THROAT Hannah and Sarah have the following exchange over dinner:
 Hannah: God, I find frog legs disgusting. How can you eat them?
 Sarah: Well, they taste great. Besides, you can have all kinds of fun with them. You can try to swallow them in one piece. Look! I have a frog in my throat!

In this case, Sarah seems to convey the semantic content of her last sentence, namely that she has a frog in her throat. Now take a look at the following case in which Sarah uses the very same sentence figuratively:

THROAT* Hannah and Sarah have the following exchange over the phone:
 Hannah: Sarah, is that you? Your voice sounds so strange!
 Sarah: Sorry! I have a frog in my throat. But I don't mean to imply that I have a real frog in my throat. I just feel the need to cough.

In this case, it seems, Sarah's utterance is felicitous. So, given (Can-3), the semantic content of the sentence 'I have a frog in my throat' is cancellable as well.

One might argue that what holds for the semantic content of 'I have a frog in my throat' holds for the semantic content of any sentence.²⁶ Worse still, it holds for any kind of proposition as conveyed at a context, i.e. not only for semantic contents but also for, e.g., semantic presuppositions and conventional implicatures. Take the semantic content of the sentence ' $2 + 2 = 5$ '—that $2 + 2 = 5$ —or the proposition presupposed by 'The king of France is bald'—that there is exactly one king of France—or the proposition conventionally implicated by 'Mary is tall but beautiful'—that there is a contrast between being tall and being beautiful. Think of a context where the speaker uses the sentence in question ironically. In such a context, one might hold, it will be in principle possible to felicitously add the respective cancellation clause. That is, in such a context, an utterance of ' $2 + 2 = 5$. But I don't mean to imply that $2 + 2 = 5$ ' can be felicitous (*mutatis mutandis* for the other sentences). It thus seems that, given (Can-3), all propositions as conveyed at contexts come out cancellable. For if the sentence *s* in question is used figuratively, then adding a cancellation clause is fine.

²⁶For an inconclusive discussion of this worry, see Grice (1989, 44f.).

Does this render the cancellability test uninformative and useless? I think there is a way to resist this conclusion. It is to distinguish a broad and a narrow notion of cancellability. The broad notion is spelled out in (Can-3); the narrow notion is just like (Can-3) but restricts the condition (i'') to non-figurative uses of s . Given the broad notion, everything is cancellable. Given the narrow one, though, this is not the case. Semantic presuppositions and conventional implicatures, for instance, turn out not to be cancellable, because there are no sentences of the form $\ulcorner s$. But not $p \urcorner$ or $\ulcorner s$. But I don't mean to imply that $p \urcorner$ with s being the sentence that carries or triggers the semantic presupposition or conventional implicature that p which are felicitous when used non-figuratively.

It might seem worrisome that, to apply the test featuring the narrow notion of cancellability, we do not only have to have intuitions about whether a contribution of the form $\ulcorner s$. But not $p \urcorner$ or $\ulcorner s$. But I don't mean to imply that $p \urcorner$ is felicitous; we also have to know when a sentence is used non-figuratively. Note, first, though, that this does not make the test unduly demanding. Just like we have ordinary linguistic intuitions about whether some contribution of the form $\ulcorner s$. But not $p \urcorner$ or $\ulcorner s$. But I don't mean to imply that $p \urcorner$ is felicitous, we have ordinary linguistic intuitions about whether a sentence is used non-figuratively. And it is not clear why we should not be allowed to rely on these intuitions when we apply the test.²⁷ Note, secondly, that the test is not rendered superfluous. If we are looking at a case like PRIZE where it is clear that the sentence in question (the sentence ' $2 + 2 = 5$ ') is used figuratively, we can indeed already tell that the proposition in question (that King will not win the Nobel Prize for Literature) is presumably a conversational implicature. So, in such cases, we do not need the cancellability test anymore. But in other cases where we do have the impression that the sentence is used non-figuratively, like for instance in NIGHT and SINGLE, applying the test featuring the narrow notion of cancellability makes perfect sense.²⁸

It should be noted that in many of the philosophically interesting cases where conversational implicatures seem to play a role, there is a standing assumption that the sentence in question is not used figuratively. For instance, hardly anyone would hold that knowledge sentences in skeptical contexts are used figuratively.²⁹ Even so, there is a large debate on whether skeptical intuitions can be explained in terms of conversational implicatures.³⁰ In these cases the cancellability test can still be usefully applied.

²⁷There will of course be unclear cases. But this, I take it, is a general problem that basically any test is confronted with.

²⁸I thus disagree with Weiner (2006, p. 129), who holds that 'if we can already tell what utterances are to be taken non-figuratively, we do not need a test for the presence of an implicature.'

²⁹Schaffer (2004) is an exception, but even he has changed his mind in the meantime.

³⁰See, e.g., Brown (2006).

4 Conclusion

Grice famously suggested the following test for conversational implicatures: if you want to find out whether some proposition is a conversational implicature, you should ask yourself whether it is cancellable. If you find that it is not cancellable, you can infer that it is not a conversational implicature; if you find that it is cancellable, you can infer that it might well be a conversational implicature and that you should now do further testing. But Grice did not leave it at that. He also made clear what he meant by ‘cancellability’: a proposition p as conveyed by the speaker’s use of a sentence s at a context c is explicitly cancellable iff there is a context c^* where the speaker’s use of $\ulcorner s$. But not $p \urcorner$ or $\ulcorner s$. But I don’t mean to imply that $p \urcorner$ is felicitous, and it is contextually cancellable iff there is a context c^* where the speaker’s use of s does not convey that p . Given this view of cancellability, Grice’s cancellability test is reliable. All conversational implicatures come out as cancellable. Restricted to non-figurative uses of the sentence s , the test also seems informative. So Grice’s test can be usefully applied.

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