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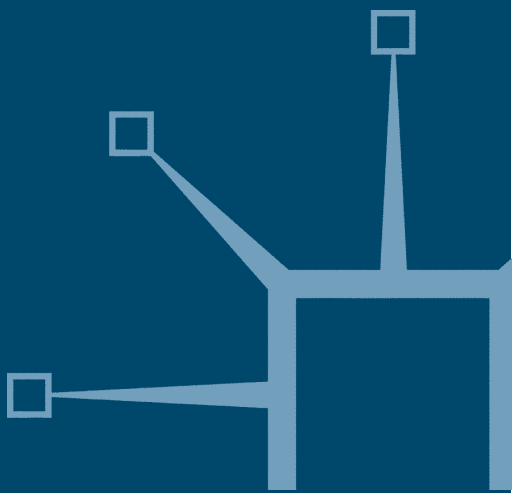
A Hybrid Theory of Metaphor

Relevance Theory and Cognitive Linguistics

Markus Tendahl



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Markus Tendahl
University of Dortmund, Germany

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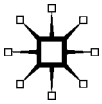

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Typographical Conventions

Italics are used for:

- metalinguistic uses, for example titles of works, examples without number, etc.
- important terms which have not been mentioned and explained before
- lexical concepts
- general emphasis

*Italics** with an asterisk are used for:

- ad hoc concepts

SMALL CAPITALS are used for:

- conceptual domains
- conceptual metaphors
- conceptual metonymies
- image schemas
- mental spaces
- thematic roles

CAPITALS are used for:

- conceptual regions

Acknowledgements

Many monographs are either started with a preface or with acknowledgments. As I see it, prefaces are usually written for two reasons: (1) deploring one's sufferings in writing the book, and (2) thanking various people for their support. A chapter with acknowledgments usually just serves the latter function. I have decided to restrict myself to acknowledgments – again for two reasons: (1) It is probably obvious to most people anyway that writing such a book is not a pleasure all the time and therefore I do not deem it necessary to set off on a long rambling account of my writing experience. At the same time, to me it certainly was a pleasure most of the time. (2) This should be the place where after several years of support, patience and endurance those people whose names are not on the cover, but who have been supportive, patient and enduring, ought to be in the centre of attention.

The first group of people I would like to thank are the ones who spent so much time with me discussing the topics and chapters of this book. I had the pleasure to spend the most rewarding discussions with my PhD supervisors Prof. Dr Hans Peters, Dortmund University and Prof. Raymond W. Gibbs, Jr, University of California at Santa Cruz, without whose help I would never have started nor completed this project. Both have not only accompanied my development as a young scholar, but have also become friends.

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1
Introduction

The main aim of this work is to make an original contribution to the study of metaphors, or more particularly, to the study of how people ordinarily use and understand metaphors in their daily lives. The phenomenon of metaphor has fascinated scholars for at least two millennia and still there are many open questions. Nonetheless, I do believe that the advances in linguistics, philosophy and cognitive psychology over the past four decades have led to substantial insights into the significance and workings of metaphors.

Various models describing the nature of metaphor have been put forward. The classical model is often attributed to Aristotle's *Poetic* and *Rhetoric* and is called the *comparison theory of metaphor*. According to this model, metaphors are elliptical versions of similes or comparisons. Thus, a metaphor of the form '*A* is *B*' is the elliptical counterpart of the linguistic expression '*A* is like *B* in respects *X*, *Y*, *Z* ...' This model was proven wrong by many scholars. One problem is that it presumes that metaphors cannot *create* similarities. From this perspective, metaphors can only describe existing similarities. However, research (cf. Lakoff and Johnson 1980; Reddy 1979/1993; Schön 1979/1993) has clearly shown that we use metaphors not only in order to describe similarities, but also in order to create them or, more generally, to conceptualize one conceptual domain in terms of a different conceptual domain. Another problem the comparison theory of metaphor has to face concerns the issue of how we process metaphorical language. Often, there simply is no similarity between the *vehicle* (the conventional referent of a metaphorical expression) and the *topic* (the actual unconventional referent). This raises the question of how we manage to understand such metaphorical utterances, if there is no similarity that we can accept as the *grounds* of the metaphor. Finally, Glucksberg (2001: 29–51; see also Glucksberg and Haught 2006) offers many good reasons to reject the idea that metaphors are implicit similes. For example, he points out that the vehicle of a metaphor (of the form *A* is *B*) refers to a new category, whereas the same term in a simile (*A* is like *B*) refers to the literal concept.

In the 1950s and 1960s the pragmatics movement won widespread attention through seminal works by John L. Austin (1962), John Searle (1969) and H. Paul Grice (1957, 1967). This was important for the study of metaphor, as linguists began studying contextual influences on utterance comprehension. Furthermore, the significance of inferential abilities in communication and the functions for which speakers use language were taken into account. All of these issues are highly significant for the study of language and metaphor, and therefore pragmatic theories of metaphor were able to give rise to important advances in metaphor research. The *standard pragmatic model of metaphor*, which was predominantly developed by H. Paul Grice (1967, 1975) and John Searle (1979/1993), was beneficial for research on metaphor, because it emphasized that metaphors rely heavily on inferences and on speakers' intentions. However, it also incorrectly assumed that metaphors are only used for special purposes and that literal language has priority over metaphorical language. These assumptions are no longer supported by current theories of metaphor due to a number of theory-internal and psycholinguistic counterarguments.

An alternative approach to language and cognition within a pragmatics framework is offered by *relevance theory* (Sperber and Wilson 1986). Relevance theory also considers the discourse context as being utterly fundamental to language understanding and stresses the importance of our inferences in communication. However, in contrast to other pragmatic approaches, relevance theory focuses explicitly on the cognitive background of communication. With respect to metaphor theory, relevance theory has the clear advantage over other pragmatic theories of metaphor that it does not presume that metaphor processing is different from the processes involved in understanding literal language. Quite to the contrary, metaphors are regarded as just one particular kind of the *loose use* of language. Metaphors are considered as a common way of achieving optimal relevance. Thus, relevance theory offers a sophisticated model that makes suggestions about how we process metaphors, and it also takes into account the cognitive abilities which are necessary to comprehend metaphors. In spite of this, the theory struggles with difficulties regarding its descriptive and explanatory possibilities concerning the interpretation of metaphors. I suggest that this is predominantly due to the fact that relevance theory has largely ignored the systematic and pervasive nature of metaphors in language and thought. This, however, is a topic that has been studied extensively by cognitive linguists.

Cognitive linguistics offers another cognitive, but in many respects different, orientation towards metaphor. In contrast to relevance theorists, cognitive linguists presume that language is not an isolated system. They believe that language is a cognitive ability that is intricately intertwined with general cognitive abilities which are deeply influenced by our cultural and bodily experiences of the world. George Lakoff and Mark Johnson's (1980)

pioneering work on conceptual metaphor has set in motion a whole new way of looking at metaphors. The main assumption underlying the *conceptual metaphor approach* is that metaphor is not primarily a phenomenon of language, but rather a phenomenon of thought. Conceptual metaphor theorists suggest that we use metaphors in order to make sense of our ordinary experiences of the world. Many concepts cannot be understood directly, and in these cases we use our knowledge of one tangible and well-understood conceptual domain in order to conceptualize another domain. This approach has initiated an enormous flood of publications on conceptual metaphor theory, and we owe many significant insights to this research conducted by cognitive linguists and psycholinguists (for a survey see Gibbs 1994). Thus, cognitive linguists have always focused on metaphor in thought, but initially their main interest had not been to present a processing model of metaphor. This is a shortcoming that was repaired to some extent by the work of cognitive linguists working in the framework of *blending theory* (Fauconnier and Turner 1998, 2002). These scholars also adhere to general assumptions shared by all cognitive linguists, but unlike conceptual metaphor theory, blending theory gives the online processing of metaphors some serious attention.

Thus, there have been two major developments in theorizing about metaphor during the past four decades: the pragmatic approach and the approach from cognitive linguistics. Relevance theory is certainly a pragmatic theory in the first place, but it has much in common with cognitive linguistics as well. Therefore, I consider it a fruitful project to combine central ideas from relevance theory and cognitive linguistics in order to create a more comprehensive *hybrid theory of metaphor*. I call it a hybrid theory, as it is deeply influenced by both relevance theory and cognitive linguistics. However, it is not a theory that can be seen as a version of a relevance-theoretic approach to metaphors, nor is it an approach that can be viewed as a version of conceptual metaphor theory or blending theory. My hybrid theory of metaphor rather attempts to combine the advantages of various existing theories of metaphor and discard their disadvantages. On top of that, the hybrid theory of metaphor makes unique and original suggestions and predictions that none of the two theories have made.

So far, the relationship between relevance theory and cognitive linguistics could have been described as something in between mutual rejection and mutual ignorance. I see two main reasons for this. First, some of the theoretical core assumptions of relevance theory and cognitive linguistics differ fundamentally. For example, relevance theory claims that our cognition is modularized with many autonomous modules executing domain-specific tasks. This is a position that cognitive linguists reject fervently. Hence, it is probably the case that many scholars working in either of the two frameworks could not imagine that there is potential for cooperation. Secondly, I assume that many scholars from both camps have not studied

the other theory closely enough. If this is true, then a certain lack of knowledge is perhaps one reason for the mutual ignorance. The structure of the present work reflects these considerations. In order to achieve theoretical credibility, I consider it useful to start this work with a critical overview of the developments in pragmatics and cognitive linguistics. After that, I will compare the two theories along the lines of several topics which are crucial in any theory of metaphor. Finally, I will present the hybrid theory of metaphor, and I will end this work with a summary of its main results and a look at future challenges.

In the following chapter I will examine influential developments in pragmatics with special emphasis on the question of how pragmatics deals with implicit language in general and metaphor in particular. In order to have a basis for doing this, I will start by briefly presenting Grice's theory of meaning and communication, which will be followed by a presentation of relevance theory. One of relevance theory's important, but also problematic, contributions to pragmatics is their idea of how interlocutors manage to coordinate the assumptions which are critical in discourse. Therefore, the section on relevance theory will have a special focus on this issue. In a subsequent section I will critically discuss pragmatic approaches to explicitness and implicitness proposed by François Recanati, Kent Bach and relevance theorists such as Deirdre Wilson, Dan Sperber and Robyn Carston. After this general introduction into the ways pragmaticists view implicit language, I will present the standard pragmatic approach to metaphor and, most importantly, various lines of criticism against this approach. As an alternative theory of metaphor in a pragmatic framework, I will then discuss the relevance-theory account of metaphor, which is not susceptible to the criticism put forward against the standard pragmatic approach. Nevertheless, this view has, besides all its advantages, some problems that will also be addressed. For example, in Section 2.3.5 I will critically discuss the predictions that relevance theory makes concerning the effort involved in processing metaphors. In Section 2.3.6 I will discuss the claims that relevance theory makes concerning the relationship between cognitive effort and cognitive effects. Section 2.3.7 will present the results of a study conducted by Gibbs and Tendahl (forthcoming) on the cognitive effects communicated by metaphors. This study underlines the importance of the contribution that relevance theory makes to the study of metaphor.

In Chapter 3 I will provide brief outlines of cognitive linguistics in general, of conceptual metaphor theory and of blending theory. In the section on conceptual metaphor theory, I will critically discuss the *invariance hypothesis*, which makes predictions about metaphorical entailments. Furthermore, I will specifically emphasize the importance of cognitive linguistic research on the motivation for metaphors, i.e. I will deal with the question of why we have the particular metaphors which pervade our language and thought. In the section on blending theory, I will devote particular consideration

to questions regarding the online processing of metaphors that conceptual metaphor theory does not address.

Having introduced the most important developments in pragmatics and cognitive linguistics, I will systematically compare these two directions of research in Chapter 4. The need for such a systematic juxtaposition of ideas in order to advance research on metaphor has also been recognized by Adrian Pilkington (2000) in his relevance-theory inspired book *Poetic Effects*:

> At first glance there seems to be a certain amount of common ground between this approach [the conceptual metaphor approach] and that of relevance theory: both approaches are cognitive and both emphasise that metaphor is a natural non-deviant feature of language use, that metaphorical utterance interpretation does not involve calculating and then rejecting a literal meaning in favour of an alternative figurative meaning. Lakoff and Turner (1989) are also interested in developing an account of poetic metaphor. At second glance, however, there are a number of significant differences. A detailed analysis that compares and contrasts the two approaches would be valuable. (Pilkington 2000: 108)

Chapter 4 will do exactly what Pilkington advocates – it will provide a detailed analysis of what both theories have in common and it will also show where they differ. In order to accomplish this, I will select nine criteria along which I compare the theories.

Based on this comparison, I will develop the hybrid theory of metaphor in Chapter 5. The first part of the hybrid theory is a proposal on how we construct ad hoc concepts while processing utterances. The hybrid theory of metaphor posits that words have pointers to so-called conceptual regions which serve as blueprints for the creation of ad hoc concepts. These conceptual regions contain context-independent information, called the inherent domain, and context-dependent information. Via connectors they are connected to external knowledge structures, such as conceptual domains, metaphors or metonymies, image schemas, scripts, etc. Which elements from external knowledge structures eventually enter the ad hoc concept is determined by relevance-driven selection processes. Only elements which contribute to the overall relevance of the utterance will enter the ad hoc concept. In order for an external element to be relevant, it must be easily accessible. Therefore, one of the relevance-theory-inspired assumptions of the hybrid theory is that connectors get activated if the according external knowledge structures match assumptions in a person's cognitive environment that are held in a strongly manifest fashion. If such a match is detected and the degree of activation is sufficient, then the connectors may be activated and specify an ad hoc concept that will become part of a larger network structure that represents meaning. Thus, expectations of relevance play a decisive role in generating figurative meanings.

On the basis of these general considerations, I will explore the nature of metaphorical ad hoc concepts. A major defining feature of metaphorical concepts is that these concepts are predominantly profiled against external knowledge structures, whereas literal concepts are profiled against the inherent domain. Obviously, the hybrid theory of metaphor is based on a thorough description of the lexical processes involved in utterance interpretation. I consider this important, because the hybrid theory respects the fact that the online processing of utterances works incrementally. This entails that analysing processes on utterance level can only work if more fine-grained processes on a lexical level are devoted serious attention.

Having discussed the lexical semantics and pragmatics of metaphorical utterances, I will examine the processes involved on the level of utterances. The idea from blending theory that complex network structures of mental spaces are built up during utterance comprehension seems to be best suited in order to capture the dynamics of utterance comprehension. These processes do not work according to the principle of compositionality, which would imply that the meaning of a sentence is the composite meaning of its constituent meanings. The detailed discussion of an example in Section 5.5.1 will instead show that the construction of the network structure of mental spaces representing comprehension processes on utterance level is characterized by a substantial interaction between the context, expectations of relevance and the structure of the involved conceptual regions. These interactions can lead to an increase in our perception of figurativeness. Thus, the figurativeness of an utterance is not just proportional to the figurativeness of single constituents, but the combination of constituents can contribute to the level of figurativeness. In Chapter 5 I will explain these ideas, the sum of which I call the hybrid theory of metaphor, in detail.

2
The Relevance-Theory Approach to Metaphor

This chapter presents an approach to metaphor that has largely been ignored by scholars of metaphor: the relevance-theory approach to metaphor. I consider this situation unfortunate, because relevance theory, as a cognitive pragmatic view on language and communication, can make very important and unique contributions to the study of metaphor. I will start this chapter by first giving a very brief overview of Gricean pragmatics, because although relevance theory differs from Gricean pragmatics in many respects, it is fundamentally based on core assumptions introduced by Grice. Then I will present an overview of the current state of relevance theory and finally I will critically discuss the advantages and problems of the relevance-theory approach to metaphor.

2.1 Grice's theory of meaning and communication

Within the first half of the nineteenth century, philosophers dealing with truth-conditional semantics were occupied with placing the study of meaning within the larger philosophical doctrine of logical positivism. The works of philosophers such as Gottlob Frege (1848–1925) and Bertrand Russell (1872–1970) were concerned with translating natural languages into scientifically adequate and accurate artificial languages. The truth-conditional theory of meaning, which was based on these ideas, was dedicated to the belief that to determine the meaning of a sentence is to know the conditions under which it would be true. Thus, knowing the meaning of a sentence amounts to knowing whether a given sentence in a given world is true or false. This account of meaning is seriously restricted as it can only be sensibly applied to declarative sentences. Furthermore, recent research has come to the conclusion that even the meaning communicated by a literally intended declarative utterance goes well beyond anything that truth conditions could purport.

The major change in philosophizing about the meaning of utterances came about with the pragmatic turn in the 1950s and 60s. At that time,

Austin and Wittgenstein had started thinking about language in terms of actions being performed in the context of social practices and institutions. Austin's speech act theory soon became one of the most recognized approaches in pragmatics – a discipline that has boomed ever since.

Grice can be seen as a figure who tried to reconcile truth-conditional semantics with ordinary language philosophy. In his work he attempted to delineate how differences between sentence meaning and speaker meaning may arise. In distinguishing between sentence and speaker meaning, he acknowledged a contribution from truth conditions to the meaning of sentences. However, in order to fully capture a speaker's meaning, he also proposed a pragmatic principle which may cause inferences on the part of the addressee of an utterance, so that eventually we have a model at hand that can be regarded as being more satisfying than anything that had been proposed until then.

Grice's programme started out with his 1957 article entitled 'Meaning', which laid the foundation for his theory of communication. His main interest was communication characterized by full intentionality, such that accidental information transmission would not fall under communication proper. Grice's subsequent major step in the history of pragmatics was his further division of communicated meaning, which he called nonnatural meaning (meaning$_{NN}$), into *what is said* and *what is implicated*.

This distinction is of particular interest to the distinction between explicit and implicit language, which is at least for some scholars essential in distinguishing between literal and figurative language. I do not believe that such analogies between explicit and literal language on the one hand and implicit and figurative language on the other hand are possible at all. For one thing, not everything that is implicated is communicated nonconventionally, a characteristic that again many scholars would ascribe to figurative language. Nonetheless, I consider taking a closer look at Grice's discussions of what is said and implicatures quite useful. However, Grice distinguishes not only between what is said and implicatures, he also distinguishes

> ... between what is part of the conventional force (or meaning) of the utterance and what is not. This yields three possible elements – what is said, what is conventionally implicated, and what is nonconventionally implicated. (Grice 1978/1989: 41)

These distinctions are illustrated in Figure 2.1.

In Grice's diction, to *say* something roughly refers to the conventional and truth-conditional meaning of utterances. This is the particular part of the meaning of an utterance that the hearer can arrive at mainly by using his linguistic knowledge. In addition to linguistic decoding, only the assignment of reference and disambiguation of multiple senses is accepted into the notion of what is said. Apparently, Grice's original intention was

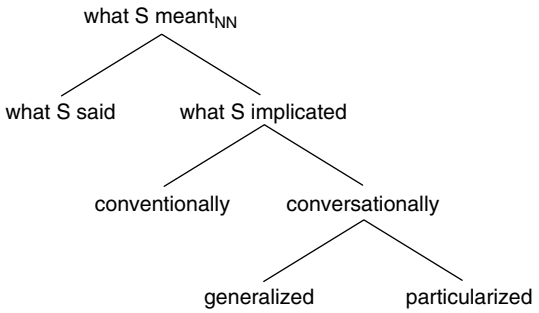

Figure 2.1 Components of Grice's Meaning$_{NN}$

to make sure that it is possible to receive a truth-evaluable proposition out of what is said. Nowadays, however, it is univocally assumed that much more pragmatic work has to be done, before we can get to something like a fully truth-evaluable proposition. Furthermore, Grice left it largely unclear how hearers manage to assign references and disambiguate expressions. It is striking that he admitted these processes, which clearly fall outside the coded parts of language, into what is said, the conventionally transmitted, coded part of meaning. In Grice's programme, reference assignment and disambiguation seem to be possible without taking into account any pragmatic principle or speakers' intentions. Inference only seems to play a role in deriving *implicatures*, the implicitly communicated propositions of an utterance. Implicatures, however, do not play a role in what is said.[2]

As can be seen in Figure 2.1, what the speaker meant$_{NN}$ may also be realized in the form of implicatures. The verb *to implicate* and the noun implicature are terms of art, invented by Grice to suggest their similarity to the words *imply* and *implication* without identifying them with the logical relation of implication. Grice suggested several subtypes of implicature.

As c*onventional implicatures* are deemed to be conventional elements of language despite being implicatures, they will not be of any interest to this work. Besides, many scholars would probably agree with Levinson, who is of the opinion that 'conventional implicature is not a very interesting concept – it is rather an admission of the failure of truth-conditional semantics to capture all the conventional content or meaning of natural language words and expressions' (Levinson 1983: 128). For us *conversational implicatures* are more interesting.[3]

These are implicatures which are recoverable by a reasoning process (cf. Wilson and Sperber 1991: 378). In contrast to what is said and the entailments of what is said,[4] conversational implicatures draw on the linguistic meaning of what has been said, the context, background knowledge and the cooperative principle together with the maxims of conversation. Capturing

a speaker's intention becomes the driving force in establishing them. The following example (adapted from Grice 1975/1989: 24) might help to illustrate this point:

(1) *Gary*: How is Stuart getting on in his new club?
Paul: Oh, quite well, I think; he likes his colleagues, and he hasn't been fined yet.

Linguistic decoding, reference assignment and possibly semantic disambiguation would deliver a truth-conditional content of Paul's answer that would demand quite a deal of work from a truth-conditional semantic or formal pragmatic theorist, and still, significant bits of Paul's intention would probably remain hidden. He perhaps wanted to imply that Stuart is the kind of person who is likely not to behave according to generally accepted rules of professional football players. This interpretation of Paul's utterance would be an implicature and also part of the meaning.

Grice investigated the phenomenon that people sometimes say something and mean something completely different from what the proposition of the sentence conventionally expresses by offering a general principle and a number of maxims. The basic idea is that speakers meet certain standards in communication and hearers will be guided in their interpretation process by the according assumption that a rational speaker follows these standards. In his 1967 *William James Lectures* (reprinted in Grice 1989), which were delivered at Harvard University, Grice introduced his notions about the guidelines that people make use of in order to communicate in an efficient and effective way. The basis for his theory is formulated in his now classic essay *Logic and Conversation* as follows:

> Our talk exchanges ... are characteristically, to some degree at least, cooperative efforts; and each participant recognizes in them, to some extent, a common purpose or set of purposes, or at least a mutually accepted direction. ... We might then formulate a rough general principle which participants will be expected (ceteris paribus) to observe, namely: Make your conversational contribution such as is required, at the stage at which it occurs, by the accepted purpose or direction of the talk exchange in which you are engaged. (Grice 1975/1989: 26)

This *cooperative principle* has enough explanatory power to cope with the question of why Emma is able to interpret Paul's answer in (2):

(2) *Emma*: Did Dwight score a goal?
Paul: He sang the national anthem in the changing room.

According to the cooperative principle, Emma will not take Paul's answer as a change of topic, as she will assume that Paul chose his utterance in

correspondence with the cooperative principle and that his utterance therefore fits the purpose and the direction of the talk. Provided that Emma and Paul share the knowledge that Dwight's customs after having scored a goal include singing the national anthem in the changing room, Emma will easily recover Paul's answer as stating that Dwight did, indeed, score a goal.

The cooperative principle serves as a source for nine associated maxims, arranged in the categories of quantity, quality, relation and manner:

> *Category of quantity*
> 1. Make your contribution as informative as is required (for the current purpose of the exchange).
> 2. Do not make your contribution more informative than is required.
>
> *Category of quality*
> *Supermaxim*: Try to make your contribution one that is true.
> 1. Do not say what you believe to be false.
> 2. Do not say that for which you lack adequate evidence.
>
> *Category of relation*
> Be relevant.
>
> *Category of manner*
> *Supermaxim*: Be perspicuous.
> 1. Avoid obscurity of expression.
> 2. Avoid ambiguity.
> 3. Be brief (avoid unnecessary prolixity).
> 4. Be orderly.
>
> And one might need others. (Grice 1975/1989: 26–7)

Grice assumed that these maxims may not be followed consciously, but that they, together with possible other maxims, still structure discourse. In particular, Grice believed that hearers tacitly assume that these maxims and the cooperative principle underlie each utterance. But how do the maxims contribute to the questions that Grice wanted to find an explanation for? In other words, why do the maxims help us to understand how it is possible that sometimes speakers successfully communicate more than they say? Part of the answer is that utterances which seemingly do not fit the maxims are usually still interpreted as being cooperative. In order to behave in accordance with the cooperative principle, one basically needs to follow the nine maxims. Conversational implicatures 'are the assumptions that follow from the speaker's saying what he says together with the presumptions that he is observing the maxims of conversation' (Recanati 1989: 295). In addition to implicatures which derive from observing the maxims, speakers can create implicatures by failing to fulfil the maxims in different ways. They can for example, (a) quietly and unostentatiously *violate* a maxim, they can (b) *opt*

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