ABSTRACT

A Study of Conversational Implicatures With Special Reference To Vikram Seth’s A Suitable Boy and An Equal Music

The present study aims at exploring the nature and function of conversational implicatures in written communication with reference to fiction. A study of conversational implicatures involves exploration into the pragmatic implications of a linguistic discourse, i.e. how, while communicating, speakers mean more or different than what they actually say.

Communication, being a social affair, takes place within the context of a fairly well defined social situation. Features of context such as the physical setting of utterances, participants’ personal background knowledge and beliefs, their world view, their goals and intentions, their attitudes toward each other, the socio-cultural assumptions concerning role and status relationship, the social values associated with various message components, etc play an important role in the planning and interpretation of utterances. That is why linguistic behaviour can provide significant clues for understanding the complex psychological make up of individuals we happen to interact in our day-to-day life. A careful analysis of the choice of the topic of conversation, selection of words, phrases and expressions, structure of conversation, etc can give insights into the functioning of language in which human personality gets manifested. This is more so in the world of fiction in which the context is restricted.

In actual as well as fictional communication, most of the communicational content is passed on by way of implication rather than by explicit statements. The issue of implied meaning is one of the core concerns in pragmatics. In order to bring out implied meaning, it is required that the hearer locates the context of the interaction and interprets the utterances in the light of the general principles of language use. This calls for a deeper analysis of utterances— an analysis of the context in which the discourse is situated and relating it to the inferencing
strategy that would correctly predict the implied propositions. Implicature analysis proves to be a very effective tool in this respect.

A study of conversational implicatures in fiction can reveal the hidden agenda of the characters in the socio-cultural context of the work and can enhance our understanding and appreciation of the work. A literary artist is often very conscious and careful about the use of language. This is because the fictional world he creates is motivated by aesthetic reasons. Conversational interaction introduced in the narrative design of a novel is not merely a variety in the mode of expression. Conversational devices are used in a very subtle way in character delineation in the context of their complex socio-cultural network of relationships. Since the conversational component plays a major role in the realisation of the aesthetic structure, a study of conversations can yield substantial insight into the text. It can certainly add to our understanding, appreciation and enjoyment of a literary text.

For the analysis of conversational implicatures two voluminous novels by Vikram Seth, A Suitable Boy and An Equal Music, have been taken up. The thesis is divided into six chapters. The first chapter introduces and explains the metalanguage used in the dissertation. This involves consideration of concepts such as discourse, communication, context of utterance, etc. It attempts to distinguish between semantics and pragmatics along the line of the dichotomies such as ‘sentence and utterance’ and ‘sense and force’. It also highlights the aims and objectives, plan, scope, data and method of study. The focus here is on the nature of communication and on the metalinguistic tools required for analysing it. Communication is a complex interpersonal phenomenon involving at least two persons or agents using some medium for exchange of ideas. Semantics alone cannot cope with it. In linguistic semantics meaning is defined purely as a property of expressions in a given language, without any reference to particular situations, or speakers and hearers. Consequently, semantics accounts for only a small portion of meaning involved in language use, namely the propositional content or ‘sense’ of an utterance. Such meaning is abstract and without any force or illocutionary intent. Any study of communication, therefore, requires
analysis at the pragmatic level. In pragmatics, meaning is defined relative to the
users of a language.
Several types of meaning and the factors affecting the meaning of an utterance in
question have been considered. Meaning is a culture specific domain. As there
are so many variables affecting meaning, what the hearer infers can hardly ever
be exactly the same as what the speaker means. What the hearer infers, even in
the case of the so-called ideal case of communication, is, strictly speaking, only
an approximation of what the speaker means. To understand the total
signification of an utterance is to understand the speaker intended meaning. The
total signification is the product of the interaction between the sentence meaning
and the speaker intended meaning. Features of context modify the sentence
meaning such that the utterance systematically encodes the speaker’s intention.
This makes it possible for the hearer, given appropriate contextual knowledge, to
retrieve that intention. Encoding, and retrieving, speaker intended meaning is
possible only when both the speaker and hearer act in accordance with a set of
generally shared conversational principles and assumptions. These assumptions
pertain to certain very general norms of rational communicative behaviour
tacitly known to users of a language.
Two major models of communication, the code model and the inferential model
have also been considered. From Aristotle to modern semiotics, almost all
theories of communication were based on a single model- the code model.
Recently, however, several philosophers, notably H. Paul Grice, have proposed a
quite different model- the inferential model. According to the inferential model,
communication is achieved by producing and interpreting evidence. An
inferential model is essentially a Pragmatic model of communication. The
speaker, in this framework, tries to achieve his aims within constraints imposed
by the norms or principles and maxims of standard communicative behaviour,
whereas the hearer tries to solve his problem using the same mechanism for the
purposes of interpretation. This view of communication visualizes the
interactants as trying to achieve their respective goals within the constraints
imposed by these principles and maxims. Here the principles such as the
cooperative principle (CP) and the politeness principle (PP) play an important part.

The code model and the inferential model are not incompatible; they can be combined in various ways. In fact both the models contribute to the study of communication. Communication is achieved by encoding and decoding messages, and the users of a language arrive at the shared understanding of the communicational content by providing evidence for the intended meaning. The pragmatic model of conversation analysis draws heavily upon the clues for inferring this evidence on the basis of certain very general conversational principles and maxims like the cooperative principle and the politeness principle. Thus, with its sharp focus on the significance and superimposing role of the features of context in the pragmatic analyses of a given text, the first chapter sets the general tone for the theoretical framework provided in the ensuing chapters.

Chapter II, ‘Theoretical Framework- I : Conversation’ is devoted exclusively to the survey of the prominent perspectives on conversation. It deals with the nature and significance of conversational activity in spoken and written discourse and with the various approaches to the study of conversation.

The overwhelming variety of perspectives- linguistic, anthropological, sociological, philosophical, psychological, has given rise to a variety of different approaches to the study of language and generated different models for understanding, and methods for analysing conversations. These various perspectives throw light on different aspects and issues concerning the study of language and thus contribute to our understanding of this extremely vast and complex domain. However, the researcher, instead of taking a detailed survey of the currently popular approaches, concentrates on only a few major approaches relevant to the pragmatic paradigm of utterance interpretation. These approaches have been examined only in relation to their significant contribution relevant to the pragmatic approach. The centrally relevant approaches considered here are: the ‘Ethnomethodological Conversation Analysis’, the ‘Speech Act Approach’, the ‘Face Theory’ expounded by Brown and Levinson, and ‘The Gricean Approach’.
The basic assumptions shared by almost all these models of conversation analysis are:

Conversations consist of identifiable individual units like sentences/utterances, acts, moves, turns, etc.

Conversationalists are guided by certain interactional rules in the production and combination of the individual units into higher structures (like opening, closing, etc) in the discourse.

The interactional rules are tacitly known and shared by native users of a language. (This assumption accounts for the shared identification of individual acts which makes communication possible.)

The pragmatic approach tries to arrive at a systematic and comprehensive understanding and interpretation of the stretches of language actually used for the purpose of communication. It seems to dwell upon the findings of other approaches as empirically tested ontological and epistemological assumptions for the purpose. The researcher’s aim in this chapter is to highlight the indebtedness of the pragmatic approach to the other approaches to the study of conversation.

Chapter III, ‘Theoretical Framework- II: Conversational Implicatures’ deals with the different types of inferences which facilitate communication. In linguistic communication a large part of meaning is conveyed by way of implication and is retrieved by way of inferences. It is common knowledge that users of a language convey most of the communicational content by way of implication rather than by making overt statements. They systematically encode and decode implied meaning by making use of different inference generating mechanisms. Entailments, presuppositions and implicatures are some of the most common inference generating mechanisms or tools used for the purpose of encoding and decoding meaning. This chapter highlights the distinctive features of entailments, presuppositions and implicatures as the major inference generating mechanisms which users of a language know tacitly or explicitly, and employ consciously or unconsciously, for the purposes of communication. These inference types have been classified into two categories- semantic inferences and
pragmatic inferences. Entailments are semantic inferences, whereas presuppositions and implicatures are pragmatic inferences. Presuppositions are inferences regarding background assumptions against which the main import of an utterance is assessed and against which the utterance makes sense. An implicature may be said to be the extra meaning attached to, but distinct from, the sense of the utterance. The term implicature signifies what a speaker implicates, as opposed to what he actually says, and its approximation arrived at by the hearer by making use of some inferencing mechanism. Conversational implicatures are a special type of pragmatic inferences arrived at by relating the contextual assumptions to the principles and maxims of standard conversational practice. Implicatures cover a tremendously vast and extremely vital area in communication.

Entailments, presuppositions and implicatures play vital role in the organisation and management of conversational interaction. Entailments account for the literal meaning of the sentences/sentence parts uttered; presuppositions account for the background assumptions and shared knowledge (world view) against which utterances in conversation make sense; and implicatures account for the additional non-literal but contextually relevant inferred portion of meaning in a conversation. Together, these inferencing mechanisms enable interlocutors to fulfil their conversational goals more effectively. These inference types thus play vital role in language use and consequently are of great significance in the study of conversation. The focus here is on the implicature generating mechanism, a typology of implicatures, ways of identifying and distinguishing different types of implicatures, and on the role of implicatures in communicative activity in general and in fiction in particular. The purpose is to develop analytical framework which is applied to the selected conversations from the novels taken up for analysis.

A proposition expressed by an utterance may be entailed, presupposed or conventionally or conversationally (i.e. non-conventionally) implicated. Since the present study deals with conversational implicatures, and not with any and every kind of inference involved in the encoding and transfer of meaning, it is
necessary to identify whether an inference in question is a case of an entailment, a presupposition, a conventional implicature or a conversational implicature. The overall framework used for identification of implicatures is the one proposed by Grice (1967). Grice used the term ‘implicature’ as ‘a term of the art’ to signify the communicational content not covered in ‘what is said’ (in the favoured sense of the term). It was intended to serve as a blanket term to cover a whole lot of other words like imply, suggest, implicate, indicate and mean. In order to distinguish implicatures, Grice distinguished between three categories of meaning, viz. (i) what is said, (ii) what is conventionally implicated, and (iii) what is non-conventionally implicated. The first category of meaning, viz. ‘what is said’ stands for what is entailed by the expression used as a vehicle for the act of communication. The second category, viz. ‘what is conventionally implicated’ refers to the additional meaning conventionally but non-truth-conditionally attached to the expressions. In a conventional implicature, what is implicated derives from ‘the additional conventional meaning attached to the words used’. Conventional implicatures, as Levinson (1983) says, are not a very interesting category. In fact, the main focus of the Gricean paradigm is to identify and explain ‘conversational implicatures’ which belong to the third category of meaning, viz. ‘what is non-conventionally implicated’. And it is this category with which the present chapter is primarily concerned.

Chapters I, II & III together complete the theoretical framework. They clarify the researcher’s position on the core notions. The model for analysis postulated here is essentially an eclectic one. It takes into account the various approaches to the study of conversation resulting from a variety of academic disciplines. It also takes into account the methods and models emerging from these approaches and uses as tools the observations, findings and discoveries of several other approaches.

In the fourth and the fifth chapters the researcher applies the model emerging from the theoretical framework for analysing conversational implicatures in fiction. The data for the analysis consists of selected pieces of conversational interaction from two major novels by an eminent Indian writer in English.
Vikram Seth, viz. A Suitable Boy and An Equal Music. Of these two novels, the first, the massive 1349 page novel- A Suitable Boy, is the winner of the 1994 Commonwealth Writers Prize For Best Literature. It reflects contemporary reality and truthfully depicts the social and political scenario of the post-independent India. The second novel An Equal Music is an equally ambitious and widely acclaimed work. Since the present study is confined to the examination and analysis of conversational implicatures in these novels, the focus is on conversations. The data for analysis, therefore, comprises significant conversations from these two novels. It does not cover all the conversations built into these novels; nor does it cover all the major and significant ones. The criteria for selection of conversational passages for analyses include the illustrative value of these passages. The aim here is to examine and illustrate the types of conversational implicatures generated, the strategies deployed by conversationalists in implicating the same, the uptake (or failure of uptake) by the co-locutors and their communicational consequences.

Analysis of conversational implicatures involves extensive inferencing in context. For establishing the communicative context of utterances in question, the researcher draws mostly upon the information supplied in the texts and on intuition (i.e. the rationality-based inferencing mechanism). Since implicatures are generated by following, violating or flouting/exploiting the principles of standard type of conversational interaction, they are examined within the limited framework established for the purpose of analysis. No finality is claimed for the inventory either of the so-called norms of conversational behaviour or of the types of implicatures discussed. The purpose here is to explore the possibility of analysing fictional conversations and the pedagogic utility of the proposed type of pragmatic analysis.

In the fourth and fifth chapters selected passages from A Suitable Boy, and An Equal Music, have been analysed respectively. The purpose of this analysis is to test the applicability of the model to the narrative discourse like fiction. The thrust is on different types of implicatures involved in each of these
conversational interactions and the strategies employed by the interactants for the transfer of the implied meaning.

The concluding chapter sums up the ideas and points emerging from issues discussed in the preceding chapters in terms of the findings of the researcher. It states the researcher’s conclusions concerning the socio-linguistic and pedagogic implications of the proposed type of analysis. The researcher here shows how conversational implicatures occupy central position and play a crucial role in the actual as well as fictional communication. It shows how, despite the culture-specific and idiosyncratic variation in strategies concerning language use, the users of language generally tend to orient their behaviour to certain universal principles like the cooperative principle and the politeness principle. They may not be acting in accordance with the dictates of these principles all the time or most of the times but they certainly make use of these principles strategically for the fulfilment of their personal goals. This chapter puts the different patterns of culture-specific speech functions emerging from the selection and analysis of illustrations from the novels into a common perspective and advocates the need for developing a separate rhetoric or schema for the analysis of complex speech functions. Such a schema would involve an elaborate interpretative mechanism based on the findings of the different approaches emerging from different academic disciplines that deal with the phenomenon of language use. There are several other strategies of interpersonal behaviour that need to be studied in more detail, but the researcher could not venture into such detailed investigation due to the constraints of the scope of this study. There is thus tremendous scope, as there are infinite possibilities, for further research in this field.