# Omissive Implicature[1]

Eric Swanson
ericsw@umich.edu

"Illocutionary agents skillfully use the said and the unsaid."

– Gennaro Chierchia, *Logic in Grammar*, p. 102

"There is not one but many silences, and they are an integral part of the strategies that underlie and permeate discourses."

– Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality*, vol. 1, p. 27

In some contexts, not saying *S* generates a conversational implicature: that the speaker didn't have sufficient reason, all things considered, to say *S*. I call this an *omissive implicature*. Standard ways of thinking about conversational implicature make the importance and even the existence of omissive implicatures somewhat surprising. But I argue that there is no principled reason to deny that there are such implicatures, and that they help explain a range of important phenomena. This paper focuses on the roles omissive implicatures play in Quantity implicatures—in particular, in solving in the symmetry problem for scalar implicatures (§1)—and on the political and social importance of omissions where apologies, objections, or other communicative acts are expected or warranted (§2).

## 1.    Quantity implicature and omissive implicature

Many Griceans hope to explain cases in which (1) is used to conversationally implicate (2):

(1)      Prayer is permitted here.

(2)      Prayer is not required here.

Here is a naïve explanation. By Grice's first submaxim of Quantity (1987, p. 26 [1967]), a cooperative speaker has reason to say the most informative thing they could say about the question under discussion. The speaker would have said (3) instead of (1) if they believed (3); so they must not believe it.

(3)     Prayer is required here.

Given that the speaker has all the relevant information, they must not believe (3) because they believe it to be false. Thus (1) is not the only thing they intend to communicate. They must also intend to convey (2)—in particular, to implicate it.[2]


## 1.1     A challenging version of the symmetry problem

What makes this explanation objectionably naïve? It makes a very bad prediction: that (1) also communicates (3). For (again) a cooperative speaker would say the most informative thing they could say; the speaker would say (4) instead of (1) if they believed it; so they must not believe (4).

(4)     Prayer is optional here.

Given that the speaker has all the relevant information, they must not believe (4) because they believe it to be false. Thus they must intend to communicate (3), in addition to (1), for if prayer is both permitted and not optional, then it is required.

The above is one way to present the symmetry problem: the problem of breaking the symmetry between these or similar lines of reasoning, and so predicting that (1) implicates (2) but not (3) (Kroch 1972 and von Fintel et al. 2002). Approaching the symmetry problem from the starting point of an example like this one is important. Suppose that we started instead by trying to explain why uses of 'some' often implicate 'not all,' as opposed to implicating 'not (some but not all).' Then, because the relevant lexicalization of exclusive disjunction is relatively long and complex, conversational and structural economy would look very important.[3] Cases in which the relevant exclusive disjunction can be expressed simply, with 'optional,' help us guard against overemphasis on economy. That way we can try to find explanations that genuinely might handle the

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[2] I cite intentions here as part of an idealized explanatory model. As Grice puts it, this sort of model characterizes "what particular intentions on particular occasions it is proper for [speakers] to have, or optimal for them to have. Of course, there is no suggestion that they *always* have to have those intentions: it would merely be optimal, *ceteris paribus*, for them to have them" (1982, p. 299).

[3] For some examples of approaches that overemphasize economy, in my view, see Atlas and Levinson 1981, p. 44; Horn 2000, p. 306; Katzir 2007; Fox and Katzir 2011; and Trinh and Haida 2015.

prayer case above, or, to give another example, the many cases in which the use of 'possible' implicates 'not necessary' and does not implicate 'not contingent.'[4]

Common ways of deploying Grice's maxims may also contribute to the overemphasis on conversational economy. For example, the second submaxim of Quantity sounds a bit like a lawyer's instruction before cross-examination:

2. Do not make your contribution more informative than is required. (26)

And the third and fourth submaxims of Manner have a similar spirit:

3. Be brief (avoid unnecessary prolixity).

4. Be orderly. (27)

But we should not fixate on these maxims to the exclusion of other kinds of conversational pressure. Consider Erving Goffman's point that,

> …assuming a normatively anticipated length to an encounter, and the offensiveness of being lodged in one without anything to say, we can anticipate the problem of "safe supplies," that is, the need for a stock of inoffensive, ready-to-hand utterances which can be employed to fill gaps. And we can see an added function—the prevention of offensive expressions—for the organizational devices which reduce the likelihood of gaps and overlaps. (1981, p. 18)

This sort of bridging is important in all sorts of discourse—information gathering discourse as well as phatic discourse. So while I agree with Grice that there is sometimes some conversational pressure to contribute in an economical way, I want to emphasize that there is also sometimes some conversational pressure *simply to contribute*. As a result, *not* contributing, or not contributing in a particular way, is sometimes the remarkable move in a conversation. Not saying *S* can be a conversational move that calls out for rational explanation, in a very broadly Gricean sense.[5]

## 1.2  Omissive implicature and the symmetry problem

Indeed I think that recognizing the importance of pressure to contribute helps us solve the symmetry problem. Recall our starting case. In that case, the speaker uses (1) in part to conversationally implicate (2), and does not say the logically stronger (3) or (4), although (for all the addressee knew) they might well have.

(1)     Prayer is permitted here.

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[4] For further discussion, examples, and references to standard literature, see Swanson 2010.

[5] For an excellent discussion of precursors to Grice that might now be called "broadly Gricean," see Chapman 2005, pp. 91–94. See also Kasher 1976 and 1982.

(2)     Prayer is not required here.

(3)     Prayer is required here.

(4)     Prayer is optional here.

Familiar Gricean stories suggest that when we encounter this apparent flouting of the first submaxim of Quantity—"Make your contribution as informative as is required (for the current purposes of the exchange)" (Grice 1987, p. 26)—we ask why the speaker said (1) instead of (3). (Such stories argue or presuppose that there is some other way to explain why (4) isn't a relevant alternative.[6] The explanandum is the speaker's choice to say one thing rather than another. On my approach, by contrast, we respond to the speaker's apparent flouting of the first submaxim of Quantity by asking why the speaker manifestly didn't say (3) or anything that entails it, and why the speaker manifestly didn't say (4) or anything that entails it—like "Prayer is permitted here, but isn't required." The explananda are the omissions themselves, not the choice to say one thing rather than another.

In more detail: the omissions of (3) and (4) generate omissive implicatures that the speaker didn't have sufficient reason, all things considered, to say (3) or to say (4). What can an addressee infer on the basis of these omissive implicatures? Here are two important hypotheses to consider:

**Hypothesis α:** The speaker meant to convey only that they didn't believe (3) and didn't believe (4); i.e., that they didn't believe that prayer is required here, and that they didn't believe that prayer is optional here.

**Hypothesis β:** The speaker meant to convey something more—for example, that they believe (3) is *false*.

Hypothesis α would be plausible at least to the extent that it's plausible that the strongest relevant thing that the speaker believes is simply that prayer is permitted here. But if the addressee believes the speaker has all the relevant information, as I in effect presupposed when introducing the symmetry problem, hypothesis β will often look very plausible. There are then two sub-hypotheses to consider:

**Sub-hypothesis β-A:** The speaker meant to convey that (3) is false; i.e., that prayer is not required here.

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[6] Some examples: Horn 1972, Sauerland 2004, Fox 2007, Spector 2007, Geurts 2010, Chierchia 2013.

**Sub-hypothesis β-B:** The speaker meant to convey that (4) is false; i.e., that prayer is not optional here.[7]

Only one of the sub-hypotheses can be true, for if they were both true, then the speaker would mean to convey an obvious contradiction. That is, the speaker would mean to convey semantically that prayer is permitted, and via implicature that prayer is neither required nor optional.

Which of the sub-hypotheses carries the day, then, as an inference licensed by the omissive implicatures that the speaker didn't have sufficient reason to say (3) or to say (4)? Because only one can be correct, we don't need very much to break the apparent symmetry between them. For example, implicating that prayer is not required is generally more useful than implicating that prayer is not optional—that is, that prayer is either forbidden or required—because it's so much clearer what one should do if prayer is not required than it is if prayer is not optional, and so is either forbidden or required. Even if in some cases the information that prayer is not required isn't more useful than the information that prayer is not optional, *implicating* the former will generally be very useful, compared to implicating the latter. (If you want to convey that prayer is required, it's generally most useful just to say it!) Finally, because it would be surprising if prayer were not optional—compared to prayer being not required—implicature wouldn't be a very effective way for conversational participants to coordinate on the content that it's not optional. So if the addressee believes that expected utility is a reasonable guide to the speaker's communicative intentions, the addressee should endorse sub-hypothesis β-A rather than sub-hypothesis β-B.

This example of the symmetry problem is especially challenging because, again, (1), (3), and (4) are on a par in length and complexity. So the solution cannot appeal to economy. Appealing to "previous use, frequency of use, familiarity" or the like (Geurts 2010, p. 123) won't help either. It is at least in part because the expected utility of implicating that (3) is false is higher than the expected utility of implicating that (4) is false that addressees have reason to think that the speaker does indeed intend to implicate that (3) is false.

## 1.3    The need for different resolutions of the symmetry problem

While expected utility is often relevant to breaking such symmetries, other considerations are in play in other contexts, and other implicatures can result. One might implicate some content rather than assert it, for example, with the intention of thereby being discreet, circumspect, efficient, polite, in conformity with precedent, in conformity with social

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[7] More should be said about why certain alternatives aren't relevant—about why, for example, 'Prayer is supererogatory here' isn't a relevant alternative, in those circumstances and contexts in which it in fact isn't a relevant alternative—but I don't take on that project here.

conventions, setting an example, and so on, even if those considerations conflict with expected utility. Here is an example where politeness carries the day, motivating a speaker to implicate some content, rather than to assert it. Suppose a nurse walks into a waiting room and says to a patient

(5)     You can come in now.

It would be very unusual for the nurse to thereby implicate that coming in now was *optional*—a serious problem for traditional treatments of the symmetry problem. Much more commonly, the nurse would have implicated that, by the nurse's lights, the patient has to come in now. Omissive implicature helps us explain why. A nurse who says only (5) has manifestly not said the logically stronger (6) or (7), thereby flouting the first submaxim of Quantity and generating omissive implicatures that they do not have sufficient reason, all things considered, to say (6) or (7).

(6)     You have to come in now.

(7)     You can come in now, but you don't have to.

Because the nurse obviously has all the relevant information, and is obviously saying something weaker than relevant other things they could say, given all the relevant information they have, the addressee can easily rule out hypothesis α and move on to hypothesis β.

**Hypothesis α:** The speaker meant to convey only that they didn't believe (6) and didn't believe (7).

**Hypothesis β:** The speaker meant to convey something more.

In this case we have other reasons to think that the nurse did not have sufficient reason to say (6): a nurse simply asserting (6) to a patient, in many settings in the United States, might well be seen as too pushy, perhaps even as condescending. So sub-hypothesis β-A doesn't look especially plausible in this case.

**Sub-hypothesis β-A:** The speaker meant to convey that (6) is false; i.e., that the addressee does not have to come in now.

**Sub-hypothesis β-B:** The speaker meant to convey that (7) is false; i.e., the addressee either can't or has to come in now.

Combining sub-hypothesis β-B with (5), we get the content that the addressee has to come in now, as desired. It's very important that the conveyance of this content relies on *implicature*. In this circumstance, content that would verge on rudeness if it were asserted is perfectly acceptable to implicate.

I do not mean to suggest that this style of explanation is correct for all cases of understatement or litotes. In particular, in some cases of understatement it might be that the speaker manifestly flouts Grice's first submaxim of Quantity: "Make your contribution as informative as is required (for the current purposes of the exchange)" (26).[8] But it's not plausible to say that about this case, because whatever we say about what a speaker implicates with (5), the total contribution to the conversation would be informative enough not to flout Quantity once we take those implicatures into account. That is, whether we associate with an assertion of (5) the Quantity implicature that the addressee doesn't have to come in now, or the Quantity implicature that the addressee either can't or has to come in now, (5) is informative enough that the total content conveyed *won't* flout Quantity. So standard Gricean accounts of understatement do not generalize to (5). And they will have similar problems with the suggestive uses of

(8)      You could use a shower.

(9)      We can just keep this between us.[9]

(10)     You don't have to keep doing that.

(11)     Some kids won't like you if you hit them. [Spoken to a sensitive child.]

(12)     That might not be a bad idea.

Again, an adequate treatment of such sentences requires not only that (12), for example, implicates that that isn't a bad idea, or must not be a bad idea, but also that (12) does not implicate that it *might* be a bad idea. The symmetry problem must not always be solved in the same direction: sometimes $\exists$ is used by relevantly informed speakers to implicate $\neg\forall$, and sometimes to implicate $\neg(\exists \circ \neg\forall)$.

Epistemic modals are an especially interesting case because of the ways in which they can be used to exploit the cancelability of conversational implicatures. As we have seen, sometimes a speaker who says 'Might $p$' implicates 'Must $p$,' and sometimes a speaker who says 'It doesn't have to be that $p$' implicates 'Must not $p$.' Because they do so by making a very weak hedged claim, such a speaker is often on the hook for very little independently of what they implicate.[10] And they may remain on the hook for very little even after implicatures are calculated, because they can often cancel the implicature if necessary—a very useful feature of implicature as opposed to assertion. Here is such an example. The U.S. Steel Corporation is very concerned to distance itself from vicious convict labor practices in Alabama in the late 19th and early 20th centuries—"slavery by another name," in Douglas Blackmon's apt phrase. And so U.S. Steel's spokesperson has

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[8] For recent discussion, see Leech 2014, pp. 237–238.

[9] Thanks to Sarah Moss for this example.

[10] For relevant examples and discussion, see Swanson 2011, pp. 263–266 and 2016, pp. 136–138.

to be careful not to *say* that there are or must be convicts buried in certain cemeteries: to say this would be to admit U.S. Steel's liability. But the circumstantial evidence is absolutely overwhelming. So, under pressure in an interview, the spokesperson says " 'Are there convicts on that site? Possibly, quite possibly…. But I am unable to tell you that there are' " (Blackmon, 391). Intuitively, he thereby implicates that there are convicts on the site, as a concession to his interviewer, without admitting his employer's guilt. How does this implicature work? The spokesperson makes the omissive implicatures that he doesn't have sufficient reason, all things considered, to say the logically stronger (13) or (14):

(13)    There are convicts on that site.

(14)    There must be convicts on that site.

We don't have to appeal to his beliefs about whether there are convicts on the site to explain why he omits (13) and (14): his perceived professional obligations are ample explanation for those omissions. So 'Possibly *p*,' in this case, does not implicate 'Possibly not *p*,' as it often does.

> Notably, the spokesperson *doesn't* say anything like

(15)    There might be convicts on that site, but there might not be.

He thus makes the omissive implicature that he doesn't have sufficient reason to say (15), a logically stronger claim than "Possibly there are convicts on that site." Why omit the 'there might not be'—a natural enough hedge to tack on to an epistemic possibility claim, given that we are not obsessed with linguistic economy? On my interpretation, the spokesperson omits it because he is evaluating the evidence as any decent person would, and thus simply doesn't believe that there might not be convicts in the cemeteries. So by omitting (15), he implicates that (15) is false. He implicates, in other words, that there either must or must not be convicts buried in the cemeteries. With his assertion that there "possibly, quite possibly" are convicts buried there, the falsity of (15) entails that there must be convicts there.

> This conversational strategy allows him to acknowledge the overwhelming force of the circumstantial evidence, while finding a way *not to assert* the conclusion that is compelled by that evidence. More generally, he is a cooperative conversational partner to the extent that he is willing to *implicate* that there must be convicts buried in the cemetery, and a savvy spokesperson to the extent that he cordons off that content to the level of deniable, defeasible implicature. Implicatures allow for content to be proffered in 'off the record,' deniable ways, as we have seen in this case, as well as in polite, circumspect ways, as we saw earlier.[11] These non-assertive ways of proffering content

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[11] For discussion of the 'off the record' aspects of implicature, see Brown and Levinson 1987, pp. 211–213, and Camp (ms.)

help speakers and addressees in effect establish some common ground, provisionally and for purposes of conversation, without the commitment, scrutiny, and negotiation that would be required if we made all our disagreements explicit. Omissive implicatures are especially effective at this, insofar as they can provide a way to communicate and form provisional, defeasible kinds of common ground, without putting much on the explicit conversational record.

The cases we have just considered—'You can come in' communicating 'You have to come in' and 'There are possibly convicts buried there' communicating 'There must be convicts buried there'—illustrate, again, that the symmetry problem should not always be resolved in the same direction. Sometimes existential force comes with omissive implicatures to the effect that the corresponding universal is false, but sometimes it comes with omissive implicatures to the effect that everything's either one way or the other. Indeed, this phenomenon is arguably very common for those who have reason to avoid making straightforward assertions, requests, and the like. By allowing for existential to universal resolutions of the symmetry problem, we can interpret people who are coerced into saying "Maybe φ," "φ?" "φ, I think," and the like as implicating that it must be that φ. And we can interpret "Could you pass the salt?" as implicating "Would you pass the salt?"[12],[13] So fully general solutions to the symmetry problem not only need to avoid appealing to conversational economy. They also need to allow that different ways of breaking the symmetry may be appropriate, depending on context. One advantage of appealing to omissive implicature is that the relevant alternatives to (5)—namely, (6) and (7)—are both available for reasoning that is sensitive to features of the context.

(5)     You can come in now.

(6)     You have to come in now.

(7)     You can come in now, but you don't have to.

If we exclude either of these alternatives from the broadly Gricean reasoning that derives conversational implicatures, then we will not predict that the symmetries of the symmetry problem can be resolved in more than one way.

I now want to make a methodological point that, while not strictly speaking required by the approach I am developing here, may help put certain objections in perspective. In resolving the symmetry problems in the foregoing examples, I have appealed to many different factors—expected utility, surprise, politeness, professional obligations, and so on—and I will appeal to more in §2. Are there easily specifiable

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[12] Despite the influence of Robin Lakoff's work (1975) on the popular imagination, it's difficult to establish robust generalizations about the frequency of epistemic hedges across genders. See Coates 2004, especially sections 6.3, 6.6, 6.7, and 8.2 for references and excellent discussion.

[13] See Braun 2011 for more on implicating questions.

general principles that determine exactly how we interpret conversational implicatures? For all I will say here there are. But I won't and wouldn't try to state them, because I am not in fact confident that there are such principles.

For some content to be communicated via a conversational implicature, sometimes a particular relevant instance of the symmetry problem must be resolved in one way rather than another. In such cases, I believe, we can offer an explanation that helps show why that resolution of the relevant symmetry problem is right. But the principles that we appeal to in offering such an explanation might well be no more than heuristics. That is, they might admit of exceptions that could be brought out by consideration of other circumstances and contexts, and there might not be any more general exceptionless principles that would determine how we should weigh 'first-order' principles against each other in cases of conflict. Even if all this turned out to be the case, the explanation might be helpful and apt nevertheless. Indeed, it might not be possible to improve on the explanation.

This view on explanations in pragmatics is similar, in some respects, to views on moral explanation that are often associated with moral particularism. As Maggie Little puts it:

> With moral explanations…successful explanation is a more elastic notion than with, say, the explanations in the physical sciences. When we say of a given action that the infliction of pain made it cruel, we are not claiming that such infliction grounds cruelty in all physically possible worlds … Rather, we are claiming that such infliction grounds cruelty in a particular group of cases we regard as telling or illuminating given the present sense of puzzle—a constellation whose capacity for illuminating is no less for being context-dependent. (2000, p. 301)

Similarly, when we explain pragmatic phenomena, we need not take ourselves to be claiming that the explanation *entails* that the pragmatic phenomenon will obtain. Rather, we may be using the explanation to draw out similarities and contrasts between the case at issue and a relevant range of alternative cases, shedding light on a phenomenon but not with the aim of giving necessary and sufficient conditions for it, or of saying how the elements of the explanation interact with other facts that might be relevant in other circumstances and contexts. Call this sort of view 'pragmatic particularism.'

Pragmatic particularism has many important spiritual predecessors. For example, Robert Stalnaker does not try to provide a function from contexts to selection functions (1968, 1984, a.o.); Angelika Kratzer does not try to provide a function from contexts to modal bases or ordering sources (1981, 1991, a.o.); Sarah Moss does not try to give necessary and sufficient conditions for epistemic irresponsibility (2012); and so on. While these authors do not commit themselves to pragmatic particularism, the respects in which their approaches are similar to it suggest that it is not an especially radical doctrine. Just

as the relevant strains of moral particularism deny that there are any moral generalities that are explanatorily useful, exceptionless, and finitely specifiable, pragmatic particularism (about a given question in pragmatics) denies that there are any pragmatic generalities (about that question) that are explanatorily useful, exceptionless, and finitely specifiable. But the generalizations we do appeal to, in ethics and pragmatics, nevertheless can help explain. They just explain as heuristics, not as universals. When we see that a given instance of the symmetry problem is in fact resolved in a particular way, we may try give an explanation that elucidates that resolution. That is what I have tried to do here, leaving work on codification and higher-order systematization to those less tempted by pragmatic particularism.

## 1.4    Further comparisons

It's not clear to me what Grice would have said about omissive implicature. (Tantalizingly, he omits any discussion of the "moment of appalled silence" after, "at a genteel tea party, A says *Mrs. X is an old bag*" (1987, p. 35).[14]) At times Grice seems to presuppose that conversational implicatures require that something be said: "the calculation of the presence of a conversational implicature presupposes an initial knowledge of the conventional force of the expression the utterance of which carries the implicature" (1987, p. 39, cf. pp. 30–31). Because omissions don't generally have a "conventional force," they do not allow for "calculation" on the basis of that force. So perhaps omissive implicatures aren't consistent with the letter of what Grice says. Alternatively, Grice might have intended his remarks about conversational implicature to be understood more narrowly, in such a way that they applied only, or paradigmatically, to commissive implicatures. Either way, my approach is congenial, again, to the broader Gricean program of "seeing talking as a special case or variety of purposive, indeed rational, behavior" (28). I am simply arguing that we should also see omitting to say as purposive, rational behavior, the interpretation of which is facilitated by knowledge of context and culture.[15]

Could more traditional Griceans adopt aspects of the view I have developed in this section? I think it would be impossible to give a knock-down argument against the possibility, especially if we construe 'more traditional Gricean' broadly. But I want to say a little about some of the challenges facing traditional Griceans who want to appeal to the kinds of explanations I have reconstructed on behalf of interpreters.

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[14] Thanks to Jeff King for reminding me of this case.

[15] Silence—arguably in some circumstances a special case of omitting to say—has been the subject of extensive ethnolinguistic study, revealing some ways in which knowledge of context and culture should affect interpretation of omissions. For an excellent recent guide to the literature, see Boromisza-Habashi and Martínez-Guillen 2012, pp. 138–143.

First, recall that on the naïve Gricean account, the explanation of a speaker choosing to say (1) rather than (3) is that the speaker doesn't believe (3).

(1)     Prayer is permitted here.

(2)     Prayer is required here.

This style of explanation would need to be changed to allow for explanations that do not simply appeal to maxims of Quantity. As in the nurse/patient case, or the spokesperson case, a speaker might omit saying *S* because it would be too forward or impolite to say *S*, or too risky, or because omitting to say *S*, in a particular context, will successfully convey not *S*.

Second, it's not clear that the contrastive explanations traditional Griceans appeal to as answers to the why-question "Why assert (1) rather than asserting (3)?" are well-suited to explain what omissive implicatures can be used to explain. Consider an explanation like the one I gave for the omission of (3). According to such an explanation, in many contexts a speaker who means to convey something more with (1) would omit (3) because they would thereby convey that prayer is not required, since there are good reasons to think they weren't trying to convey that prayer is not optional. This explanation doesn't look like a good answer to the contrastive why-question "Why assert (1) rather than asserting (3)?" First, in many such cases it's not plausible that one asserted (1) rather than (3) in order to implicate something, because the most important thing was the truth of (1)—more important than the implicature. Second, to say that one asserted (1) rather than (3) partly in order to implicate that (3) is false doesn't really explain why the implicature occurs in the first place. So there is at least some reason to think that focusing on omissions and omissive implicature is essential to solving the symmetry problem. If this is right, then the symmetry problem is an artifact of the traditional Gricean focus on commissive speech acts.

Third, and finally, my account evades a worry for traditional Griceans who predict that a speaker makes the "strengthened," "secondary" (Sauerland, 2004) implicatures associated with my hypotheses β only if the speaker has all the relevant information, or the addressee takes them to have all the relevant information. The problem is that a speaker may make strong implicatures even if the addressee believes them to be bluffing, or lying. For example, an addressee who knows a speaker to be bluffing or lying via strong implicatures may nevertheless appropriately criticize that speaker for so speaking. Accounts that need to tell another story here include, among others, Soames 1982, Zimmermann 2000, Spector 2003, Sauerland 2004, van Rooj and Schulz 2004, and Geurts 2010. This problem is a result of the traditional Griceans' focus on what's believed—as opposed to what's meant—in the derivation of implicatures. It's not clear to me how they should handle it.

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## 2.    Expectation and omissive implicature

Omissive implicatures are often generated when we expect another person or group to say something—to apologize, for example, or to object—and they do not. Those who are expected to contribute but do not, in such situations, often implicate that they didn't have sufficient reason, all things considered, to apologize or to object. But they do not necessarily indicate *why* they lacked sufficient reason. Thus the total content of such an omissive implicature often leaves many competing hypotheses open. This section starts by discussing cases in which the thwarting of expectations generates omissive implicatures. The cases I discuss differ primarily with respect to the degree to which the omission is the result of coercion. The last case I discuss—an example of what I call 'extended' implicature—differs in another dimension as well. In that case, the expectation is less temporally specific, not adhering to any particular commission or omission, but to a body of work or to a temporally extended sequence of discourses.

### 2.1    Non-coerced omissive implicature

The Nazis used omissive implicature with skill, often purposefully omitting details while anticipating how they would be filled in. In the 1920s and early 1930s, this allowed them to sustain a measure of distance from the more violent and deadly actions of their supporters. Richard Evans explains that

> …the leadership announced in extreme but unspecific terms that action was to be taken, and the lower echelons of the Party and its paramilitary organizations translated this in their own terms into specific, violent action. As a Nazi Party internal document later noted, action of this kind, by a nod-and-a-wink, had become already the custom in the 1920s. At this time, the rank-and-file had become used to reading into their leaders' orders rather more than the actual words that their leaders uttered. 'In the interest of the Party,' the document continued, 'it is also in many cases the custom of the person issuing the command—precisely in cases of illegal political demonstrations—not to say everything and just to hint at what he wants to achieve with the order.' (2005, p. 337)

It's crucial (and perhaps somewhat surprising) that the Nazis did little to *actively* distance themselves from the violence of their paramilitary supporters. The Nazis instead drew on omissive implicature and deliberate ambiguity, adopting communicative strategies that allowed some others to hypothesize that there must be such distance. "The vagueness of the Nazi programme," Evans again writes, and "its eclectic, often inconsistent character, to a large extent allowed people to read into it what they wanted to and edit out anything they might have found disturbing" (2005, p. 265). For these reasons, the Nazis also avoided apologizing. As Hannah Arendt notes in *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, the

Nazis "never apologized for 'excesses of the lower ranks'—such apologies were used only by Nazi sympathizers—and impressed the population as being very different from the 'idle talkers' of other parties" (1958, p. 344 [1951]).

The omission of an apology when it's manifest that one is expected conveys, through omissive implicature, that the speaker (or would-be speaker, if the relevant conversational participant is silent) does not have sufficient reason to apologize, because the speaker (or would-be speaker) is thwarting the manifest expectation of an apology. So by failing to apologize for the 'excesses of the lower ranks,' the Nazis implicated that they did not have sufficient reason to so apologize. This omissive implicature in turn invites interpreters to strengthen the implicature by asking: why not? By failing to apologize, did the Nazis implicate that they did nothing wrong? That they wouldn't be cowed by public opinion? That apologizers are weak? That the victims of violence at the hands of the Nazis' paramilitary supporters didn't warrant empathy? Or something else? There are no obvious grounds for choosing between these hypotheses.

When Grice discusses cases in which there are "various possible specific explanations" that could be "supposed in order to preserve the supposition that the Cooperative Principle is being observed," he says that "the conversational implicatum in such cases will be [the] disjunction of such specific explanations" (1987, pp. 39–40). So on an account that hewed strictly to the letter of Grice, we should interpret the Nazis as simply implicating that the disjunction of these possible implicatures is true. But this view leaves out important aspects of the omissive implicature's force. By willfully leaving it unclear why they did not apologize, the Nazis implicated that they were above even any pressure to communicate clearly. Unlike 'idle talkers,' in other words, the Nazis implicated both that they were above apologizing and also that they were above saying anything about the reasons, as they saw them, for their lack of apology. Manifestly deliberate omissive implicatures are especially effective—albeit callous—ways to get this kind of message across. In part because they were not coerced or pressured into not apologizing, the Nazis' omissions of apologies were a sort of power play, displaying the freedom and impunity with which they exercised their power and thereby feeding that freedom, impunity, and power.

This, then, is a point where we should diverge somewhat from Grice. Characterizing the underdetermination of explanation wholly in terms of disjunction fails to capture some of the function and effect of deliberate ambiguity in implicatures. Ambiguous communications of all sorts—via implicature and via other means as well—make room for certain kinds of denial after the fact, just as unambiguous implicatures do.[16] But by omitting appropriate clarifications, speakers who say ambiguous things also often omissively implicate that they do not have sufficient reason, all things considered, to communicate unambiguously. This content goes beyond the content of a disjunction

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[16] For excellent work on the importance of ambiguity and deniability, and further references, see Eisenberg 1984 and 2007, and Abdallah and Langley 2014.

each disjunct of which corresponds to a disambiguation. So Grice's characterization of ambiguity and underdetermination is incomplete. Moreover, as we have just seen, with many omissive implicatures the range of possible rationalizations will be relatively large, compared to those for commissive implicatures. So the content that the ambiguity doesn't matter—or doesn't matter enough—will tend to play a larger role in omissive implicature than it does in commissive implicature. This kind of dismissive content is an important part of the Nazis' omissive implicatures.

## 2.2    Possibly coerced omissive implicature

In other situations, it's unclear whether the conversational participants feel coerced into making omissive implicatures, introducing a new source of underdetermination. For example, Ishani Maitra offers a case in which

> An Arab woman is on a subway car crowded with people. An older white man walks up to her, and says 'F***in' terrorist, go home. We don't need your kind here.' He continues speaking in this manner to the woman, who doesn't respond. He speaks loudly enough that everyone else in the subway car hears his words clearly. All other conversations cease. Many of the passengers turn to look at the speaker, but no one interferes (2012, p. 101).

By not objecting, do the other passengers implicate that they agree with the man?[17] That he should be able to say what he wants, whether or not they agree? That they can't safely and overtly disagree? Each of these explanations could underwrite a particular passenger's not having sufficient reason to say anything. As before, there are great differences between these potential explanations. But the differences are not exploited to display and increase power, because some of the plausible explanations involve coercion, or something approaching it: not objecting is a relatively attractive strategy for a passenger who fears for their safety. Moreover, even a passenger who agrees with the overtly racist man may feel coerced into omitting any indication that they support or sympathize with the man's views.[18] Given that these hypotheses can't be ruled out, in this situation, there is no analogue to the Nazis' implicature that they are above apologizing, and above explaining the omission of an apology. Instead, we have implicatures for each person in the car, to the effect that something—what it is not exactly clear—blocks that

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[17] Read 'objecting' broadly here, so that non-confrontational interventions can still count as tacit objections.

[18] For a similar view, see Anne Waldron Neumann's suggestion that "the negative aspects of political correctness" could be called " 'political coercion' " (as opposed to " 'political courtesy' ") (1999, pp. 171–172). See also Judith Butler's argument that prohibitions on speech can lead toward coercion and away from robust political engagement: "when political discourse is fully collapsed into juridical discourse, the meaning of political opposition runs the risk of being reduced to the act of prosecution" (1997, p. 50).

person from actively participating. And whether or not that something is coercive isn't clear, since some participants might feel ambivalent about objecting for reasons that don't have to do with the people around them or any other potentially coercive force.

One unsettling effect of this implicature is that, by raising to salience many hypotheses that could explain why the other people on the subway car do not object, those people are encouraged not to object. For example, suppose that everyone in the car except for the racist man wants to object in a way that would stop his vitriol. Nevertheless they are all silent. As their silence continues, the hypotheses that it would be dangerous for them to object, or that some on the car are sympathetic with the racist—or both—will gain in salience and plausibility. After all, if it *were* safe to object, or if objecting *were* clearly justified, or if it *were* the case that someone else on the car would support the initial objector, then, each of them will reason, more likely than not *someone* would have objected already. Indeed, the content of the omissive implicatures conveyed by not objecting gets stronger over time, in some ways, since the accumulation of vitriolic interaction over time provides more and more reason of one kind to object. And so, each of the passengers may eventually reason, it must not be safe to object, or it must not be justified, or it must be that they would have to go it alone. For an analogy consider a table of people at a restaurant, each of whom would like some hot sauce but doesn't want to be the one person to ask the waiter to make a special trip just for them. The waiter asks if they can get anything else, and as the collective silence around the table draws out, eventually it becomes common ground that no one wants anything—even though each of the diners does want something. Similarly, even if each of the people on the subway car who is in a position to object *wants* to object, their collective lack of objection can eventually make it common ground that no one wants to object. Indeed, if no one is willing to object unless they are sure that they have others' support, collective lack of objection can, over time, make it common knowledge that no one wants to object, by giving each potential objector reasons to think that they would likely go it alone if they were to object. So even if none of the people on the subway who are in a position to object are, at first, coerced into not objecting, they may eventually be so coerced, as the collective silence reinforces itself.

## 2.3   Coercion and omissive implicature

On my view, whether or not the omission of *S* is coerced, if that omission thwarts a manifest expectation it generates an omissive implicature that the conversational participant doesn't have sufficient reason, all things considered, to say *S*. In cases in which the omission of *S* is coerced, however, it's important not to misunderstand the reasons underlying that omission. Misunderstanding those reasons may lead to strengthened interpretations of the total implicated content that are incorrect.

Consider the slogan 'Silence is consent.' This has a natural reading on which it says that we should voice our objections—if we do not, we are passively consenting to

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practices we may abhor. This sounds plausible enough when it would be genuinely feasible for those who are silent to express their dissent. But it's clearly wrong when one is coerced into not saying *S*. For example, silence clearly does not constitute or implicate consent to sexual activity if the silent party has been coerced into silence. Grice's account of conversational implicature is helpful here. The supposition that the silent party consents is *not* "required in order to make" that omission "consistent with…presumption[s]" about their rationality, cooperativeness, or communicativeness (30–31). Rather, the fact that the silent party has been coerced into silence—even if that means simply that not saying anything is the least bad of some bad options—or that that is a possibility that should be taken seriously, is sufficient to explain their omission.[19] So there is an omissive implicature that they do not have sufficient reason to say *S*—to actively dissent or consent—but no more. And in the face of coercion, they do not have sufficient reason to actively dissent or consent. Similarly, even though there might be a naïve expectation that a person who has been raped will say that they have been raped, omitting to say that one has been raped does not implicate that one has not been raped in the face of a wide range of social pressures not to disclose that information.[20] In both cases, these silences might seem to implicate things that they do not in fact implicate, on my view—consent, or that the person has not been raped. These interpretations would be wrong because the competing hypothesis that the relevant omissions are the result of coercion must be considered and taken seriously.

What should we do when omissions *might* be the result of coercion? Miranda Fricker suggests that "virtuous hearers" can sometimes "help generate a more inclusive hermeneutical micro-climate" through a dialogue that "involves a more pro-active and more socially aware kind of listening than is usually required in more straightforward communicative exchanges. This sort of listening involves listening as much to what is *not* said as to what is said" (2007, pp. 171–172). When this is not possible, Fricker goes on to suggest, a virtuous hearer can try "*reserving* judgement, so that the hearer keeps an open mind as to credibility" (172). These strategies help considerably in the coercive cases I discussed above. I would like to add, however, that we also have reason to foster communicative environments in which people are not and do not feel as though they are coerced into omissions. One reason to do this is that it makes non-coerced omissive implicatures possible. To the extent, that is, that coercion prevents a person from making an omissive implicature, the coercion is 'silencing' in the broad sense that it precludes communication via omissive implicature. For example, if it's possible to convey consent to sexual activity via omissive implicature, then such conveyance requires it to be the case that coercion is not a relevant competing explanation for the omission. A background condition involving a significant amount of coercion into sexual activity can

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[19] In precisely what circumstances and contexts this possibility should be taken seriously is a controversial question which I won't discuss further here.

[20] On such pressures, see Gavey 2005, pp. 17–49.

make it impossible for a person to convey consent by making an omissive implicature. Like other speech acts, then, a particular omissive implicature can be made "unspeakable" insofar as a person is prevented "from satisfying the felicity conditions" for that omissive implicature (Langton 1993, pp. 319–320).

## 2.4    Extended omissive implicatures

Grice's examples of conversational implicatures focus on particular discourse acts. But omissive implicatures sometimes result from larger sequences of discourse, which are distinctive in that they omit acts that we have reason to expect to be part of the sequence—although not necessarily to be any particular member of the sequence. 'Extended' implicatures, the derivation of which relies not on the features of particular discourse acts but on the features of an extended sequence of discourse acts, needn't involve the flouting of maxims or the thwarting of expectations at any particular time. Omissions that are, for each particular omission considered on its own, wholly anticipated and predictable can nevertheless contribute to the generation of extended omissive implicatures. Such implicatures are often very subtle, progressively and surreptitiously influencing beliefs, expectations, values and practices.

Traditional academic canons supply many good examples. (Without loss of generality, and without implicating that other canons are uninteresting, I'll omit discussion of those canons to focus on the philosophy canon.) Even if it's not at all surprising at any particular time that a given philosopher wouldn't write on a particular topic at that time, the choice *never* to so write can nevertheless generate an omissive implicature to the effect that the topic is less important than those that did merit the philosopher's attention. When few or no canonized philosophers write on a given topic, the cumulative force of their omissive implicatures can become oppressive. As Charles Mills puts it,

> Where is Grotius's magisterial *On Natural Law and the Wrongness of the Conquest of the Indies*, Locke's stirring *Letter concerning the Treatment of the Indians*, Kant's moving *On the Personhood of Negroes*, Mill's famous condemnatory *Implications of Utilitarianism for English Colonialism*, Karl Marx and Frederick Engels's outraged *Political Economy of Slavery*? Intellectuals write about what interests them, what they find important, and—especially if the writer is prolific—silence constitutes good prima facie evidence that the subject was not of particular interest. (1997, p. 94; see also Outlaw 1996, pp. 34–35)

On my view, these silences are more than just *evidence* that these subjects were not of interest; they are extended omissive implicatures that the subjects weren't as important as those that did occupy the philosopher's attention. Perhaps in some cases these philosophers were not, in omitting, aiming in any sense at mutual recognition of communicative intentions—though it's not as though Kant, Marx, Engels and the rest

failed to write the sort of work that Mills envisions *by accident*, or without knowledge that their choices would be scrutinized by the public. But I think it would be a mistake to say that aiming at mutual recognition of communicative intentions is *necessary* for conversational implicature. This is because we can implicate inadvertently or by accident, and because we sometimes exploit the cancelability and ambiguity of conversational implicatures in ways that would be impossible if conversational implicature depended on mutual recognition of communicative intentions. Think back to the U.S. Steel spokesperson, who on my analysis implicates in part to be able to disavow mutual recognition of communicative intentions if necessary. Or think of times when your friend, therapist, or advisor has implicated things that you certainly wouldn't understand at the time, and might not ever understand.[21]

This isn't to suggest that Cantor, say, implicated that Reconstruction was philosophically uninteresting: reasonable expectations play important roles even for extended implicatures! But it is entirely reasonable to expect that philosophers concerned with human rights, personhood, and exploitation, like those Mills mentions, would discuss colonialization, imperialism, and the treatment of indigenous peoples, Africans, and enslaved people. So the work of each of these philosophers conveys an extended omissive implicature that these topics are not sufficiently important to be discussed. A course on set theory that does not discuss these topics likely wouldn't convey such an omissive implicature, but a course in ethics, political philosophy or perhaps even philosophy of language or epistemology that doesn't discuss related issues might.

> Whatever you say reverberates,
> whatever you don't say speaks for itself.
> So either way you're talking politics.
> – from Wisława Szymborska's "Children of Our Age"

## 3.    Conclusion

I have argued that we should countenance omissive implicature on the basis of two very different kinds of example. On the one hand, I have argued that subtle, easily overlooked omissive implicatures help solve an outstanding problem with Quantity implicatures. On the other hand I have argued that omissive implicatures play important roles in socially and politically interesting communication. The fact that omissive implicature is helpful in treating such different phenomena lends considerable plausibility to the idea that they are every bit as real as commissive implicatures.

On the basis of these examples, I have put some pressure on the traditional Gricean picture. In particular, I have raised questions about the importance of structural

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[21] Thanks to Daniel Drucker for this sort of example.

economy, about the tendency to focus on commissions as the basis of conversational implicatures, about the pure disjunctive treatment of underdetermination, and about the presupposition that implicatures adhere to relatively short spans of discourse. Since my treatment considered as a whole constitutes a significant departure from Grice, I hope that the range of examples I have considered helps make the importance of omissive implicature evident to a wide range of theorists. I also hope that omissive implicatures may shed light on other areas than those I've considered here—for example, on embedded implicatures, free choice, conditional perfection, focus, and exhaustive interpretation. But for the time being I have to omit further discussion.

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