

2. Jackson, Adams' Thesis, & Conventional Implicature

I Problems for Grice

(i) Suppose that the speaker is sure of the falsity of the antecedent of an indicative conditional; then they shouldn't be able to assert that conditional. But consider again:

(1) If Oswald didn't shoot Kennedy, then someone else did.

Surely I can say that, even if I am certain that Oswald *did* shoot Kennedy. But on Grice's account, that should be unassertible.

(ii) Likewise, if the speaker is sure of the truth of the consequent of an indicative conditional, it may still be assertible, and least for future conditionals:

(2) If we don't stop burning fossil fuels at the the current rate, global temperatures will rise by more than 2 degrees. In fact if we do stop burning fossil fuels tomorrow, global temperatures will (still) rise by more than 2 degrees.

(iii) How does it explain the relevance constraint? Perhaps typically we would only assert a disjunction if there were some connection between the two disjuncts, but it seems much weaker than that involved in an indicative conditional. Moreover, the connection in an indicative conditional seems to have direction: it matters which is the antecedent and which is the consequent, unlike with a disjunction. This comes out in a further feature:

(iv) indicative conditionals don't always contrapose; consider again the second half of (2):

(3) If we do stop burning fossil fuels tomorrow, global temperatures will rise by more than 2 degrees.

This is not the same as

(4) If global temperatures will not rise by more than 2 degrees, then we won't stop burning fossil fuels.

and it doesn't make any different even if we make the grammar more acceptable:

(5) If global temperatures don't rise by more than 2 degrees, then we won't stop burning fossil fuels.

2. The Ramsey Test

Let's focus on the issue of the typical connection between the antecedent and the consequent of an indicative conditional. Ramsey suggested that we can think of this in terms of a kind of update rule: in accepting an indicative conditional, one accepts that if one were to add the antecedent to one's suppositions, one would then add the consequent to one's suppositions.

That provides a stricter test than is given by a disjunction (I can accept (p∨q) because I accept p, but it doesn't follow that if I added not-p I'd accept q); and it is directional in the right sort of way (it's not equivalent to: If I added the negation of the consequent to my suppositions, I'd add the .

We can phrase Ramsey's point as a test of whether one accepts a conditional:

The Ramsey test

Try adding the antecedent to one's suppositions and see if as a result you'd add the consequent.

There's surely something right about this, but it is hard to formulate it. For instance, it can't be formulated in terms of adding the antecedent to one's beliefs; witness:

(6) If my partner is cheating on me they'll be hiding it so well that I will never notice.

So we need to stick with suppositions: I can suppose that my partner is cheating and that I don't notice. We might try to broaden this into a probabilistic framework: add the antecedent to one's suppositions and see if the consequent would be made probable. To think about this we need the idea of conditional probability: $P(A|B)$, the probability of A conditional on B. Standardly (but not uncontroversially) this is given as $P(A\&B)/P(B)$. (Don't think of $A|B$ as a self-standing proposition whose probability you are assessing; the line combines with the initial probability operator to provide a single two-place operator $P(_ | _)$ that is completed with two propositions.)

With that we can formulate:

Adams' Thesis

An indicative conditional 'If A then B' is assertible iff $P(B|A)$ is high.

3. Jackson

Jackson wants to add the feature described by Adams' Thesis to the information that is communicated by an indicative conditional. But he doesn't want to do this by making it part of the truth conditions of the conditional. Rather, using another device from Grice, he argues indicative conditional brings a *conventional* implicature that the consequent is robust with respect to the antecedent, by which he means that the probability of the consequent, conditional on the truth of the antecedent, is high.

Let's take this in parts.

Conventional implicatures share with conversational implicatures that they are not part of the truth conditions. But unlike conversational implicatures, they are part of the meanings of the words involved, rather than being derived from general conversational rules. So, to take an example from Grice, the sentence:

(7) She was poor but honest

brings a (rather objectionable) suggestion that her honesty is surprising given her poverty. But is that actually part of the truth conditions? Grice argues that it isn't. He argues that the truth conditions of (7) are the same as of:

(8) She was poor and honest.

The implicature somehow lurks in the background, rather than being part of what is said in the most straightforward sense. (Why think that? Suppose that someone asserted (7), and you objected to the suggestion that poverty typically brings dishonesty. You would be unlikely to say 'No she isn't'; you'd be more likely to say something like, 'Yes, she is, but I object to what you are trying to suggest about poor people'.)

Jackson wants to make use of this notion of conventional implicatures; he wants to say that the indicative conditional brings a conventional implicature that expresses Adams' Thesis. To use the indicative conditional is to conventionally implicate, but not to assert, that the conditional probability of the consequent on the antecedent is high.

4. Problems for Jackson

(i) Typically words that bring conventional implicatures have corresponding terms that lack them: we saw that 'but' has 'and' playing that role. Does the indicative conditional have something that plays this role? If Jackson's theory is correct, 'or' should do so. But are ordinary speakers likely to accept that indicative conditionals are truth functionally equivalent to disjunctions in the way that they allegedly accept that 'but' and 'and' are equivalent?

(ii) Should we believe in conventional implicature at all? The intuitions on which Grice's case was based seem rather fragile. A number of theorists have argued that there are no conventional implicatures: Kent Bach's 'The Myth of Conventional Implicature' is the most influential piece here; he argues that 'but' expresses a secondary but still truth conditional proposition (but see Potts 'The Logic of Conventional Implicatures' for a response).

(iii) If the standard account of *subjunctive* conditionals is along the right lines, then they are clearly not truth functional: they are to be understood in terms of possible world or the like. If that's right, then, given Jackson's account, indicative and subjunctive conditionals behave in very different ways. So it seems to be just a coincidence that they are both marked in English with the word 'if'; these are just unrelated homonyms, like the two senses of 'bank' or 'bear'. But it turns out that this isn't just a feature of English: indicative and subjunctive conditionals are represented in most languages in very similar ways — in French with 'si', in German with 'wenn', and so on, even across very different languages. That makes it much less plausible that it is just a coincidence in English. But then wouldn't we want both types of conditional to be explained in broadly similar ways? A number of theorists — Robert Stalnaker is one — argue that both indicative conditionals and subjunctive conditionals should be understood as non-truth functional in rather similar ways: very roughly, on Stalnaker's account, the latter makes you consider worlds that you know to be non-actual, whereas the former makes you consider worlds that you are supposing could be actual. At the very least, Jackson owes us an account of why many different languages use the same sorts of construction for such different roles.