

Implicature

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Implicature

When someone says “If P, then Q,” we often understand them to suggest or imply or implicate that “If not P, then not Q.”

But that is not a consequence of what they have said, or part of the meaning of what they said. (They’ve uttered a conditional, not a biconditional!)

Philosophers of language have a name for this sort of thing:
implicature.



Content or Implicature? Testing by Cancellation

Here's a test for telling whether something is a consequence of what was said or just something that you are "reading between the lines":

Can you "cancel" the sentence without contradicting yourself?

Suppose I say: "If the virus doesn't mutate, we'll be okay."

And then I say: "In fact, even if it *does* mutate, we'll still *probably* be okay."

I haven't *contradicted* what I said earlier. I have just canceled an *implicature*: something that you might (reasonably) have "read between the lines."



More Implicature Cancellation

My stock broker makes money whenever *I* make money.

- *Indeed, he makes money even when I don't.*

If you finish your dinner, you can have a cookie.

- *Heck, you can have a cookie even if you don't finish your dinner.*

I have three fingers on my right hand.

- *And two more, in addition to those.*



Compare with these attempts at cancellations, which *don't* work. They don't work because what we're trying to cancel really *is* part of the sentence means or entails. We can't cancel it without contradicting ourselves.

- Nick and Tim went surfing.
 - *Indeed, Nick didn't go.*
- **d** is neither a cube nor a tet.
 - *Rather, it is a cube.*
- **a** is larger than **b**.
 - *In fact, they are the same size.*



Be careful of implicature

Implicature can mess with your head. For instance, you might read

If **a** is in back of **b**, then it is larger than **b**.

Then when you find out that **a** *isn't* in back of **b**, you might assume that **a** *isn't* larger than **b**.

But that would be a mistake!

The conditional will still be true when the antecedent is false and the consequent is true!

