

## **Evaluating the Cancellability Test**\*

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### 1. Introduction

Grice's (1975) epochal factorization of what is communicated by an utterance (in context) into the sub-components of what is semantically expressed and what is pragmatically implicated prompts the question of how exactly to distinguish between semantic content and pragmatic implicature. There are vibrant debates on this question,<sup>1</sup> and this paper picks up and further develops one strand among them. Specifically, it is focused on one of Grice's (1975) proposed criteria – namely, cancellability.

Cancellability is given pride of place by Grice (1975: 39) as the first of five distinctive features of conversational implicatures, and it is deemed "... the best of the tests" by Sadock (1978: 284) in his thorough early assessment. As we will see in §3, cancellability has an impressive history of regulative usage, in helping to chart the contours of the S/P interface. However, influential criticisms of the cancellability test date back at least to Sadock (1978), Sperber & Wilson (1986), and Crimmins (1991); and new questions about its accuracy and efficacy continue to emerge.<sup>2</sup> Some even argue that the cancellability test should be abandoned (e.g., Carston (2002, 2010), Weiner (2006)).

I will consider four different lines of criticism of the cancellability test:

- the coherence objection (Capone (2009), Burton-Roberts (2010, 2013))
- the entailment objection (Sperber & Wilson (1986), Carston (2002, 2010))
- the sarcasm objection (Camp (2006, 2012), Weiner (2006))
- the ambiguity objection (Sadock (1978), Crimmins (1991), Carston (2002, 2010))

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The coherence objection seeks to undermine the very idea of the cancellability test; the entailment and sarcasm objections both allege that cancellability is not a necessary feature of implicatures (i.e., some implicatures are cancellation-resistant); and the ambiguity objection alleges that cancellability is not a sufficient feature of implicatures (i.e., the test is not sufficiently discriminating, because things other than implicatures are also cancellable).

In §2, I situate this project within a neo-Gricean theoretical framework. Then in §3 I specify a working hypothesis about cancellability, and in §4 I argue that it survives these objections relatively unscathed. My conclusion will be that the cancellability test is still a significant, useful, reliable indicator at the S/P interface.

## 2. Framing the Issue within a neo-Gricean framework

I depart from Grice's terminology,<sup>3</sup> in employing the following terms to characterize Grice's factorization:

**WHAT IS COMMUNICATED** (with a use of a sentence, in context) is a function of two factors: (i) **WHAT IS SEMANTICALLY EXPRESSED**, and (ii) **WHAT IS PRAGMATICALLY IMPLICATED**

What is semantically expressed is a matter of what is encoded in the lexicon and imposed by the grammar, whereas what is pragmatically implicated is generated by the act of expressing a particular semantic content in a particular context of utterance. To cite one paradigmatic example, Grice's (1975: 33) infamous letter of reference semantically expresses that Mr. X has an excellent command of English and a good attendance record, while implicating that Mr. X is (as Grice puts it) "no good at philosophy". Or again: by uttering "It's getting late" and thereby semantically expressing a mere observation about the time of day, one can (in context) implicate a desire for one's guests to leave soon.

One initial important qualification is that the above generalization is rather vague and sweeping, as linguistic communication subsumes a vast and complex array of overlapping sub-varieties. (This is true of both semantics and pragmatics individually, *a fortiori* their confluence.) A large measure of the beauty and power of Grice's factorization is its general applicability to a vast, broad range of cases; but the fine details of the precise balance between semantics and pragmatics may vary widely from case to case (from metaphors to pejoratives to gradable adjectives, to mention a few examples). A related important qualification is that there are plenty of cases in which it is extremely difficult to pry apart the semantics from the pragmatics.<sup>4</sup> Nonetheless, it is generally conceded that there are clear paradigm cases of semantically expressing information vs. pragmatically implicating information, and that this distinction must be accounted for within a comprehensive account of linguistic communication.

I use 'neo-Gricean' to designate a variety of views which accord a central theoretical place to (some or other specific version of) Grice's factorization. (Examples of neo-Griceans, in this sense, include Kripke (1977), Bach (1999, 2000, 2005), Neale (2000, 2007), Horn (2004), Potts (2005).) Neo-Griceans may depart from the letter of Grice's views on many specific points;<sup>5</sup> and the varieties of neo-Gricean views may be rather heterogeneous, in several respects.<sup>6</sup> Nonetheless, the term 'neo-Gricean' is not so broad as to include all parties to the debates at the S/P interface. In particular, the centrality of Grice's factorization has been challenged by relevance theorists, semantic contextualists, semantic relativists, and others. The core objection is that the entire factorization itself is a drastic oversimplification and an untenable relic from a bygone era. (As Borg (2007: 350) puts it, non-neo-Griceans hold that "pragmatic effects are endemic throughout the literal, truth-evaluable content expressed by sentences", or that

“pragmatics infects semantic content in a substantial way.”) Non-neo-Griceans deny that semantics and pragmatics are, in general, discretely separable.<sup>7</sup>

Notwithstanding all that, for several reasons, this essay is crafted within the neo-Gricean framework. For one thing, much of the debate in which I am interested takes place within that framework. Furthermore, I hold that Grice’s factorization is a great leap forward in our understanding of linguistic communication – affording as it does a compelling, wide-ranging account of a diverse array of phenomena, thereby considerably undermining the motivation to posit a gamut of (ill-conceived) notions of pragmatic meanings, figurative meanings, referential meanings, metaphorical meanings, etc.<sup>8</sup> Part my aim here is to further develop (and hence, ultimately, to shore up) the neo-Gricean stance.

To close this orienting section, in a way that usefully anticipates some of the battles into which we wade in §4, let me contrast two different (though related) kinds of questions which get raised about implicatures – i.e., conceptual vs. empirical questions. Grice’s original project at the S/P interface is one of conceptual geography. He is concerned with the logical organization of all the information involved in linguistic communication – most specifically, with the many important differences between semantic content and pragmatic implication (originally in a few specific cases, such as ‘So-and-so looks  $\Phi$  to me’, or ‘P or Q’, and eventually encompassing linguistic communication in general). In contrast to that kind of philosophical project, there are (related but distinct) more concrete, psycho-linguistic questions about implicatures – e.g., How exactly are implicatures processed? What does the speaker need to do to send one, and the hearer need to do to receive one? Empirical researchers across the cognitive sciences are, of course, more interested in this latter kind of question.

To be sure, there is productive dialogue between neo-Gricean philosophers of language and more empirically-oriented cognitive scientists, in this area as in others. These conceptual and empirical projects overlap, and the best of work in each camp is influenced by and has influence on work in the other camp. However, there are also cases of noise and confusion resulting from the interplay between the conceptual and the empirical projects. A case in point is the controversy over the relations between ‘implicature’ and ‘inference’ (cf., e.g., Haugh (2013)). From the point of view of empirical research into processing, inferences are always necessary steps to identifying implicatures, and so it might seem to be a harmless, convenient shorthand to elide the implicature/inference distinction.<sup>9</sup> On the other hand, to a neo-Gricean conceptual geographer, it is a drastic category error to confuse implicature (a distinctive, non-literal, channel involved in linguistic communication) with inference (a transition among states of information).<sup>10</sup>

My point here is not to really get into this ‘implicature’/‘inference’ debate here, let alone try to argue for either side. Rather, the point is that this kind of interplay between the conceptual vs. empirical inquiries about implicature will be important to bear in mind in adjudicating some of the objections to the cancellability test below.

### 3. A Working Hypothesis about the Cancellability Test

A key question for a neo-Gricean, then, is: How, exactly, do you tell whether something which is communicated with an utterance should be counted as semantically expressed or as pragmatically implicated? There are lots of familiar ways to characterize the S/P interface – e.g., semantics studies *meaning* whereas pragmatics studies *use*; semantic properties are common amongst all tokens of the expression type, whereas pragmatic properties are distinctive to only

some tokens of the type; semantic properties are encoded in the linguistic expression whereas pragmatic properties are generated by the act of using *that expression* in *that context*; etc.

However, the ongoing debates about the proper theoretical classification of various phenomena, with respect to the S/P interface (cf. note 1), prove that there is some distance between such characterizations and effective criteria.

The basic idea behind the cancellability test is that implicatures can generally be cancelled without contradiction, while semantic content cannot.<sup>11</sup> (Underlying this difference is that anything implicated pragmatically is distinct from semantic content in not being a part of the formal, compositional, context-independent, forensic semantic record; rather, it lives in the context-dependent circumstances making up the way in which what is expressed is expressed.)

To illustrate, compare the following three alternatives:

(i) Dear Sir, Mr. X's command of English is excellent, and his attendance at tutorials has been regular. Yours, etc.

(ii) Dear Sir, Mr. X's command of English is excellent, and his attendance at tutorials has been regular. *Mr. X is also the most brilliant philosophical mind of his generation.* Yours, etc.

(iii) Dear Sir, Mr. X's command of English is excellent, and his attendance at tutorials has been regular. *Mr. X is also no good at philosophy.* Yours, etc.

The first (i) is Grice's (1975: 33) original letter of reference discussed above, which (in its home context) implicates that "Mr. X is no good at philosophy". In (ii), that original implicatum is explicitly canceled, the result being a rather odd letter, but not a contradiction. In (iii), the

original implicatum is semantically expressed. Here there is no way for the author of (iii) to take back the negative claim about poor Mr. X without incurring blatant contradiction.

So, (ii) illustrates the cancellability of the original implicature in (i). The cancellability test returns the verdict that the negative claim communicated in Grice's original example (i) is cancellable, and so pragmatically implicated and not semantically expressed. In general, applying the cancellability test essentially involves this sort of counterfactual reasoning, differentially applied to the sub-components of the information communicated (e.g., imagine a distinct situation as like the original as possible except that proposition whose S/P status is at issue is explicitly cancelled; imagine a distinct situation as like the original as possible except that that proposition is semantically expressed; etc.)<sup>12</sup>

Grice (1975: 39) contrasts two different types of cancellation – explicit vs. contextual. (ii) above is an example of explicit cancellation, involving as it does "... the addition of a clause that states or implies that the speaker has opted out ..."; in the case of contextual cancellation, the "... context ... makes it clear that the speaker is opting out ...". For example, consider again another case mentioned above, wherein uttering "It's getting late" (in context) pragmatically implicates a desire for one's guests to leave soon. Since alternative contexts of utterance are available in which what may be actually implicated would not have been implicated (say, for example, the interlocutors are eagerly waiting for it to get late), that shows a kind of contextual cancellation of what might otherwise be implicated – as distinct from an explicit case like: "It's getting late. But I don't want you to go!"

I am going to focus exclusively on explicit cancellation here, and put aside contextual cancellation, as this allows better focus on the issues I am pursuing. For one thing – and particularly when one takes into account the fuller text from Grice (1975: 39):

[An] implicature ... may be contextually cancelled, if the form of utterance that normally carries it is used in a context that makes it clear that the speaker is opting out ...

contextual cancellation is more appropriate to just generalized conversational implicatures, as opposed to implicatures more generally.<sup>13</sup> (Relatedly, in Jaszczolt's (2009: §2) terms, contextual cancellation might be thought to apply first and foremost to sentence types, as opposed to token uses thereof.) Hence, in addition to being more stark and tractable, explicit cancellation is more widely applicable – any implicature whatsoever admits of at least an attempt to explicitly cancel. (The qualification ‘... at least an attempt to...’ is required so as not to prejudge the cases of putative cancellation-resistant implicatures, to be studied below at §4). Hence, explicit cancellation is the more appropriate notion for testing general hypotheses at the S/P interface.

Given that, the general schema of the cancellability test might be phrased as follows<sup>14</sup>:

- (1) Among the things communicated with a certain utterance, identify some specific proposition P
- (2) Consider the appending to that utterance a further utterance that semantically expresses not-P
- (3) If (2) would communicate a contradiction, then P is non-cancellable
- (4) If (2) would not communicate a contradiction, then P is cancellable

My working hypothesis about the cancellability test is that coming out cancellable is a strong (albeit defeasible<sup>15</sup>) reason to hold that P is pragmatically implicated, while coming out non-

cancellable is a strong reason to hold that P is semantically expressed. Again, this is no original, bold conjecture, but rather more like the orthodox party line. However, there are some considerable objections to this orthodox view. Before we turn to them, though, much more needs to be said in the way of explaining and illustrating the cancellability test.

First, note that the test seems to be fairly decisive over a broad range of paradigm cases. Lining up with semantic content, presuppositions and entailments come out non-cancellable, while implicatures (both particularized and generalized) generally seem to come out cancellable.<sup>16</sup> That is to say, there is a clear divide between the first three cases below (marked [C\*] to indicate that they are contradictory) and the latter three cases (marked [PO] to indicate that they are merely pragmatically odd):

[C\*] Mr. X is no good at philosophy, and is also good at philosophy.

[C\*] X's kangaroo is sick, and X has no kangaroo.

[C\*] All humans are mortal, X is human, and X is not mortal.

[PO] Mr. X's command of English is excellent, his attendance at tutorials has been regular, and he is also good at philosophy.

[PO] X has two children; in fact X has five.

[PO] X is meeting a woman this evening; she is X's mother.

What I am calling 'pragmatic oddness' arises when one takes back (or, in Grice's terms "opts out of") something which might otherwise be merely implicated; hence [PO] cases pass the cancellability test for pragmatic status (i.e., satisfy clause (4) of the above schema of the test). To illustrate further, alluding back to the above discussion of Grice's letter of reference, (ii) counts as [PO], while following up (iii) by cancelling the negative claim would be [C\*]:

(ii) [PO] Dear Sir, Mr. X's command of English is excellent, and his attendance at tutorials has been regular. Mr. X is also the most brilliant philosophical mind of his generation.

Yours, etc.

(iii') [C\*] Dear Sir, Mr. X's command of English is excellent, and his attendance at tutorials has been regular. Mr. X is no good at philosophy, and is the most brilliant philosophical mind of his generation. Yours, etc.

Given both the diversity of the category of pragmatic implicature, and the universally conceded point that implicatures exhibit a high degree of indeterminacy, this [PO] category is bound to be broad and heterogeneous. The key point though is not that these [PO] cases constitute a homogeneous, tightly-knit kind, but rather that they one and all fall decidedly short of contradiction.

Some of the challenges to the efficacy of the cancellability test may boil down to whether certain cases belong in the first, semantically contradictory [C\*] category or the second merely pragmatically odd [PO] category. (Or, indeed, should be understood as falling into neither of them – cf. §4.4.)<sup>17</sup>

Second, even though cancellability is specifically introduced by Grice (1975: 39) as a distinctive feature of conversational implicature (a sub-class of implicatures, which might also include conventional implicatures, scalar implicatures, etc.), it has come to be understood and employed more broadly as a generally applicable test for standing at the S/P interface. Examples of regulative uses of the test abound in the literature (and another such instance will come up below in §4.3). For example, Sadock (1978: 285) appeals to cancellability as a decisive consideration against the notion that 'not P' should be understood as a pragmatic implication of 'almost P' – i.e., since "X almost swum the Channel; in fact, X did so" is [C\*], *QED*. Or, again, the premise that Grice's (1975) so-called conventional implicatures are non-cancellable is a key part of the case for their being counted as semantic, as opposed to pragmatic, phenomena.<sup>18</sup>

Relatedly, considerations pertaining to cancellability play a major role in recent thinking about

how expressives (including especially pejoratives) relate to the S/P interface.<sup>19</sup> That is: Just as there is something semantically awry, not merely pragmatically odd, about using the expression “poor but honest” while disavowing that there is anything odd or unexpected about the conjunction, similarly too with using a pejorative while disavowing the negative features connoted by the term; and many take this to strongly suggest that the negative expressive polarity of a pejorative is part of the semantic content.<sup>20</sup> Or, finally, consider Jaszczolt’s (2009: §4) discussion of the relevance of cancellability to the proper theoretical treatment of enrichment or modulation – that, say, ‘Tom and Anne got married; Tom married Sue and Anne married Bob’ is merely [PO] and not [C\*] weighs (to some extent) against the notion that these are semantic, as opposed to pragmatic, phenomena. Note well that all of this above (more or less standard, conventional) reasoning about implicatures, expressives, and enrichment presumes something like the above working hypothesis about the cancellability test.<sup>21</sup>

Thirdly, it might be useful to explicitly distinguish paradigm cases of cancellability (e.g., the implication of Q by semantically expressing P, whose pragmatic status is shown by the consideration that an utterance of ‘P but not Q’ should be counted as merely [PO], not as [C\*]) from some related phenomena, such as retraction or ambivalence. They are similar, in that all involve varieties of subsequently taking back something that has initially been put out there. Retraction, though, is explicit contradiction, within the scope of some sort of higher-order apology for it. (‘I acknowledge that I said that P; but I now hold that not-P; and I regret any inconvenience caused by my previous assertion that P’.) I take ambivalence to be a familiar, even if troubling or confusing, aspect of *Dasein* – e.g., one might both love and hate a former intimate friend, or be simultaneously deeply saddened and profoundly overjoyed about some significant development. Like retraction, it is a special case in which we tolerate (something very

much like) contradiction; unlike retraction, though, ambivalence is simultaneous. The pertinent present point, though, is not so much that neither retraction nor ambivalence constitutes a counterexample to the Law of Non-Contradiction, but rather that both are distinct from the kind of subsequent taking back of what was initially put out there instanced by the [PO] cancellable cases. To follow up ‘It’s getting late’ with ‘But I don’t want you to go’ could (in context) cancel a possible implication, but it would instance neither retraction nor ambivalence (e.g., respectively, ‘I acknowledge that I said I wanted you to go, but I have since changed my mind’; ‘I both do and don’t want you to go’).

Finally, I consider a dose of skepticism about this entire project. Namely: How could we possibly hope to cleanly and comprehensively distinguish semantics from pragmatics when there is, in general, nothing close to consensus on the matter of how to identify and individuate semantic content? *Given that literal meaning, in general, cannot be easily identified and non-controversially individuated, how could we reasonably expect to distinguish it from another, related aspect of linguistic communication?* Well, I certainly concede this substantive point to the skeptic about the controversial status of ‘meaning’, but I am inclined to put a more positive and enterprising spin on the situation. Starting from some paradigm cases in which we can fairly clearly distinguish what is semantically expressed from what is pragmatically implicated could serve to aid our working conceptions of both semantic content and pragmatic implication, which we can pick up and run with, re-tooling and fine-tuning as necessary. This is often how inquiry has to proceed. Standard, well-motivated, sensible principles governing systematic inquiry (such as: first figure out exactly what P and Q are, before arguing about criteria for distinguishing P from Q) often have to be kept at bay to let inquiry run its course. Work on the distinction

between P and Q may afford valuable and insightful lessons for both identifying and individuating P and identifying and individuating Q.

A detailed study of the cancellability test may well turn out to be a case in point – not to mention its possibility to afford another instance, within the Gricean tradition, wherein progress in pragmatics proves helpful in sorting out some unfinished semantic business (cf. note 8).

#### 4. Objections to the Cancellability Test

My working hypothesis about the test is that P's coming out non-cancellable is a strong reason to think that P is semantically expressed, while P's coming out cancellable is a strong reason to think that P is pragmatically implicated. While this is a fairly conservative hypothesis, it has its detractors, to whose objections we now turn.

The entailment and ambiguity objections are the oldest in the literature – putative complementary trumps in the hands of those who argue that cancellability is neither a necessary (i.e., entailment objection) nor a sufficient (i.e., ambiguity objection) feature of implicatures. However, I will consider the objections rather in the order in which it makes dialogical sense in which to address them. At multiple points below, responses to earlier objections are subsequently picked up and further built upon, in the course of responding to later objections.

**4.1: The coherence objection** to the cancellability test alleges that “it should be impossible to cancel an implicature” (Capone 2009: 58) since implicatures are intended and something that is intended cannot be unintended.<sup>22</sup> For example, take the case in which the host utters ‘It is getting late’ with the intention to communicate ‘Please leave soon’. The idea seems to be that one cannot

imagine *that utterance* without *that intention to implicate*; with different intentions, we would have a different utterance. Hence implicatures are not cancellable by definition.

Given that implicatures live in the context-dependent circumstances making up the way in which what is expressed is expressed, there is a sense in which to alter those circumstances is to change the subject. Still, though, this objection does not seem to me to engage with Grice's test. Friends of cancellability are not committed to any such views about individuation conditions for utterances, or contradictory assumptions about the simultaneous presence and absence of certain intentions. Rather, one need only counterfactually vary the relevant variables in order to get the required contrast between [C\*] and mere [PO] oddness up and running (e.g., imagine a distinct situation as like the original as possible except that the original implicature is cancelled; imagine a distinct situation as like the original as possible except that the original implicature is semantically expressed; etc. – cf. the detailed illustration of applying the test to Grice's letter of reference, at the beginning of §3 above).

The cancellability test does employ counterfactual reasoning, so perhaps any objections to the efficacy or worth of counterfactual reasoning in general will apply here. However, if counterfactual reasoning is conceded to be possibly significant, then this coherence objection misses the mark.<sup>23</sup>

**4.2: The entailment objection** concerns the possibility that something could be both conversationally implicated by, and entailed by, what is semantically expressed. Since entailments are non-cancellable, while conversational implicatures are the very paradigm of what should be counted as pragmatic, this seems to pose a problem for my working hypothesis.

Several putative cases of implicated entailments have been raised in the literature.<sup>24</sup> However – especially considering the unanimously conceded point that implicatures generally exhibit a high degree of indeterminacy – many of the putative examples do not strike me as clear-cut or knock-down. Not so for all candidates, though; consider for example a case discussed by both Sperber & Wilson (1986: 61) and Carston (2002: 139), among others:

A: Does X drink slivovitz?  
B: X does not drink any alcohol.

It is plausible to hold that: (i) B pragmatically implicates that X does not drink slivovitz, and (ii) given the enthymematic premise that slivovitz is an alcoholic beverage, that also happens to be entailed by what is semantically expressed. Hence, we have here a putative non-cancellable particularized conversational implicature.

However, given that the vast preponderance of implicatures are not entailments, I do not think that this entailment objection should much trouble my working hypothesis. It could be used to show that cancellability falls short of a necessary and sufficient condition for some specific thing or things; but that kind of categorical, decisive reading of the cancellability test was never espoused by Grice anyway,<sup>25</sup> and is no part of my working hypothesis about cancellability. (More or less reliable indicators, not just necessary or sufficient conditions, would still be significant.) So, while this variety of cancellation-resistant implicature certainly seems to be a coherent possibility, still the general usefulness of the test as a source of relevant, significant but defeasible data survives this challenge.

**4.3 The sarcasm objection** also involves putative counterexamples to cancellability being a necessary feature of pragmatic implicatures.<sup>26</sup> Consider for example Weiner's (2006: 128) case,

in which a person trying to find a seat on a crowded train says to a person whose possessions are thoughtlessly sprawled out over three seats:

[2] I'm curious as to whether it might be physically possible for you to make room for someone else to sit down.

In context, we have a clear implicature that the addressee should tidy up to make room for others. Weiner holds that, in such a case, what might otherwise seem to be attempts to explicitly take back the implicature (e.g., 'Oh, no; I'm not suggesting that you *should* make room!') actually have the reverse effect of reinforcing, as opposed to cancelling, the implicature. Hence, Weiner argues, this is a cancellation-resistant implicature.

A similar case from Camp (2006) involves a speaker whose arms are full with a heavy load, obviously wanting to make it through a closed door, yelling sarcastically to another who just went through the door and left it to slam shut without helping: '*Thank you!*' The pragmatic implicature here comes across loud and clear; yet it appears not to be cancellable. As above, continuing on as follows is inevitably heard as reinforcing the implicature, not cancelling it.

[3] *Thank you!* Not that I wanted any help, or that you ought to have held the door for me, or anything like that.

Hence, it is arguable that these are non-cancellable implicatures.

One line of response would be to deny that sarcasm is a pragmatic phenomenon. This is explored (though not endorsed) by Camp (2006, 2012), who takes the seeming non-cancellable status of such cases to be among the factors motivating the idea that sarcasm is a semantic, not a pragmatic, phenomenon.<sup>27</sup> However, I am not tempted by that path. Briefly, I hold that, first, much of the beauty and power of Grice's factorization stems from its generality, from its affording one univocal sort of explanation of a staggeringly broad range of seemingly distinct phenomena; and, second, sarcasm is a paradigm case in point, which is rather plausibly amenable

to a satisfactory Gricean account. In short, sarcasm is a distinctive kind of *use*, not a distinctive kind of *meaning*.

Instead, I will explain both (i) why these cases are not genuinely non-cancellable, and (ii) why they appear to be so. My answer to the sarcasm objection presupposes and extends my answer to the coherence objection. Briefly, these implicatures are in fact cancellable, though the relevant counterfactuals involve more remote, and so less readily evident, possibilities.<sup>28</sup>

The first point is that what are phrased as the attempts to cancel in the above Weiner (2006) and Camp (2006) cases are almost inevitably heard as also sarcastic, as *just more sass*. The natural, almost unavoidable, way to read these follow-up utterances is not as literal attempts to opt out or take back the implication, but rather as following-up one sarcastic remark with another sarcastic remark. If the second utterance is also sarcastic, with its own communicative agenda, then these cases do not simply or obviously satisfy the schema of the cancellability test outlined above (wherein an utterance that communicates that P (among other things) is followed by an utterance expressing not P).

What is distinctive about these putative cancellation-resistant cases is that it is relatively hard to imagine situations in which the second sentences (below, and of [3] above) are meant literally – i.e., the counterfactual scenarios which are relevant to the cancellability test are less readily evident:

[2'] I'm curious as to whether it might be physically possible for you to make room for someone else to sit down. I'm not suggesting that you *should* make room, though.

But nonetheless they are *possible*. (I mean, the speaker *might* really be literally inquiring about the addressee's capabilities!) The relative availability of the relevant counterfactual scenarios between [2']/[3] on the one hand and "It is getting late, but I don't want you to leave" on the other does not undermine the cancellable status of these implications. They are one and all

cancellable implicatures; where they differ is along this dimension of how readily evident the relevant counterfactual scenarios are.

We could chart a gradable spectrum, plotting a range of cases according to how readily evident the relevant counterfactual scenarios are; and these sarcastic cases would end up at the remote end of the spectrum. That would account for the semblance of cancellation-resistance – though, crucially, as difference of degree, not of kind. (And who among us would be surprised to discover that pragmatic oddness comes in degrees?)<sup>29</sup> The key point is that, once we digest these points about (i) just more sarcastic sass vs. opting out or taking back (ii) relative remoteness of relevant possibilities, these sarcasm cases should be seen as instancing pragmatic oddness, not [\*]-type, non-cancellable contradiction.<sup>30</sup>

**4.4 The ambiguity objection** alleges that the cancellability test will return a verdict of cancellable for any case of ambiguity.<sup>31</sup> Hence, at best, the test seems to vastly over-generate; and so cancellability may fall far short of being a sufficient test for pragmatic implicature.

Consider this example from Carston (2010: 227):

- [4] X ran to X's coach but X didn't run to any vehicle.
- [5] X ran to X's coach but X didn't run to an instructor of any sort.

I agree with Carston that there is nothing contradictory about [4] or [5]. Given that this is an arbitrary, typical case of ambiguity, this might provide reason to think that that any case of disambiguation will come out cancellable.

However, to the contrary, I think that the ambiguity objection should also be resisted and that the grounds for rejecting it lie in the distinction between *clarifying* (e.g., [4] and [5] above) and *cancelling* (e.g., [PO] cases<sup>32</sup>). I will approach this core distinction between disambiguation and cancellation from multiple directions.

First, note that [4] and [5] are not merely not contradictory; they are not even pragmatically odd. As compared to the [PO] cases, they *do not* put something out there that they subsequently take back. Second, note that there is symmetry between the alternatives, in these ambiguity cases, which also renders them rather unlike other cancellable phenomena (i.e., there is nothing remotely like symmetry between what is semantically expressed and what is pragmatically implicated). Third, note that the following may well be contradictory:

[6\*] X ran to X's coach but X didn't run to *either* a vehicle *or* an instructor.

That is, it is possible to put a cat at every mouse-hole for these disambiguation cases, which is another large disanalogy with the other cancellable cases considered above. Disambiguation cases involve multiple candidates as to what is semantically expressed, as distinct from questions about the S/P status of the various things which have been communicated. Fourthly, and most fundamentally, disambiguation is (like saturation) pre-propositional, and hence again rather distinct from other cancellable phenomena. That is, disambiguation applies at a stage when it is not yet clear which information is semantically expressed, as opposed to at the conceptually subsequent stage of determining the semantic/pragmatic status of the various things which may have been communicated. This is the root of these significant differences between disambiguation and the post-propositional, cancellable phenomena discussed above.<sup>33</sup>

It might be said here (and in fact was, helpfully, pressed by an anonymous referee) that Carston's above, accidental homonymy, 'coach'/'coach' case is just simply too easy, and there are much harder kinds of ambiguity to be considered here (e.g., inclusive vs. exclusive senses of 'or', cases of autohyponymy (e.g., the lion is a cat in one sense of the term but is not a cat in a narrower, non-accidentally related, sense), and, more broadly, various other specific vs. general ambiguities investigated by Nunberg (1979), Atlas (1989), and others.<sup>34</sup> To the contrary, though,

while these cases may prompt interesting refinements, they do not differ in kind from the accidental homonymies when it comes to general morals about ambiguity and cancellability. I will proceed to explain why there is not much further promise here to undermine either the distinction between implicature and ambiguity, or, subsequently, my working hypothesis about the cancellability test.

Let us take ‘or’ first, and compare an inclusive case (‘Cream or sugar?’) with an exclusive case (‘Beer or wine?’). The general neo-Gricean party line on ‘or’ (cf. notes 5, 16) is, I assume, that its context-independent semantic content is the inclusive sense, but that there are contexts in which the exclusive sense is implicated (as there are contexts in which complimenting punctuality implicates besmirching other capacities). That one can more or less always answer ‘Both, please’ to ‘Would you like cream or sugar (with your coffee)?’, while there are contexts in which it would be an egregious *faux pas* to answer ‘Both, please’ to ‘Would you like beer or wine?’, is a social fact, not a semantic fact.

Accordingly, this predicts that (as they are most standardly used, in most typical contexts) [7] is a [PO] cancellation, while [8] is needlessly prolix:

- [7] Would you like beer, or wine, or both?
- [8] Would you like cream, or sugar, or both?

This prediction seems exactly right to me. Given that, ‘or’ ultimately poses no more of an ambiguity-challenge for the cancellability test than the accidental homonymy case does. To the contrary, to the extent that this difference between [7] and [8] is conceded, the consideration of ‘or’ adds to the case in favor of a difference between implicature and ambiguity. Sure, neither [7] nor [8] is contradictory; but that does not entail that they are both equally [PO]. Rather, there is a fairly clear and critical difference between them. Hence, the complications brought up by ‘or’ do nothing to undermine the working hypothesis about the cancellability test.

It is less clear what a neo-Gricean is committed to, when it comes to autohyponymy (or other varieties of polysemy). In the over-arching present dialogical context, though, that just makes it less clear what challenge such cases present for the above response to the ambiguity objection to the cancellability test. Certainly, if a non-contradictory reading is available for:

[9] Leo is a cat, though Leo isn't a cat.

then it is a clarification, not a cancellation. It involves reading the two tokens of 'cat' as distinct homonyms. But so what? As far as I can tell, this is tangential to the above line of response to the ambiguity objection. In the broader dialogical context, the key point is that there is no compulsion to assimilate [9] to the ranks of the pragmatically odd (cf. note 32). To clarify is not to opt out.

Finally too for some other Atlas-type specific/general, otherwise scope-ambiguities, such as 'All my friends aren't linguists'. Sure enough, a non-contradictory reading of the following is available:

[10] All my friends aren't linguists, though some of them are.

However, the neo-Gricean can and should say about [10] exactly what they say about [4] and [5]. In [10] the second clause helps to disambiguate the first clause via clarification; it is not a case of opting out or of pragmatic oddness.<sup>35</sup>

Therefore, given these significant differences between clarifying and cancelling, we should not concede the ambiguity objection. There are real hard problems about individuating ambiguity (cf. note 34); but they hardly suggest, let alone support, that there is no difference between cancelling and clarifying, and hence between ambiguity and implicature.

More generally, there is a strong point to be made in the other direction – namely, if the cancellability test is to play its regulative role at the S/P interface, then there is an important

cancel/clarify distinction. To illustrate: Crimmins (1991) runs this sort of ambiguity-objection focused not merely on ambiguity, but on what he calls “underarticulation” as well (e.g., ‘It is raining’-type cases – ‘It is raining, though not around here’ is not contradictory, akin to [4] and [5], and so ... ). If this one line of argument applies to both disambiguation and underarticulation, it may well also apply across the vast range of semantic underdetermination cases which have been explored in recent decades (cf. Bach (1995, 2005).) The floodgates would be opened up, and all Grice’s razor-type arguments in favor of pragmatic explanations over semantic ambiguities would have to be handled with extreme caution (since this crucial working divide between ambiguity and implicature would be undermined).

Again, because of controversial status of claims to identifying or individuating semantic content, it is hard to make precise, general claims about pragmatic oddness, or about the related clarify/cancel distinction; but, clearly, a lot is at stake here, for various substantive and methodological aspects of the philosophy of language. Hence, we return to a point raised at the end of §2, about investigations into the S/P interface yielding insightful returns for the notion of semantic content. It is not just that orthodox conceptions of the S/P interface presuppose the efficacy of the cancellability test; further, this study into the cancellability test also yields a firm desideratum for any tenable, satisfactory conceptions of semantic content itself: You had better underwrite a cancel/clarify distinction, or else you risk losing the legitimacy of Grice’s-razor-type arguments against semantic ambiguity. If you cannot distinguish implicature from ambiguity, this will undermine your ability to individuate meanings – and hence also your ability to count meanings, let alone engage with worries about proliferating them.

## 5. Scorekeeping

To recap: the coherence objection allegedly undermines the very idea of a cancellability test; the ambiguity objection alleges that cancellability is not a sufficient feature of pragmatic implications; and the entailment and sarcasm objections allege that cancellability is not a necessary feature of pragmatic implications.

I have argued that the coherence objection should not be conceded. It can be handled by digging into the ways in which Grice's cancellability test involves counterfactual reasoning. The entailment objection strikes me as unassailable but limited in its effects. The other two objections, sarcasm and ambiguity, might be seen to straddle this above (eminently assailable/unassailable but fairly harmless) bifurcation. Sarcasm first: There is good reason to think that it, too, can be completely dealt with via the kind of reasoning which we addressed to the coherence objection. However, if, to the contrary, we countenance non-cancellable, over the top sarcasm (cf. note 30), this is a limited and circumscribed category which does little to undermine the general usefulness of the cancellability test as a reliable indicator at the S/P interface.

As for ambiguity: Provided that there is a significant, principled cancel/clarify distinction, then the ambiguity objection should also be dismissed. In other words, to the extent that ambiguity is a circumscribed category, the above working hypothesis about the cancellability test remains relatively unscathed. Since it was the only putative counterexample to the sufficiency of the cancellability test which was seriously considered here (cf. note 15), the conjecture that only pragmatic implicatures are cancellable has not been transgressed. On the other hand, if one is skeptical of the intelligibility or significance of this cancel/clarify distinction, then that would complicate Grice's-razor-type attempts to argue against semantic

ambiguity, and hence have some drastic wide-ranging consequences for various substantive and methodological aspects of the philosophy of language.

On the evidence, then – for any and all views that hold that semantic content is even remotely determinate, such that ambiguity is a distinctive, circumscribed phenomenon – Grice’s cancellability test remains a significant, useful reliable indicator at the S/P interface.

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<sup>1</sup> Cf. Szabó, ed. (2005), Stojanovic, ed. (2008) for examples, and Ariel (2016), Schlenker (2016) for recent accounts of the state of the art. An illustrative (but by no means remotely exhaustive) list of phenomena whose relation to the S/P interface is a matter of ongoing controversy might include: metaphor, irony, deferred interpretations, expressives (including especially pejoratives), gradable adjectives, domain restriction, and referential uses of descriptions.

<sup>2</sup> Cf. Camp (2006, 2012), Blome-Tilmann (2008, 2013), Capone (2009), Jaszczolt (2009), Burton-Roberts (2010, 2013), Dahlman (2012), Feng (2013), Haugh (2013), Akerman (2014), Walczak (2016), Davies (2017) .

<sup>3</sup> I will avoid Grice's terms "what is said" and "conventional meaning". While Grice is exceedingly consistent in his usage of "what is said", the diverse range of ways in which others use the expression render it sub-optimal. (In particular, the common locution "said that" is notoriously ambiguous between what I am calling WHAT IS COMMUNICATED and WHAT IS SEMANTICALLY EXPRESSED.) As for "conventional meaning", following largely on Bach's (1995, 2005) work on "standardized non-literality" or "pragmatic regularity", I countenance a kind of pragmatic implication that is systematic and regular, and so "conventional" in some senses of the term (Sullivan (2012)). I will reserve "meaning" for semantic work, but I hold that not everything that is conventional should be counted as semantic.

<sup>4</sup> Cf. Recanati (2004, 2010) for extensive discussion. Take the process of enrichment, for example – hearers take 'She took out her key and opened the door' to assert that she opened the door *with the key*, but that information is neither (at least obviously or typically) semantically expressed nor pragmatically implicated. (Such cases are discussed again below, at a couple of junctures (e.g., notes 21, 33).)

<sup>5</sup> For example, Bach (1999) and Potts (2005) reject Grice's position on conventional implicatures, while remaining squarely within the neo-Gricean orientation (a bit more on that in note 18); in work in progress I defend a neo-Gricean approach to irony which rejects Grice's (1978: 54) claim that derogation is essential to verbal irony; and so on. More generally, as Sedivy (2007: 475) notes, "There is ... considerable and fundamental disagreement among researchers about the appropriate way to classify certain pragmatic phenomena initially identified by Grice as implicature." To call someone a neo-Gricean, in the operative sense here, imparts a general theoretical commitment to the importance of Grice's factorization, but does not entail any specific doctrine about any specific phenomena.

<sup>6</sup> For more or less any of the contentious phenomena listed in note 1, there may be neo-Griceans within any and all of the opposing camps in the debates regarding their proper categorization. For example, Stanley & Szabo (2000) might completely agree with Bach (2000) and Neale (2000) about the centrality of Grice's factorization, but yet there still remains wide disagreement about exactly how domain restriction relates to the S/P interface. Similarly, say, for Stern (2000) v. Camp (2005) on metaphor, or Bach (2004) v. Devitt (2004) on referential uses of descriptions.

These in-house disputes, within the neo-Gricean tent, provide a stark contrast with some of the objections to the cancellability test discussed at length below in §4, in which case both general theoretical disputes, and specific semantic disputes, can be at play, to varying degrees. (A pertinent example: some of the literature cited in note 2 is addressed to the question 'Are explicatures cancellable?'; 'explicature' is a relevance-theoretic notion (cf. Sperber & Wilson (1986), Carston (2002)) and so non-neo-Gricean to the core. Hence, the exact relation between the questions 'Are implicatures cancellable?' and 'Are explicatures cancellable?' involves a complex tangle of distinct kinds of issues.)

<sup>7</sup> Cf. Sullivan (2015) for more thorough discussion of these issues.

<sup>8</sup> While the notion of 'pragmatic meaning' has some currency in some important literature, on my orientation it must be read as shorthand for 'information which is pragmatically implicated', as opposed to naming a putative distinct variety of meaning. Examples of classic cases which the neo-Gricean views as ill-motivated semantic claims that are

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ultimately exposed by Grice's factorization include Strawson (1952) on 'and', Donnellan (1966) on 'the', and Wittgenstein (1969) on 'know'. Cf. King & Stanley (2005) for some discussion and further references.

<sup>9</sup> Haugh (2013: §1) goes so far as to say that many – including Sperber & Wilson (1986), Levinson (2000), and Carston (2002) – treat “implicature” as “essentially synonymous” with “pragmatic inference”.

<sup>10</sup> Cf. Horn (2004), Bach (2005).

<sup>11</sup> For another, confluent avenue into this divide, cf. Camp (2012: §4.2) for discussion of deniability as it pertains differentially to pragmatic implicature vs. semantic content.

<sup>12</sup> Cf. Crimmins (1991: 23-4), Blome-Tillmann (2013: §1) for other ways into this point that the cancellability test essentially involves counterfactual reasoning.

<sup>13</sup> So, 'X is meeting a woman' normally implicates that the woman is not X's mother, say, or 'X has two children' normally implicates that X has exactly two children, *qua* 'form of expression' – though special contexts are available in which the implication is not carried and therefore contextually canceled.

<sup>14</sup> This schema is similar to one given by Crimmins (1991). Cf. Blome-Tillmann (2013) for separate schemas for the explicit and contextual cases; cf. Jaszczolt (2009), Haugh (2013) for further discussion of the explicit/contextual distinction.

<sup>15</sup> As Grice (1978: 43) puts it, it provides "... a more or less prima facie case in favor of a conversational implicature". His considered view (1978: 43-6) is that all, but not only, conversational implicatures are cancellable. I find the cases which Grice classifies as cancellable non-implicatures to be not terribly significant to this present inquiry, as compared to those considered in §4 below – e.g., "If we all know that Macbeth hallucinated, then we can quite safely say that Macbeth saw Banquo ...", and yet *that Banquo was there to be seen* is cancellable but no mere implicature. Surely, though, this is loose talk, on which neither general morals about the semantics of 'to see', nor general principles regarding the S/P interface, can be built.

In any case, the view I defend herein will countenance a limited, circumscribed class of non-cancellable implicatures, but (apart from some relevant discussion in the course of the ambiguity objection in §4.4) I will not comprehensively investigate any such putative cancellable non-implicatures.

<sup>16</sup> Remember again the pinch of salt first discussed in note 5. *Qua neo-Gricean*, I am going to stay general here, and not get into any specific nuanced debates – e.g., about precise relations between any and all varieties of implicature and any and all varieties of presupposition. Cf. Schlenker (2016) for an example of such an investigation.

<sup>17</sup> There is much more discussion of this key notion of 'pragmatic oddness' at several junctures below (especially the rest of the present section, and §§4.3-4). Indeed, it becomes gradually clearer that the cogency of the cancellability test relies on some such notion as I am calling 'pragmatic oddness', as distinct from cancellation (which, in the context of the ambiguity objection in §4.4, will boil down to the distinction between clarifying and cancelling).

<sup>18</sup> Cf. Bach (1999), Potts (2005). For example, the cancellability test is presupposed by arguments along the general lines of: It is contradictory (not just odd) to say "She was poor but honest – though I do not mean to suggest that there is anything unexpected about being both poor and honest"; therefore 'but' differs semantically (not just pragmatically) from 'and'.

<sup>19</sup> Cf. Hom (2008), Williamson (2009), Vayrynen (2013).

<sup>20</sup> Comparing and extending note 18, consider (certain among the many things wrong with): "I'm not racist because I actually like niggers"; or the line from a hip-hop song I've heard on the radio: "I'm so proud to call you my bitch". Arguments that – given that these go beyond oddness to approach or instance contradictions, therefore the expressive dimension is semantically relevant (cf. Potts (2005), Hom (2008), and others) – also clearly presuppose the cancellability test.

<sup>21</sup> Another few examples: Searle (1975: 66) appeals to the cancellability test in the course of an argument against the notion that ‘Can you pass the salt?’ is ambiguous between a question and a request; Williamson (1996: 500) uses the test in an argument against a certain tempting appeal to pragmatics within a debate in epistemology; Nunberg (2004: 267-8) uses it to argue against a proposed pragmatic account of descriptive uses of indexicals.

One might also think that the cancellability test could be useful in dividing mandatory, bottom-up, pre-propositional (e.g., saturation) from optional, top-down, post-propositional (e.g., modulation, enrichment) interpretive processes. We might try to fashion something akin to Recanati’s (2004: 101) ‘optionality constraint’ – if it is cancellable, then it is optional. Surely, there is something to this:

[PO] She took out her key and opened the door; though she did not use the key to do so.

[C\*] She is tall; though no contextually salient females currently under discussion are tall.

However, I will not try to further develop this idea here. (I will however get into disambiguation in §4.4 below, and since disambiguation is also a mandatory, pre-propositional process, it will have some relevance to this issue.)

<sup>22</sup> It can be found in Capone (2009) and Burton-Roberts (2010, 2013), among other places.

<sup>23</sup> Cf. Carston (2010: §2), Haugh (2013: §2.2) for other criticisms of the coherence objection. I should acknowledge two potential sources of noise here. First, the coherence objection may well apply differentially across the contextual/explicit divide, and so may be unfairly disadvantaged by my strategic choice above to focus on explicit cancellation. Second, alluding back to the conceptual/empirical distinction delved into at the end of §2, this objection tends to come from empirically-oriented researchers, who may not be all that impressed by the above kind of conceptual footwork.

<sup>24</sup> Cf. Haugh (2013: §2.1) for extensive discussion, and Bach (2005), Blome-Tillmann (2013) for separate rationales for something very much like the present stance. I suspect the reason that Grice never worried about such cases (cf. note 15) is that what he meant by ‘implicature’ is ‘*mere* implicature’; and hence, by definition for Grice, what is entailed is not implicated.

<sup>25</sup> Grice (1978: 42) explicitly disavows the possibility of “a decisive test to settle the question of whether a conversational implicature is present or not”.

<sup>26</sup> Such cases have been raised by Camp (2006) and Weiner (2006), among others. All the putative cases involve sarcasm or verbal irony. I will just say ‘sarcasm’ – I am not much interested here in how best to label this category. Cf. Dynel (2013), Kapogianni (2016) for some sophisticated recent analyses of verbal irony.

<sup>27</sup> Note again the regulative use of the cancellability test, as an indicator at the S/P interface, at work here. This would be a way to save the working hypothesis about cancellability – i.e., if these so-called ‘cancellation-resistant implicatures’ turn out not to be implicatures after all, then their non-cancellable status would pose no problem. If this is a semantic phenomenon, we should expect it to be cancellation-resistant.

<sup>28</sup> For some other critical responses to Weiner (2006), cf. Blome-Tillmann (2008), Dahlman (2012), Haugh (2013).

<sup>29</sup> Cf. Sperber & Wilson (1986: 195), Haugh (2013: §2.2) for discussion of other senses in which implicatures are gradable along a scale.

<sup>30</sup> Matt Weiner has pressed that there are cases for which this response will not suffice – i.e., obviously sarcastic meaning-inversion cases in which what is semantically expressed is tautologically false (“Yeah, right! And black is white and up is down!”) The key difference between these cases and similar-feeling cases (“Yeah, and pigs can fly!” “Yeah, and I’m the Queen of England!”) is precisely that the relevant counterfactuals are false – so remote as to be non-existent.

Now, I am not really sure that I *HAVE TO* concede much here. I have some inclination to dig in my heels and hold that what I have already said in §§4.1-3 can still handle these cases. For example, I might just add on the disjunct “or counterpossibles” anywhere I say “counterfactuals” – after all, I am modelling discourse, not doing

metaphysics here; so there is no shame in getting into impossible worlds, if that is where the discourse to be modelled has gone.

But I also have some inclination to concede the point and countenance a limited, circumscribed category of “over the top”, non-cancellable sarcasm. As I see it, this would no more undermine the general usefulness of the cancellability test as a reliable indicator at the S/P interface than did the already conceded limited, circumscribed case of non-cancellable implicatures which also happen to be entailments (cf. note 25).

<sup>31</sup> This objection dates back to Sadock (1978: 284): “The test does not distinguish cases of ambiguity from cases of univocality plus possible conversational implicature”. It also plays a key role in Carston’s (2002, 2010) influential rejection of the cancellability test.

<sup>32</sup> Here are a few exemplars of the varied [PO] species, for quick reference:

[PO] X has two children; in fact X has five.

[PO] X is meeting a woman this evening; she is X’s mother.

[PO] X and Y got married; X married Z and Y married W.

[PO] Dear Sir, Mr. X’s command of English is excellent, and his attendance at tutorials has been regular. Mr. X is also the most brilliant philosophical mind of his generation. Yours, etc.

[PO] I’m curious as to whether it might be physically possible for you to make room for someone else to sit down. I’m not suggesting that you *should* make room, though.

<sup>33</sup> Note that, while many cases have been raised to complicate this pre-propositional/post-propositional distinction (cf. note 4), they concern whether the divide is exclusive (i.e., modulation, enrichment, etc., do not fall neatly onto either side of the divide), not whether it is coherent, or whether there exist paradigm cases at the extreme poles. Disambiguation vs. particularized conversational implicature are precisely such.

<sup>34</sup> Indeed, Nunberg (1979) presses how difficult it is to even conclusively identify whether or not a given expression is ambiguous; see Sennett (2016) for a good contemporary discussion of the matter. I connect again with this point at a couple of junctures below.

<sup>35</sup> Both [9] and [10] are much more like Kaplan’s (1978) famous case of the haberdasher saying to the banker ‘I am out of checks’, in the absence of knowing whether the utterance occurs in the clothing store vs. in the bank, than like the kind of [PO], cancellation cases under ongoing discussion here. [9] and [10] are akin to [4] and [5] in involving not opting out, but rather subsequent information helping to disambiguate a prior utterance.