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Theoretical Approaches to Implicit Meaning, Presupposition, and Implicature

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Abstract: This article examines the theoretical foundations of implicit meaning, presupposition, and implicature as central categories of contemporary pragmatics and discourse analysis. The discussion draws on the major contributions of H. P. Grice, Robert Stalnaker, Stephen C. Levinson, George Yule, Dan Sperber, and Deirdre Wilson. Particular attention is paid to the relationship between linguistic encoding, contextual information, common ground, speaker intention, and inferential interpretation. The analysis shows that presupposition is relatively stable and is often activated by identifiable linguistic triggers, whereas implicature depends more strongly on communicative context and pragmatic reasoning. Examples from English and Uzbek demonstrate how similar types of implicit content may be generated through different formal resources. The article argues that implicit meaning should be treated as a broader category that includes, but is not limited to, presuppositional and implicatural content.

Keywords: implicit meaning, presupposition, implicature, pragmatics, discourse, inference, context, common ground, communicative intention, relevance

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1. Introduction

The information conveyed in discourse is not limited to what is explicitly encoded in the grammatical and lexical structure of an utterance. In everyday communication, speakers frequently communicate meanings that are not directly stated but can nevertheless be recovered by hearers on the basis of linguistic cues, contextual assumptions, shared knowledge, and inferential reasoning. The study of such meanings occupies a central place in pragmatics and discourse analysis because it explains how communication routinely goes beyond literal sentence meaning[1].

The notions of implicit meaning, presupposition, and implicature are closely related, but they are not interchangeable. Implicit meaning is the broadest of the three concepts: it covers information that is not fully verbalized but is recoverable in context. Presupposition refers to information treated as already given, taken for granted, or required for the interpretation of an utterance. Implicature, by contrast, concerns additional meanings that a hearer infers from what has been said, the communicative situation, and assumptions about rational and cooperative communication[2].

The aim of this article is to systematize major theoretical approaches to these categories, clarify their conceptual boundaries, and demonstrate their interaction in discourse through English and Uzbek examples.

2. Materials and Method

The study applies descriptive, comparative, contextual, pragmatic, and discourse-analytic methods. Inferential analysis is used to identify the transition from explicitly

encoded propositional content to implicit interpretation. English and Uzbek examples are compared in order to reveal both universal pragmatic mechanisms and language-specific means of signaling implicit content.

The Linguistic and Pragmatic Nature of Implicit Meaning

Implicit meaning may be defined as meaning that is not fully stated in the surface form of an utterance but is intended or conventionally available for interpretation. Such meaning may arise from lexical semantics, grammatical structure, discourse relations, cultural assumptions, or pragmatic inference. A simple example is provided by the aspectual verb stop:

John stopped smoking.

The explicit proposition states that John no longer smokes. At the same time, the utterance normally conveys the background assumption that John used to smoke. This second proposition is not asserted independently; rather, it is triggered by the lexical-semantic properties of the verb stop and is interpreted as a presupposition.

In other cases, implicit meaning cannot be traced to a single lexical trigger. Consider the following exchange:

A: Are you coming to the meeting tonight?

B: I have an exam tomorrow.

Speaker B does not explicitly say that they will not attend the meeting. Nevertheless, the likely interpretation is that the exam provides a reason for non-attendance. Here the implicit meaning emerges through contextual relevance and inferential reasoning rather than through a conventional presupposition trigger.

3. Results

Theoretical Approaches to Presupposition

The concept of presupposition originated in philosophical logic and later became a central object of semantic and pragmatic research. In pragmatic terms, a presupposition can be described as background information that a speaker presents as already accepted or as uncontroversial for the purposes of the current discourse[3].

Stalnaker's pragmatic theory is especially influential because it links presupposition to the common ground of a conversation: the set of assumptions that interlocutors mutually treat as shared. On this view, a speaker presupposes a proposition when they act as though that proposition belongs to the shared background against which the utterance is interpreted.

Sarah's brother is a doctor.

The sentence normally presupposes that Sarah has a brother. Importantly, this background assumption tends to survive negation:

Sarah's brother is not a doctor.

Even under negation, the existence of Sarah's brother remains part of the background interpretation. This persistence under negation is commonly used as one diagnostic property of presuppositional content, although the behavior of presuppositions may vary across contexts and constructions[4].

Gricean Theory of Implicature

H. P. Grice's theory of conversational implicature transformed the study of non-literal and implicit communication. Grice proposed that conversation is guided by a Cooperative Principle and by maxims concerning quantity, quality, relation, and manner. When an utterance appears not to satisfy one of these expectations at the literal level, the hearer may infer an additional meaning that makes the contribution rational and relevant within the interaction[5].

A: *How was the lecture?*

B: *The professor had a very nice tie.*

Speaker B does not directly evaluate the lecture. However, the apparent irrelevance of the response encourages the hearer to infer that the lecture was not particularly impressive, or that the speaker prefers not to praise it. This interpretation is not

linguistically encoded as part of the sentence meaning; it is pragmatically calculated in context.

A key property of many conversational implicatures is cancellability. An inferred meaning can often be withdrawn without contradiction. For example:

Some students passed the exam - in fact, all of them did.

The use of *some* often gives rise to the implicature “not all,” yet the continuation explicitly cancels that inference. This contrasts with many presuppositions, which show greater resistance to simple cancellation[6].

Levinson and Pragmatic Inference

Levinson develops the distinction between encoded semantic content and pragmatically inferred meaning by emphasizing systematic patterns of pragmatic enrichment. He also highlights the importance of linguistic triggers in presupposition and the role of generalized inferential principles in implicature.

Even John passed the examination.

The focus particle *even* introduces a scalar interpretation: John’s passing is presented as less expected or less probable than relevant alternatives. Uzbek can express a closely related meaning through the combination *hatto ... ham*:

Hatto Karim ham bu masalani yechdi. (Even Karim solved this problem.)

The utterance asserts that Karim solved the problem while simultaneously suggesting that his success was unexpected relative to a contextual scale. The precise classification of such content may involve the interaction of presupposition, conventional meaning, focus semantics, and pragmatic inference; therefore, analysis must be sensitive to context rather than relying on labels alone[7].

Relevance Theory and Inferential Communication

Sperber and Wilson’s Relevance Theory conceptualizes communication as an inferential process in which hearers seek an interpretation that yields sufficient cognitive effects for reasonable processing effort. Linguistic decoding supplies only part of the communicative content; the hearer enriches, disambiguates, and contextualizes the decoded material in order to recover the speaker’s intended meaning[8].

A: Shall we have dinner outside?

B: It is raining heavily.

Speaker B does not explicitly reject the proposal, yet the hearer can infer that eating outside is not advisable under the current weather conditions. The inferred conclusion depends on encyclopedic knowledge, the conversational goal, and the search for a relevant interpretation.

Presupposition and Implicature: Similarities and Differences

Presupposition and implicature both contribute to meaning beyond what is directly asserted, but they differ in their typical sources and behavior. Presuppositions are frequently associated with identifiable lexical or grammatical triggers such as *again*, *stop*, *realize*, *regret*, possessive constructions, definite descriptions, and certain temporal clauses. Conversational implicatures, by contrast, depend more directly on speaker intention, discourse context, conversational expectations, and inferential reasoning[9].

Presuppositions are often relatively stable under negation and other sentence transformations, whereas conversational implicatures are typically more context-sensitive and cancellable. Nevertheless, the boundary is not always absolute. The interpretation of particular triggers, especially focus particles and scalar expressions, may require an integrated analysis of semantics, pragmatics, and discourse[10].

4. Discussion

The analysis suggests that implicit meaning is best understood as an umbrella category covering several mechanisms by which non-explicit content becomes available to the hearer. Presupposition represents a type of backgrounded content that is often

closely linked to linguistic form, while implicature represents content inferred through principles of rational communication and contextual relevance[11-13].

A useful general model may therefore be represented as follows: linguistic expression -> explicit proposition -> contextual integration -> inference -> implicit interpretation. In presupposition, the contribution of the linguistic expression is often particularly strong; in conversational implicature, contextual integration and inferential reasoning play the dominant role[14].

This perspective supports a multi-level approach to discourse meaning. Implicit content should not be reduced either to lexical semantics or to free pragmatic interpretation. Instead, it emerges through the interaction of semantic structure, grammatical form, discourse context, common ground, communicative intention, and cognitive inference[15].

5. Conclusion

Implicit meaning, presupposition, and implicature are interrelated but theoretically distinct categories. Implicit meaning covers a broad range of non-explicitly verbalized content. Presupposition concerns background assumptions that an utterance treats as given or necessary for interpretation, whereas implicature concerns additional meanings inferred from what is said in a particular communicative context.

Grice's theory explains how implicatures arise from cooperative inferential reasoning; Stalnaker's account relates presupposition to common ground; Levinson systematizes central pragmatic distinctions and inferential patterns; and Relevance Theory provides a cognitive account of how hearers recover intended meanings from linguistically underdetermined utterances. Taken together, these approaches demonstrate that the analysis of implicit meaning in discourse requires an integrated semantic-pragmatic framework

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