

# Reassessing the Explicit-Implicit Distinction: A Critical Analysis of Gricean Pragmatics and Relevance Theory

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## Abstract

This paper investigates the problematic nature of the explicit-implicit distinction in the theory of meaning. It reviews how this notion has been addressed in the two major theories of the inferential approach, namely, the Gricean semantics-pragmatics theory and Wilson and Sperber's Relevance Theory (RT). The representation of meaning in terms of the explicit-implicit distinction is attributed to Gricean semantics-pragmatics, which is operationalised in terms of truth-conditions for the explicit meaning and implicatures for the implicit meaning. Although Gricean proposals have laid the foundations for most of the work in the theory of meaning, the paper highlights that such an explicit-implicit distinction cannot be a clear-cut division and identifies some irregularities in the interplay between Grice's linguistic meaning and conversational implicatures. The paper then re-analyses Gricean pragmatics in the light of Relevance Theory (RT) and concludes by explaining the salient issues with the clear-cut distinction between explicit and implicit meaning. The study finds that Grice's view—that the semantics-pragmatics distinction is based on the saying/implicating distinction—does not hold because conversational maxims play a significant role in reference assignment and in determining which of the logically possible senses of what is said the speaker could have intended.

**Keywords:** Explicit-Implicit Distinction, Gricean Pragmatics, Relevance Theory, conversational implicature

## 1. Introduction

The paper addresses a contentious topic in successive theories of meaning, namely, the problematic distinction between explicit and implicit meaning. Its complicated nature is due to the interdisciplinarity of the subject matter, as students of the theory of meaning can be found in different disciplines, including linguistics, philosophy and communication. It is also due to the dichotomies surrounding this baffling question: semantics or pragmatics, what is said or what is implied, and so forth. Within the domain of linguistics and the philosophy of language, there have been three approaches to developing a theory of meaning: the behaviourist approach, the mental image approach and the inferential approach as set out by Paul Grice.

This paper sheds light on the explicit-implicit distinction as an essential notion in contemporary pragmatic theory and truth-conditional semantics. It reviews how this issue is dealt with in two major theories in the domain of the inferential approach: Grice's semantics (truth-conditional vs. conversational implicature) (Grice, 1971, 1989) and Wilson and Sperber's Relevance Theory (RT) (Sperber & Wilson, 1986, 1987; Wilson & Sperber, 2006, 2012). It sketches the systematic frameworks of both Grice's semantics and Wilson and Sperber's RT to highlight the distinction between the explicit (semantics) and the implicit (pragmatics) and reviews the potential problems arising from each approach. Section two outlines Grice's theory of meaning, which is the foundation for the Gricean school in semantics-pragmatics. It reviews his truth-conditional semantics and his co-operative principle (CP) and the four maxims of successful communication. Section three reviews RT and its amendments of Grice's CP maxims to form a cognitive-oriented theory of communication. The fourth section sketches the problems arising from the explicit-implicit distinction.

## 2. The Semantics/Pragmatics Distinction

Setting the boundaries between semantics and pragmatics has received considerable scholarly attention. One of the earliest attempts to do so was Grice's (1971, 1989) approach, based on the explicit-implicit distinction. However, there has been no consensus—neither on the nature of this distinction (cf. Burton-Roberts, 2005;

Blakemore, 2014, among others) nor on its equivalence to the semantics/pragmatics distinction (Carston, 2002, 2009). Carston (2009) argues that this distinction is more closely related to the communicated content in speaker meaning, as real language use typically falls short of full explicitness, which requires complete linguistic encoding of thoughts and propositions. Bach (1994) similarly argues that full explicitness would require the speaker to add more lexical material. However, this is rarely the case in real communication, which instead tends to minimize both the speaker's articulatory effort and the hearer's processing effort.

Thus, the simplistic definition of semantics as 'the study of meaning' seems to be outdated. Meaning is extremely broad, and the technical use of the term semantics has come to 'cover a particular deliberately restricted semantic theory in an overall theory of grammar, or language structure' (Levinson, 1983, p. 12). Levinson (1983, p. 14) argues that there are seven elements in the communicational content of an utterance: truth-conditions or entailments, conventional implicatures, presuppositions, felicity conditions, generalised and particularised conversational implicature, and inferences based on conversational structure. For him, semantic theory has to be truth-conditional, since 'it is the only kind of theory now available that is precise and predictive enough to make investigable the nature of a semantics/pragmatics boundary, or the interaction between the two components' (ibid, p. 15). In this sense, the term semantics leaves much of the communicational content of an utterance for pragmatics. The term 'pragmatics' is restricted to other context-dependent elements of meaning as opposed to the purely linguistic or semantic meaning. The inferential approach adopts a view of semantics as tied to the truth-conditional content of the utterance. While the study of language structure has been focused on the study of phonology, morphology and syntax in the domain of linguistics proper, the attempts to account for the structure of meaning are to be found within formal logic and the philosophy of language (Allwood et al., 1977).

### 2.1 Gricean Explicit/Implicit Distinction

It was Grice who laid the foundations of the inferential model of communication. This model is composed of two processes: the process of linguistic coding (decoding/encoding explicit meanings) and the inference process (interpreting the implicit) (Wilson & Sperber, 2004). Grice insists that an ideal conception of the construction of linguistic meaning (linguistic coding) incorporates the tools of formal logic, in which sentences have clear and determinate truth-values (Grice, 2001). For Grice, the existence of the counterparts of what he calls 'the formal devices' of *negation* ( $\sim$ ), *conjunction* (&), *disjunction* ( $\vee$ ), and *material implicature* ( $\square$ ) in natural languages, in expressions (such as *not*, *and*, *or* and *if*) makes it possible to construct a system for handling the meaning assigned to these expressions in terms of logic relations (2001, p. 165).

Grice distinguishes between natural and non-natural meaning (meaning<sub>NN</sub>), where the natural meaning is the meaning of linguistic expressions, and the meaning<sub>NN</sub> is the one 'used in communication' (Grice, 1971, p. 55). Based on this premise, a distinction is made between semantics and pragmatics, where semantics deals with the meaning of context-free linguistic expressions in terms of logic relations while pragmatics involves the inferred meaning of utterances in real contexts in terms of Grice's formal conversational implicature (see section 2.2 below).

For Grice, the linguistic semantics (LS) of expressions (words, phrases or sentences)—what is said—is what is literally expressed by their natural meanings regardless of the contexts in which they were uttered. Thus, for every sense of a linguistic expression, there is one interpretation or encoded reading (LS), which is relatively vague and context-free and is shared amongst speakers of the same language. However, this level of meaning is not sufficient to ensure a successful communication. For a communication to be successful, LS needs to be pragmatically enriched (via implicature) to convey the speaker-intended meaning. Such a distinction in verbal communication results in a semantics/pragmatics division in which semantics deals with the explicit content, and the residue of the utterance's meaning (the implicit content) is pragmatically imported or inferred (Carston, 2002; Levinson, 1983).

Gazdar's (1979, p. 2) formula (PRAGMATICS = MEANING – TRUTH CONDITIONS) draws a clear-cut border around truth-conditions beyond which a semantic theory cannot be applied. Levinson (2000, p. 186–7) argues for a similar view and states that:

The 'said' can be taken to be truth-conditional content, the proposition expressed, the output of the process of semantic interpretation; the proper domain of a theory of linguistic meaning. The 'implicated' can be taken .... to include all the processes of pragmatic inferences; it is the proper domain of a theory of communication.

In this equation, the explicit—*what is said*—is equal to the LS on the one hand, and on the other, the implicit—*what is implied*—is equal to pragmatics.

With regard to truth-conditionality, truth-conditional semanticists view the explicit meaning as the one that can be

characterised by formulating the conditions the world must meet for a sentence, phrase or word to be true (Allwood et al., 1977; Kearns, 2011). These are called truth-conditions. Propositional logic is concerned with how the truth-values of compound sentences are determined by the truth-values of their constituent sentences and the logical connectives combining them (Kearns, 2011). In turn, the meaning of a word is established by means of the set of, and jointly sufficient, conditions necessary for this word to be true. The explicit meanings yielded by the LS are vague (context-insensitive) meanings shared by all speakers. For example, there is one reading of the meaning of the sentence in (1): [SOME MALE HUMAN WHOSE NAME IS JOHN AT SOME POINT IN THE PAST WENT TO A PLACE WHERE CHILDREN ARE TAUGHT].

(1) John went to school.

However, in real communication, this linguistic meaning can be a springboard to endless speaker-intended meanings or pragmatic inferences within a set of maxims for successful communication (as illustrated below in section 2.2).

## 2.2 Grice's Conversational Implicatures

The conversational implicature devised by Grice was the first and most important concept in pragmatics and offered a systematic account of the possibility that someone's words could mean more than they actually say (Levinson, 1983). This proposal was brief, suggestive of the need for further work in the theory of communication and had a considerable influence on most subsequent work in pragmatics. Grice has since developed a model of how people use language efficiently and effectively or simply how they communicate successfully (Wilson & Sperber, 1981). He has proposed four basic maxims of conversation which jointly express the Co-operative Principle (CP). The CP is an essential principle for successful communication in the sense that it is the speaker-listener agreement to be engaged in an accepted talk exchange (Levinson, 1983). These principles are expressed in the table below (Grice, 2001, pp. 167–169):

Table 1. The Maxims of the Co-operative Principle

CP	Make your conversational contribution such as is required, at the stage at which it occurs, by the accepted purpose or direction of the talk in which you are engaged.
1. The maxim of quantity	(i) Make your contribution as informative as is required for current purposes of the exchange, and (ii) do not make your contribution more informative than is required.
2. The maxim of quality	Make your contribution one that is true, specifically: (i) do not say what you believe to be false, and (ii) do not say that for which you lack evidence.
3. The maxim of relation	Make your contributions relevant.
4. The maxim of manner	Be perspicuous, and specifically: (i) avoid obscurity of expression, (ii) avoid ambiguity, (iii) be brief (avoid unnecessary prolixity), and (ix) be orderly.

The speaker's adherence to the CP maxims will ensure a successful exchange in which the hearer will be able to interpret what the speaker means. Grice considers these maxims as not linguistic 'but rather [they] describe rational means of conducting co-operative exchanges' (Levinson, 1983, p. 103). The maxims are supposed to generate all the pragmatic inferences (implicatures) beyond the scope of the LS of the utterance. Such implicit inferences are called conversational implicatures (CIs) while the linguistically decoded logical inferences (e.g. entailment and logical consequence) are not CIs. The degree of context-sensitivity gives us two kinds of CIs: particularised conversational implicatures (PCIs) and generalised conversational implicatures (GCIs). GCIs are a subset of implicatures which do not require a particular context to be inferred; they are generally inferred but, of course, not truth-conditional. On the other hand, PCIs are types of implicatures which are more context-dependent and require a particular context to arise. However, for reasons of space, I will focus on the explicature/implicature distinction.

Grice suggests that CIs have five properties (Levinson, 1983, pp. 114–118). First and foremost, these implicatures are defeasible without contradicting the semantics of what is said. By adding additional premises, conversational implicatures are cancelable while logical inferences are not.

(2) John has three cows.

(4) \* John has three cows, in fact none.

(3) John has three cows, in fact, ten.

If we consider the example in (2), it is logically deduced that *John has two cows* OR *one cow*. These entailments cannot be denied as illustrated in (3). Following the maxim of quantity, it is conversationally implicated/induced in (2) that *John has only three cows*. Yet, this CI (*only three*) can be defeasible by adding the additional premise (*in fact ten*) without contradicting the logic of what is said.

The other properties of CIs include calculability with reference to CP maxims, non-detachability from the semantic content of what is said, non-conventionality (not part of the conventional meaning of linguistic expressions), and indeterminacy in the sense that one single meaning can be given to different implicatures on different occasions.

Thus, for Grice, the meaning of an utterance is composed of the linguistic meaning (what is said: the explicit) plus the conversational implicatures (what is implicated: the implicit) licensed by the co-operative maxims. This formula is a differently put version of the Gazdarian formula outlined above (what is said + what is implicated = what is communicated).

However, Grice admits that some implicatures are conventional in the sense that the words used, in some cases, do help to determine what is implicated besides what is said (2001, p. 167). He argues that in example (5), the meaning—the consequence—does not follow logically from what is *said*, but at the same time, it is not contextually *implicated*. Grice's admission that conventional implicatures do not fit properly into the framework he proposed is actually suggestive for future work and is therefore the starting point for the RT.

(5) He is an Englishman; he is, therefore, brave.

### 3. The RT: Reanalysis of Gricean Pragmatics

Grice's ideas on conversational implicature have provided a springboard for studies that analyse different types of language use—the semantics/pragmatics field inter alia (Chapman, 2006). Wilson and Sperber's RT is a modified version of Grice's proposals. RT practically conforms to the broad outline of Grice's theory with only modifications of the details and the role of the CP maxims (Wilson & Sperber, 1981). RT suggests two major modifications. Firstly, it suggests that the saying/implicating distinction is not a semantics-pragmatics distinction. In other words, it is not always the case that the maxims of conversations are restricted to a context-sensitive aspect of *what is said* as the CP maxims play a major role in determining which sense of the logically possible senses of *what is said* the speaker could have intended; that is, *disambiguation*. In addition, they also play a role in identifying which one of the range of possible referents the utterance means, that is, *reference assignment*.

- (6) a. 'Refuse to **admit them**.'
- b. What should I do when I make mistakes?
- c. What should I do with people whose tickets have expired?

(Wilson & Sperber 1981, p. 157)

In (6), what is said (in Grice's terms) is ambiguous because *admit* has two possible senses that can only be disambiguated in contexts such as b and c. The hearer can by no means interpret the propositional content of the utterance without recourse to context. Similarly, assigning the referent for *them* can be accomplished only through context.

Secondly and more importantly, RT reduces Grice's CP maxims into the over-arching maxim of *relevance*. Wilson and Sperber (2004, p. 250) argue that 'relevance is a potential property not only of utterances and other observable phenomena, but of thoughts, memories and conclusions of inferences.' For them, relevance is the decisive maxim for successful communication not because interlocutors have to obey the CP maxims, but rather because 'the search for relevance is a basic feature of human cognition' (p. 251). RT holds the fundamental view that any input—including linguistic input—is relevant to an individual when, in a given context, its processing produces a *positive cognitive effect*. In communication, the positive effect is a contextual implication or inference concluded from both input and context, but not from either of them alone.

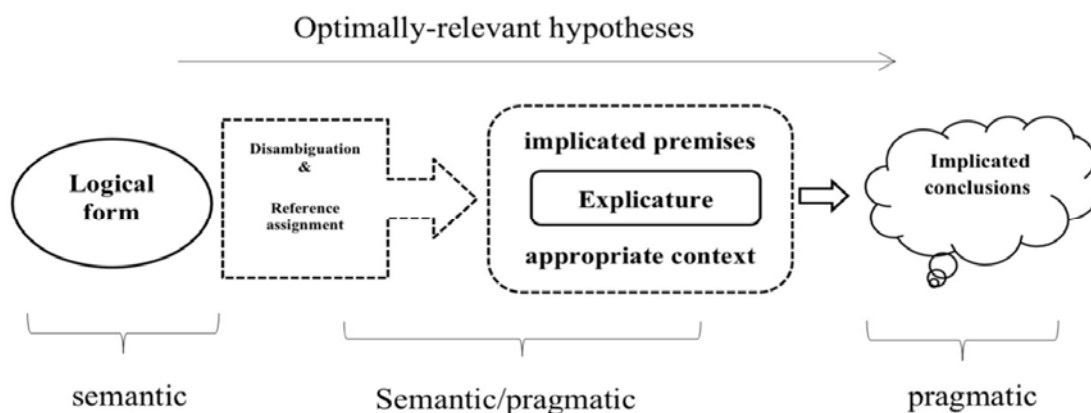


Figure 1. The online schematic outline of comprehension

Source: Carston, 2002, pp. 19–20.

The broad enterprise and theoretical grounding of RT, which appear to be both more convincing and more compatible with human behaviour, cannot be captured within this paper. Therefore, in the remaining part of this section, I will try to give an overview of the scope of the implicit-explicit distinction in RT. As discussed above, in RT's first modification of Grice's theory, RT gives more weight to the scope of the inferential process. While Grice's theory offers a binary model consisting of the exclusive processes of explicating and implicating, RT offers a schematic outline of a relevance-governed communication process throughout which the inference process is embedded (Wilson & Sperber, 2004, pp. 261–274). Inference in this model is not restricted to yielding the pragmatic of the implicit part of meaning but rather is involved in all aspects of the online and interactive process of communication.

RT asserts that the tasks shown in the figure above are not discrete tasks but some of the choices of implications made by the hearer according to his or her cognitive relevance. These choices—of explicatures, relevant implicated premises and the final implicated conclusions—are selected from a range of other potential candidate choices. The development of the incomplete decoded logical form into fully explicit content (explicature) via decoding, disambiguation, reference assignment and other pragmatic enrichment processes, involves inference. This semantic-pragmatic overlap is represented by the dotted lines in Figure 1.

Thus, RT does not provide a binary outline of meaning in terms of explicit and implicit meaning but a meaning developing from the logical form, enriched pragmatically into an explicature (full proposition), and ultimately rising to the most optimally relevant implicated conclusions. In this vein, Carston (2002) actually tackles the explicit/implicit distinction in a rather different way by proposing what she calls the *underdeterminacy thesis*, in which she argues for a further role for pragmatic inference in processing the linguistic meaning, which is undetermined by what is said. She states that:

[T]he linguistic semantics of the utterance, that is, the meaning encoded in the linguistic expressions used, the relatively stable meanings in a linguistic system, meanings which are widely shared across a community of users of the system, underdetermines the propositions expressed (what is said).

With the RT enterprise, Carston here makes a new distinction between *linguistic meanings* and *what is said* or *the fully propositional meanings*—the explicit meanings shared by all speakers. This thesis identifies a threefold level of meaning: (a) the linguistic meaning, (b) what is said and (c) what is meant, rather than the well-established representation of meaning as *what is said* (the explicit) and *what is implied* (the implicit) in Gricean and RT literature. It is worth mentioning here that while Grice 'uses the phrase *what is said* as a technical term for the truth-conditional content of an expression' (Levinson, 1983, p. 97), Carston defines the term *what is said* as a semantically complete and truth-evaluable propositional meaning. Importantly, for Carston, what is said may be more than just the meaning of the words a speaker utters. She supports her thesis with examples of language use, such as tropes, similes and sub-sentential linguistic expressions, which have propositional meanings beyond the linguistic expressions uttered.

#### 4. Issues with Explicit-Implicit Distinction

Grice attempted to provide a framework that accounts for all aspects of communication. His framework assigns all aspects of meaning to one of the two categories of meanings he provided: *what is said* and *what is implicated* (Wilson & Sperber, 1981).

Table 2. Gricean model of semantics-pragmatics distinction

Semantics	~	Pragmatics
What is said	~	What is implicated
Explicit	~	Implicit
Linguistically encoded	~	Linguistically inferred
Context-free	~	Context-sensitive
Truth-conditional (deductive)	~	Non-truth-conditional (non-deductive)

At the macro-level, there are two major practical problems with the theoretical conception of semantics and pragmatics. Firstly, Grice's model (as illustrated in the table above) seems to avoid the dilemmas of the semantics/pragmatics overlap by adopting the narrowest scope of the semantic: explicit meanings constructed in terms of truth-conditionality (Levinson, 1983). Such a truth-conditional conception of explicit meaning does not account for borderline cases such as deixis, ambiguous semantic expressions and figurative speech (as illustrated below). Secondly, the Gricean definition of pragmatics as 'anything beyond the truth-conditions of what-is-said' seems to be a one-for-all definition in the sense that it does not state the unifying characteristics of the pragmatic phenomenon.

At the micro level, certain problems arise when considering the issue of the explicit-implicit distinction. Firstly, equating the explicit linguistic meaning with that of the truth-conditional content creates some problems with the notion of truth-conditionality. Truth-conditionality might exceed the explicit level of the linguistic semantics of what is said and a great deal of propositional semantics is left unaccounted for due to the restricted semantic theory adopted. Consider the explicit (7a) and implicit (7b) representations of the meaning of the utterance 'she carried it':

- (7) a. [SOME FEMALE ENTITY AT SOME POINT IN THE PAST CARRIED SOMETHING]  
 b. Sarah carried the bag.

If we suppose in some context that the proposition in 7b is a pragmatically enriched (according to Grice) version of 7a, the proposition is still truth-valuable. Indeed, this example raises questions. First, it raises questions about the notion of *logical proposition*, as it seems to be—in the Gricean approach—a robust entity which is only the result of a decoding of the linguistic content rather than a semantic entity developing with further processes of disambiguation, reference assignment and other pragmatic processes. Secondly, it raises the question of which is more appropriate for truth-conditional treatment: 7a, the incomplete decoded proposition OR 7b, the full proposition yielded after reference assignment. Actually, the truth-value of deixis and ambiguous linguistic expressions is inevitably judged according to contextual parameters (Levinson, 1983).

Carston (2002, pp. 16–17) also reiterates the notions of truth-conditionality and propositionality in instances of *sub-sententials*. She argues that sub-sententials, such as '*on the top shelf*', are meant by the speaker to be sentence-shaped or propositional. If uttered by a speaker to a hearer looking for the marmalade, the speaker actually means more than the meaning of the linguistic expressions used. The full proposition and consequently the truth-value of sub-sententials cannot be obvious without context.

The second problem in the Gricean approach, which also arises from the example in (7), is the pragmatic positioning or classification of reference assignment and disambiguation (lexical and syntactic ambiguity). Although Grice acknowledges that these two processes (the knowledge of *sense* and *reference*) play a major role in the full identification of what the speaker has said, his conversational maxims do not tell us how these processes are achieved (Wilson & Sperber, 1981, p. 156). This also raises questions around the defining properties Grice proposes for CIs, as there seem to be some irregularities between the CIs and their properties.

Thirdly, Gricean semantics also seem not to account for figurative language and metaphor. Cases like *metaphor*, *irony*, *metonymy* and *hyperbole* involve explicitly saying something and implicitly communicating another. Carston (2002, p. 16) asserts that in such instances of language use, 'what is said is not even a part of what is meant but is merely a vehicle for conveying what is meant'. Similarly, *similes* are not taken literally, and what is said may constitute a small part of what is meant. She also argues that the implications of figurative language use are

open-ended and are bound to the different contexts in which they occur.

- (8) a. **utterance:** ‘George is a lion.’  
 b. **implicated:** George is brave.  
 c. **communicated:** George is brave.
- (9) a. **utterance:** ‘I enjoyed the sunny long weekend.’  
 b. **implicated:** I did not like the weather in the long weekend.  
 c. **communicated:** I did not like the weather in the long weekend.

The examples in (8) and (9) above show that the notion of explicit meanings in examples *a* relatively diverge from the implicated meaning in *b*, and in turn, do not constitute any of what is communicated in *c*. For Grice, first decode what is said, then calculate the implicature. Yet, the post-semantic role of Gricean pragmatics seems not to fit in such instances of language use but is rather a case where the communicated meaning is wholly exhausted by what is pragmatically implicated.

Finally, Grice’s notion of conventional implicatures (as shown above in 2.2) also fails to fit his explicit-implicit distinction. Grice claims that these implicatures are not conversational but conventional as their meaning is not essentially connected to certain features of context. In other words, it is not part of the implicated meaning. Furthermore, it is also the case that conventional implicatures cannot be accounted for in terms of truth-conditional and explicit semantic content. The dilemma of conventional implicatures, along with the shortcomings of Gricean semantics-pragmatics with regard to figurative language use, have motivated RT pragmatists such as Wilson and Sperber to adjust Grice’s theory of meaning (as discussed in section 3).

RT has attempted to avoid the discrepancies of Grice’s model sketched above by adopting the view that relevance—which subsumes other Grice’s CP maxims—is more consistent and reliable in generating pragmatic implicatures. The exclusive model of implicit-explicit meaning has been abandoned for an alternative model, in which the logical form is developed into the communicated proposition—explicature—via pragmatic processes such as reference assignment and disambiguation. Then, explicature is the stepping-stone for open-ended implicit implicatures from which the implicated conclusion is chosen according to the concept of optimal relevance (Carston, 2002). Although such a model avoids the Gricean model’s discrepancies, Burton-Roberts (2005) raises concerns about the notion of DEVELOPMENT and truth-conditionality or entailment or—simply put—where shall we draw the line between explicature and implicature. In my view, RT has succeeded in developing a pragmatic theory that has grasped the pragmatic territories accounted for in Grice’s model, such as reference assignment and disambiguation. However, there is still much to be explored in relation to how entailment and truth-conditionality contribute to the communication of meaning.

## 5. Conclusion

This paper has tackled the problematic nature of the explicit-implicit distinction. It has reviewed how this notion has been discussed in the two major theories of the inferential approach, namely, Gricean semantics-pragmatics and the relevance theory. The representation of meaning in terms of the explicit-implicit distinction is attributed to Gricean semantics-pragmatics, which is operationalised in terms of truth-conditions for the explicit meaning and implicatures for the implicit meaning. Although Gricean proposals laid the foundations for most of the work in the theory of meaning, the presents study concludes that Grice’s framework of CP maxims and conversational implicatures has proven to be vulnerable to certain loopholes and irregularities in language use, such as metaphor and conventional implicatures. The study has also highlighted the shortcomings of Grice’s use of the saying/implicating distinction as a criterion for setting the boundaries between semantics and pragmatics. It has demonstrated that conversational maxims play a significant role in reference assignment and in determining which of the logically possible senses of what is said the speaker could have intended. Furthermore, restricting the notion of truth-conditionality and propositionality to the explicit meaning, which is constructed irrespective of the contextual parameters, is another major failure that seems to have been avoided in the RT by identifying the role of context in some semantic-pragmatic processes, such as disambiguation and reference assignment.

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