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AUTHOR Norrick, Neal R.
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ABSTRACT

A discussion of semantic interpretation argues that contradictions such as "Sue's both right and wrong" are assigned consistent propositional interpretations such as "Sue's partly right and partly wrong" by universal semantic principles, which obviates analysis via conversational maxims and implicatures. First, it is shown from investigation of inconsistencies in transcribed conversations that unintentional contradictions are resolved in repair sequences with three basic strategies: conversationalists modify one term to agree with another; they relativize both terms toward a synthesis; or they assign the contradictory terms to distinct frames of reference. Second, it is demonstrated that these strategies are used to interpret intentional contradictions, based on elicited paraphrases of written paradoxes. The three strategies were found to apply regardless of context and without significant variation for speakers of unrelated languages, suggesting that they represent universal semantic principles rather than pragmatic processing procedures. These principles refute the analysis of discourse contradiction in terms of maxims and implicatures. (Author/MSE)

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SEMANTIC RESOLUTION OF DISCOURSE CONTRADICTION

Neal R. Norrick
Northern Illinois University

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ABSTRACT

This paper argues that contradictions like Sue's both right and wrong are assigned consistent propositional interpretations such as 'Sue's partly right and partly wrong' by universal semantic principles, which obviates analysis via conversational maxims and implicatures in such cases. I show, first, on the basis of an extensive investigation of inconsistencies in transcribed conversations, that unintentional contradictions are resolved in repair sequences with three basic strategies: Conversationalists modify one term to agree with the other; they relativize both terms toward a synthesis, or they assign the clashing terms to distinct frames of reference, as in the example above. I show, second, that these same strategies suffice to interpret intentional contradictions; I tested this finding separately by asking subjects to produce consistent paraphrases of written paradoxes. The three strategies applied regardless of context, and without significant variation for speakers of unrelated languages, so they presumably represent universal semantic principles, rather than pragmatic processing procedures. Since these semantic principles are necessary to describe the resolution of unintentional contradictions, where no aim to violate maxims or to generate implicatures can be present, and since they provide specific patterns for interpretation versus the indefinite process of working out implicatures, they refute the analysis of discourse contradiction in terms of maxims and implicatures.

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Both intentionally crafted paradoxes, and unintentional contradictions occur fairly frequently in everyday conversation. A speaker may cast an utterance in paradoxical form in order to render it humorous or thought-provoking, as in the first example (one I recorded). Here a woman sums up her laissez-faire attitude toward house-work with a paradox, which plainly pleased her hearers.

(1) A: ... so I married a farmer, but I'm not a farmer's wife.

B, C (laugh)

B: Well, that's certainly nicely put. I really like that.

This example is susceptible to analysis via Gricean conversational maxims and implicatures as follows (cf. Grice 1975). The statement violates at least the maxim of quality, since it counts as necessarily false according to truth-functional semantics; and it presumably violates the maxim of relation as well, since it fails to contribute relevantly at all on the purely literal level. So the speaker must intend to implicate something beyond the literal incongruity. But Grice says nothing more precise about how we work out the implicature, nor does he differentiate implicatures by source--say those deriving from paradox versus those deriving from understatement--or by result--say metaphoric transfer versus ironic reversal.

By contrast with the first example, a speaker may unintentionally produce a contradictory utterance like that in (2) from Jefferson (1972: 339).

(2) Ken: I can't dance, and--hell every time, every time the-the dance play -er every time there's a dance I'm always at it, an' I'm always dancin',

Roger: An' yer al--yer dancing?

Ken: Sure. I can't dance worth shit, I just move around hehh's all you gotta do.

Clearly, Ken cannot have intended to flaunt the maxim of quality or relation in this example, since the contradiction becomes apparent to him only through Roger's question. Consequently, the standard Gricean analysis is unavailable. Nevertheless, hearers' responses to apparent contradictions, and speakers' attempts to explain them in repair sequences à la Jefferson (1972), and Schegloff, Jefferson and Sacks (1977), reveal recurrent strategies more structured than anything Gricean

maxims determine. And furthermore, as we shall see, these strategies suffice for the interpretation of intentional paradoxes as well.

In order to identify these strategies, I investigated some 1500 pages of transcribed conversation, and I catalogued sixty-three cases of conversational inconsistency. Of course, some incongruities go unremarked by the conversationalists themselves, and occasional contradictions remain unresolved even when they are pointed out, as example (3) from Craig and Tracy (1983: 315) shows.

(3) B: ... it's a much--moister climate than here (pause) Well, you can't get much moister than Madison summers I guess, but-- (laugh)

K: Madison winters are worth a lot more.

Here B realizes she has blundered, then she introduces a statement contradicting her first; although he apparently wants to begin a synthesis with but, she laughs and gives up. Speaker K then glosses over the whole matter by changing the focus of the conversation.

Nevertheless, in general, speakers and hearers feel constrained to resolve unintended contradictions (but not intentional ones) in repair sequences. And when they do, they consistently employ only three recurrent strategies. The most common of the three appears in Ken's response to Roger's question in example (2). Ken resolves the contradiction Roger identifies by explaining what can't dance entails for him. In doing so, he takes one term of the contradiction as correct, and he brings the other term into line with it. We all employ this strategy, call it modifying one term, in finding consistent interpretations for statements like Al is thirty-five going on twenty, when we alter the second term to 'acts like he is going on twenty'. Modifying one term also includes cases where we replace one term of a contradiction with a new word entirely, as when we reinterpret tall metaphorically to mean 'virtuous' in resolving the apparent paradox A man is never so tall as when he stoops to help a child.

In example (4) from Svartvik and Quirk (1980: 664), the speaker explains his contradictory statement at some length, apparently prodded by his hearer's repeated questioning.

- (4) B: ... but it was in the middle of this Dubrovnik Garden. which is a very overgrown kind of a garden. I mean it's not overgrown.
 A: Yeah?
 B: but things start off. with plenty of space between them. on the ground.
 A: Yes?
 B: but when they get up to the sort of foliage level.
 A: (laughs)
 B: they're all sort of interlinked.

Speaker B resolves the contradiction he has produced by distinguishing two ways a garden can be overgrown. In doing so, he illustrates a second recurrent strategy of interpreting paradox, which I call separating frames of reference (cf. Norrick 1985: 134-137); here the two clashing terms are assigned to distinct frames of reference, or cognitive models à la Lakoff (1987). This strategy regularly applies to statements like Sue's both right and wrong to get a consistent interpretation such as, say, 'Sue is right theoretically but wrong practically'. Separating frames of reference is the second most frequent of the interpretive strategies I have found; Leech (1969: 142-43) mentions only this sort of interpretation for paradox.

The least frequent of the three strategies consists in averaging opposed terms from the contradiction. Example (5) illustrates this third strategy (from Craig and Tracy 1983: 320).

- (5) K: ... they don't really get a lot of snow. Like--they got more than we did so far but, ah, so.
 B: This is an exceptional year I hear.
 K: Well they usually get--about as much as--we do.

Speaker K shows with her but, ah, so that she realizes she has contradicted herself. In observing that the current year was exceptional, B employs the strategy of modifying one term of the contradiction. Then K takes a different tack: She generalizes from this year to usually, and averages the two extremes of the contradiction with about as much as. We all employ the strategy of averaging opposed terms when we interpret a statement like It's raining and it's not to mean 'it is just barely raining', and hence 'it is drizzling'.

Once I had isolated these three recurrent strategies for resolving incidental contradictions in conversation, I began to try them out on intentionally constructed paradoxes with surprisingly good results, which led me to the hypothesis that the same three strategies suffice to interpret contradictions of both types. I tested this hypothesis by

presenting seventy subjects with a set of eleven sentences, six of them contradictory, and asked them to paraphrase each in everyday language (The questionnaire examples appear in an appendix to this paper). The subjects were not expecting paradoxes, and the distractors were chosen to hide this from them. It turns out that intentional--and even literary--paradoxes do not require interpretations beyond what the three regular strategies yield, though they do show a greater tendency toward multiple simultaneous readings, and they seem always to involve word-play with humorous potential, a matter I address at some length in another place (see Norrick 1986).

Now since the three strategies are necessary to describe the resolution of unintentional contradictions, where no aim to violate maxims nor to generate implicatures can be present, and since they provide specific patterns for interpretation versus the indefinite process of working out implicatures, by Ockham's Razor, the strategies must be taken to account for our understanding of both incidental and intentional cases. And this refutes the analysis of contradiction and paradox in terms of conversational maxims and implicatures.

I believe this kind of argument can be shown to hold for any of the regularly recurrent figures of speech. I have identified the figures in question, and provided evidence of their regularity and general semiotic relevance in my How Proverbs Mean (1985). Acceptance of this position entails that we as speakers develop and store patterns of interpretation for recurrent figures of speech as part of our communicative (or, as we shall soon see, semantic) competence, and that we have recourse to resolution along Gricean lines only when these patterns fail to apply, which means general Gricean deduction occurs far less frequently than usually assumed--especially by adherents of radical pragmatics. By contrast, the approach advocated here might best be called radical semantics (cf. Wierzbicka 1987: 96).

The three strategies for resolving discourse incongruity should be formulated as general semantic principles for the following reasons. First, the strategies should count as semantic rather than pragmatic, since they apply independently of context. For one thing, my subjects achieved considerable consensus on the meanings of paradoxes, given no contextual information whatsoever. And although several subjects complained that some example sentences contained multiple figures, that they were ambiguous, or that they defied consistent paraphrase altogether, only one noted of a single example that she felt she ought to know more about the people involved, and even she produced a standard

reply without this information. So the clash of meanings in the paradox itself must determine which strategy or strategies apply, and not the identity of the speaker and hearer, nor of their mode of interaction or topic of discussion. I tested this finding by uprooting contradictions from contexts in which the conversationalists themselves had resolved them. Then I presented these contradictions to subjects in neutral third-person written forms like Sue married a farmer, but she's sure no farmer's wife, based on my first example above (See Appendix). And the subjects responded to the recast paradoxes in a manner parallel to the original conversational repair, except that the written responses tended to find more simultaneous possibilities of interpretation, but this requires no special explanation beyond the difference in available response time.

Further, the strategies are general rather than language-specific, because they apply without significant variation across languages. Of the subjects responding to the questionnaire in the appendix, three spoke Malay or Mandarin Chinese natively, two Cantonese Chinese or Korean, and one each French, German, Greek, Indonesian, Japanese, Portuguese, Spanish, Swedish, and Thai, but greater variation appeared between professional language teachers, on the one hand, and undergraduate students, on the other hand, than between any groups based on native language. The only significant source of variation at all was the failure to correct a contradiction that most others did--again something undergraduates do almost exclusively.

So we can count the three strategies for resolving discourse incongruities as general principles of interpretation. Yet even if the strategies were considered part of pragmatic competence, the central argument outlined here still holds: Strategies which regularly recur in the repair of incidental conversational contradictions also account for intentionally constructed paradoxes, thus rendering analysis via Gricean maxims and implicatures unnecessary for them, first, because the three strategies are required in any case, in order to interpret contradictions which cannot depend on intentional violations of maxims or implicatures; and second, because the strategies make more precise predictions than the broad Gricean theory of conversational inference.

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APPENDIX

Examples from original questionnaire, paradoxes checked.

The pen is mightier than the sword.

X Weekends at home are heaven and hell.

Billboards are the warts of the highway.

X Judy quit drinking, though she often enjoys a beer with dinner.

The grass is always greener on the other side of the fence.

X A man is never so tall as when he stoops to help a child.

The early bird catches the worm.

X When you're seventy, if you wake up and nothing hurts, you're dead.

Al crossed the old bridge in his car.

X Sue married a farmer, but she's sure no farmer's wife.

X By the time the wise man is old enough to marry, the fool has enough children to support him.

Examples from second questionnaire, first those lifted from natural discourse, then two authored paradoxes.

Al can't dance, but at parties he goes ahead and dances anyway.

Burt's a good father and a bad father.

We don't get much snow here, but last year we got plenty.

Tests are important, but they're a waste of time.

Sally listens, but she never listens.

Many people would be cowards if they had courage enough (T. Fuller).

We learn from history that we learn nothing from history (G.B. Shaw)