

Understanding conversational implicatures in two languages

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Implicatures are meanings that are intended but not explicitly expressed by the speaker (Grice 1975). They have to be inferentially derived by the hearer on the basis of contextual clues. Understanding conversational implicature forms part of figurative competence, since “speaking figuratively consists of saying what you mean (intended meaning) by not meaning what you say (literal meaning)” (Steinmann 1973: 224). Implicatures arise through deliberate violation of Gricean conversational maxims, leading to traditional ‘figures of speech’ such as: metaphor, irony, idiom, understatement. While the speaker’s intended meaning is derived through general inferencing mechanisms, some implicatures are more sensitive to the context of a particular culture.

Previous research (e.g. Bouton 1994, Lee 2002, Taguchi 2005) has focused on how non-native speakers understand conversational implicatures in their L2. The present paper aims to explore how advanced L2 users understand conversational implicatures in their two languages. The subjects in this study are two groups of Polish university students, differing in proficiency and exposure to L2 English, referred to after Cook (2002) as L2 users and L2 learners. The L2 users ($N = 83$) are students in the English Studies programme, with high proficiency in English and daily exposure. The L2 learners ($N = 88$) are students of economics with low proficiency in English and irregular exposure. Data were elicited by means of a multiple choice implicature test modelled on Bouton (1994), consisting of 16 situations in which the respondents were asked to decide what discourse participants mean by what they say. The L2 users completed the questionnaire in both languages, the L2 learners in L1 only.

The L2 users tend to point to the figurative meaning as the intended one more often in L1 than in L2 ($M_{L1}=.78$, $M_{L2}=.73$, $t=4.41$, $p<.00005$). However, in some of the situations they identify the figurative meaning as intended more often in the L2 than in the L1. The L2 users also point to the figurative meaning as intended in the L1 more often than the L2 learners ($M_{users}=.78$, $M_{learners}=.74$, $t=2.87$, $p<.005$). They are particularly more aware of understated criticism and indirectness. These results will be interpreted as indicative of L2 effect on L1 and greater communicative awareness of the L2 users.

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