

Interactions of the Expression ‘Let’s Just Say’ with the Gricean Maxims of Conversation

Author(s): Cathy Cogen and Leora Herrmann

Proceedings of the First Annual Meeting of the Berkeley Linguistics Society (1975), pp. 60-68

Please see “How to cite” in the online sidebar for full citation information.

Please contact BLS regarding any further use of this work. BLS retains copyright for both print and screen forms of the publication. BLS may be contacted via <http://linguistics.berkeley.edu/bls/>.

The Annual Proceedings of the Berkeley Linguistics Society is published online via [eLanguage](#), the Linguistic Society of America's digital publishing platform.

Interactions of the Expression
'Let's Just Say' with
the Gricean Maxims of Conversation*

Cathy Cogen and Leora Herrmann
University of California, Berkeley

Grice (1967) has shown how implicatures arise from violations of the rules of conversation. In many cases, these violations are intentional and serve specific purposes. We have found that the expression 'let's just say' serves as an overt marker on sentences which constitute an opting out from the normal flow of a discourse. It is used as a cue to the addressee that a violation follows, and that the violation is significant.

The expression 'let's just say' can operate in ways similar to 'well', as Lakoff (1973) described it. That is, both 'well' and 'let's just say' can be used in replies to questions in case the respondent is not giving directly the information the questioner sought, and both can operate as a signal that what follows is not to be taken as a complete reply which gives all the necessary information; the addressee will have to deduce the details that have been left out. However, it is obvious from a comparison of (1) and (2) that 'let's just say' has properties that 'well' does not share.

- 1)P: Did you have beef stroganoff last night?
Y: Let's just say we had a combination of beef, noodles, and sour cream.
- 2)P: Did you have beef stroganoff last night?
Y: Well, we had a combination of beef, noodles, and sour cream.

While (1) gives an assessment of the quality of the stroganoff, namely, "yech", (2) does not necessarily do that.

We see from (3) that 'let's just say' also functions differently from 'let's say', as James (1973) described it.

- 3)M: What does Alfred look like?
Q: He's, let's just say, beautiful.
Z: *He's, let's say, beautiful.

James seems to be correct in saying that 'let's say' would not be used with such a strong expression of emotion. She claims that 'let's say' indicates that a description is not very far from the truth, but is not quite the truth, and it would be difficult in a sentence like (3) to imagine a state of feeling which would be close, but not quite the same as that expressed by (3). 'Let's just say', on the other hand, seems to indicate that the actual description is beyond words; that is, to say Alfred is beautiful is putting it mildly.

We mentioned above that 'let's just say' functions as an overt marker on a statement which constitutes an opting out from the normal flow of a discourse. These optings out are often accomplished

by failure to adhere strictly to Grice's maxims of conversation. For example, in (4), 'let's just say' is used with a violation of the maxim of quantity, "make your contribution as informative as required."

4)Z: Do you want to hear a funny story? The most embarrassing thing happened to me. I was in the car with my brother-in-law and I asked him if he wanted to hear a funny story. I told it to him and he didn't even laugh. Then about five minutes later he says, "Hey, weren't you going to tell me a funny story?"

O: Huh? Say it one more time.

Z: Let's just say it was a really embarrassing situation.

O: (later) Hey, weren't you going to tell me a funny story?

In (4), Z violates quantity because the point of telling her story, to be funny, would be lost if she explained it again. Thus, she uses 'let's just say' to signal that a violation of quantity is about to take place.

Speakers commonly use 'let's just say' as a means of hedging their responses. That is, it allows a speaker to "drop" information inexplicitly, or it allows a speaker a means of responding to a question, without really answering it. When the actual answer to a question is made available to the addressee, it is deducible by implicature. In either case, 'let's just say' signals to the addressee that the speaker is opting out from one of the maxims of conversation.

5)Dick: Where's your cute girlfriend live?

Pat: Let's just say she lives on Northside, creep.

In (5), Pat uses 'let's just say' to signal not only that she is not giving Dick complete information, but also that she does not want him to have that information. Thus, her response did not implicate an answer to Dick's question. In (6), (7), and (8), however, the responses do implicate at least a general answer to the questions asked.

6)Antony: Who was that man I saw you with last night?

Cleopatra: Let's just say he's a friend.

7)Sister: Why did Joseph and Mary decide to get married all of a sudden?

Father: Let's just say they thought it would be a good idea given the circumstances.

8)Otto: What's your average in your physics class?

Albert: Let's just say I'm no Isaac Newton.

Each of the responses in (6), (7), and (8) opted out from the first maxim of quantity by not being as informative as required. However, answers to the questions are deducible from the responses given. In each case, the use of 'let's just say' in a sense "presupposes" that the respondent, for one reason or another, refuses to be explicit.

The sentences following 'let's just say' in each of examples (6), (7), and (8) violates or in some way fails to adhere to a Gricean maxim of conversation. In (6), the response would have violated quality had it not been prefaced with 'let's just say.' The addition of 'let's just say' communicates the intentionality of the violation, and prompts Antony to deduce that Cleo's relationship with the man is more than friendship, that is, more than she explicitly stated in her response.

In (7), the respondent refuses to explicitly state the reason for Joseph and Mary's hasty marriage (but you know why they got married). The respondent relies on 'let's just say' to point out that a violation of Grice's maxim of manner is about to occur. The questioner, rather than assuming that the respondent is being uncooperative, is able to deduce the actual reason from what is said.

In (8), the statement following 'let's just say' both states the obvious, a violation of Grice's second maxim of quantity, and in itself, without its implicature, is irrelevant to the issue at hand. In order to see the relevance of Albert's response, Otto has to make a connection between Isaac Newton and doing well in physics. 'Let's just say' signals that Albert is intentionally violating a maxim of conversation, thus leading Otto to look for an implicature instead of assuming his response is irrelevant. In each of the examples just discussed, the statement following 'let's just say' involves a violation of quantity in the negative direction. That is, the speaker gives less explicit information than was asked for.

Returning now to sentence (1), repeated here for convenience,

1)P: Did you have beef stroganoff last night?

Y: Let's just say we had a combination of beef, noodles, and sour cream.

we see that 'let's just say' can also be used with responses that give even more information than the questioner asks for. The response in (1) through a violation of Grice's maxim of quality, "be succinct", not only gives an affirmative answer to the question asked, but also conveys the quality of the stroganoff. The same statement prefaced by 'well', as in (2), does not necessarily have this implicature. We feel that 'well' would more likely be used in case the speaker wasn't sure whether he/she actually had beef stroganoff. Thus we have, "Well, we had a combination of beef, noodles and sour cream; is that stroganoff?", versus, "Let's just say we had a combination of beef, noodles, and sour cream, if you can call that stroganoff!".

The response in (9a) also gives more information than asked for.

(9)Nurse: Did he kiss you goodnight?

Juliet:a) Let's just say I'm not a virgin anymore.

b)*Let's just say we slept together.

c)*Let's just say we finally got it on.

Notice, however, that while (9a) is acceptable, (9b) and (9c) are not. The use of 'anymore' in (9a) implicates that the speaker was previously a virgin, and that she no longer is. The same response without 'anymore', namely, "Let's just say I'm not a virgin", does not implicate information relevant to the question asked. While the fact that Juliet slept with the man is deducible from her response in (9a), it is overtly expressed in (9b) and (9c). Thus, it seems that in order to give more information than a question asked for, that information must be deduced from the response. In other words, if you're going to "drop" information you'll do it as inexplicitly as possible. Notice, also, that the response in (9a) does not necessarily convey an answer to the question asked, but it does seem to satisfy the ostensible purpose of the question, namely, to find out how the relationship is progressing.

Thus far, we have looked at the conversational functions which 'let's just say' can serve. These are listed in (10).

- 10) a. summing up a description
- b. indicating that the true state of affairs is beyond words.
- c. giving an indirect response which implicates additional information
- d. refusing to give adequate information to answer a question (no implicature)
- e. communicating information by using sentences which give more than asked for

We have shown how each occurrence of 'let's just say' is accompanied by a violation of Grice's maxims of cooperative discourse.

We have also found that 'let's just say' obeys Ross Constraints. For example, 'let's just say' cannot refer into part of a Complex NP. Compare (11) and (12).

- 11)U: Let's just say I met a man who was beautiful.
- 12)W: I met a man who was, let's just say, beautiful.

(11) would most likely be used to mean "all I want to tell you is that I met a beautiful man." In other words it fits into category (10d). (12), however, fits into category (10b), indicating that the true state of affairs is beyond words. We see then, that 'let's just say' in (11) is not referring into the Complex NP; that is, it does not refer to 'beautiful' as it does in (12), but rather, it refers to the entire statement that follows it.

'Let's just say' cannot refer into part of a sentential subject, as we see from (13).

- 13)E: How did Harry feel after he flunked his algebra test?
- O: Let's just say, that he was pretty upset, was obvious.

Most speakers seem to feel that 'let's just say' in O's response

refers to the whole sentence or just to 'obvious'. We find that 'let's just say' can only refer to part of a sentential subject when it occurs within that sentential subject, as in (14) where 'let's just say' refers to 'pretty upset'.

(14)I: That he was, let's just say, pretty upset, was obvious.

In coordinate structures, a pause between the first and second conjuncts can indicate that 'let's just say' only refers to the first. Take for example (15) and (16).

(15)Y: What happened when Jack Spratt and his wife came over last night?

S: Let's just say Jack's weird, and his wife's even weirder.

(16)S: Let's just say Jack's weird....and his wife's even weirder.

In (15), S indicated that she was opting out on quantity in her response. In (16), however, she seemed to limit the scope of 'let's just say' to the information contained in the first conjunct. In (15), S indicated that she did not want to discuss the situation any further--in (16), that she did not want to go into the details of Jack's weirdness. No speaker we have come across can use S-initial 'let's just say' to refer only to the content of the second conjunct.

In (17), it seems that 'let's just say' can only refer to the entire coordinate structure.

(17)J: Was that class hard?

K: Let's just say Mary flunked and Sandy got an A.

K's response in (17) might be paraphrased as "Mary flunked and Sandy got an A, so draw your own conclusions". It is easy to see why 'let's just say' in this case must refer to the whole sentence. By itself, "Let's just say Mary flunked" would communicate that the course could be considered difficult, since Mary flunked. To then add, "...and Sandy got an A", would seem contradictory. The reading where 'let's just say' refers to both conjuncts is more consistent within itself.

Notice that in (18), where 'let's just say' occurs within the first conjunct and is used solely to modify 'flunk', it serves a different function from that in (17).

18)J: Was that class hard?

K: ?Mary, let's just say, flunked, and Sandy got an A.

In (18), 'let's just say' is used to indicate that a lot more could be said about Mary's performance in the class. J, then, would deduce this implicature, which is not relevant to the question asked. Thus, K's response seems inappropriate. We see, then, that with coordinate structures, S-initial and S-internal 'let's

just say' often function quite differently.

The fact that sentence-initial and sentence-internal 'let's just say' serve different functions in each of the cases we have been discussing, perhaps explains why 'let's just say' cannot refer into an island construction from the outside. It is also evidence that the two types of constructions are not related by a simple movement rule.

Let us now return to the sentence pair of (11) and (12), in which 'let's just say' prefaces the answer in the first case and occurs inside the Complex NP in the second. We repeat these examples here, for convenience.

11) T: What did you end up doing last night?

M: Let's just say I met a man who was beautiful.

12) T: What did you end up doing last night?

M: I met a man who was, let's just say, beautiful.

We have already shown that 'let's just say' refers to different things in each case. Moreover, we find that 'let's just say' performs a different conversational function in each. While (11) acts as an opting out from the flow of the conversation, (12) leaves open the possibility for further discussion. That is, in (11), the speaker indicates that she does not want to give more information, in effect, stopping the flow of the conversation in the direction it was previously headed. In (12), the speaker is not withholding information, and thus does not stop the flow of the conversation. In fact, (12) might be used to promote further discussion. We find that sentences like (5), which have no implicatures, are more effective conversation stoppers than sentences which do implicate the answer to the question. Responses having no implicature may be considered rude. They deny the questioner access to the information he/she sought.

The interaction of 'let's just say' with indefinites is interesting, in that the respondent is able to avoid indentifying a particular person or thing, while indicating, at the same time, that he/she does, in fact, have the information that the questioner seeks. Consider, for example, (19).

19) V: What's Mom getting at the store?

W: Let's just say she's getting something.

W's reply in (19) seems to have the following components:

- 20) a. W knows what Mom is getting at the store.
- b. W is not telling V all he knows about what V asked.
- c. W is telling V that Mom is getting a non-specified item.

The (c) component seems to be what is asserted after 'let's just say'. The (b) component is what 'let's just say' itself conveys, and the (a) component is implicated by the combination of (b) and (c). The process for deduction of the implicature in (19) might be something like (21).

- 21) (c--W is saying that Mom is getting a non-specified item--c) and that (b--he is not telling all that he knows in response to V's question--b). W asked what Mom is getting. The only information W could be withholding is what Mom is getting, since he admits that Mom is in fact getting something. Therefore, (a--W must know what Mom is getting--a).

A similar analysis explains why (22) works as it does.

- 22) L: Who did Bill hit?
 B: Let's just say he hit someone.
 L₁: Who did he hit? Come on, tell me.
 L₂: *Oh, then you don't know who he hit.

The final comment on L's part is unacceptable because it ignores the implicature of B's response. If B communicated only the fact that Bill hit some non-specified person, L₂ would have been a possible rejoinder. But, since B's response implicates that B knows who Bill hit, L₂ is not acceptable.

Notice further that in (19), the statement that follows 'let's just say' gives no new information to the addressee. In fact, the response is merely a restatement of the presupposition of the question asked.

- 23) What's Mom getting at the store?
 Presupposes: Mom is getting something (at the store).

In (24), then, L's response is inappropriate.

- 24) C: What's Mom getting at the store?
 L: *She's getting something.

The implicature which is added by 'let's just say', namely, that the speaker knows what the indefinite refers to, is the additional information which makes the response in (19) acceptable.

Sentences with 'let's just say' followed by an indefinite description are only acceptable when the context or situation enables the addressee to postulate a reason for the speaker to withhold information. Thus, for many speakers, G's response in (25) seems odd until it is pointed out that there are reasons why G might not want H to know what her friend is writing about.

- 25) H: What's your friend writing her paper on?
 G: ?Let's just say on something.

Few speakers have trouble with (19), however, because it is easy to understand why W might not want V to know what Mom is getting.

Extending this analysis, we can better understand how some 'let's just say' sentences result in implicatures. For example, consider (6), which we can break down as shown in (26).

- 6) Antony: Who was that man I saw you with last night?
 Cleopatra: Let's just say he's a friend.

- 26)a. Cleo is involved in a deep relationship with this man.
 b. She is not telling Antony all she knows about what he asked.
 c. She is telling Antony that the man is a friend.

The implicature, (a), is deduced by the addressee through a process which involves attempting to guess what reason the speaker had for "not telling all". Guessing at the possible reasons for withholding information leads the addressee to the information itself. For this to work, however, the reasons for withholding information must be accessible to the addressee and must be related to the question asked. In (6), then, the reason for not answering explicitly is, in essence, the answer to the question. In (5), however, there are no reasons for withholding information which are related to the question, and therefore, an answer is not implicated.¹

We have seen that 'let's just say' is used to signal violations of the maxims of conversation, and that it thereby serves specific conversational functions. It seems as if Grice's rules of conversation were made to be broken. Speakers are often aware that they are violating the rules for normal serious discourse. In fact, speakers use violations for specific effects in conversation, for example, sarcasm, implicatures, and the uses associated with 'let's just say'. 'Let's just say' explicitly indicates that a violation is about to occur, that it is intentional, and that it serves a specific purpose. Its use insures that the addressee will notice the violation, and will realize that it has occurred for a reason.

FOOTNOTES

*This paper was originally entitled "But it, let's just say, this way".

Thanks to Jeff Dornbusch, Maida Cogen, Tom Sherwood, Tom Fallows, David Justice, Henry Thompson, George Lakoff, Folgers and Yuban.

1. It is possible that (5) could have an implicature if there were reasons for the respondent to withhold more specific information. For example, suppose that the "cute girlfriend" lived in a certain well-known house on Northside, which people preferred not to mention. It is possible that the response in (5) could, in such a case, have an implicature, namely, that she lives in that house.

REFERENCES

- Grice, H.P., Logic and Conversation. Unpublished Notes from the Henry James Lectures, Harvard, 1967
 James, Debra, On the Syntax and Semantics of Some English Interjections. Unpublished Doctoral Dissertation, University of Michigan, 1973
 Lakoff, Robin, Questionable Answers and Answerable Questions, in Kachru, B. et al. (eds.), Papers in Linguistics in Honor

of Renee Kahana, University of Illinois Press, 1973
Ross, John R., Constraints on Variables in Syntax. Unpublished
Doctoral Dissertation, Massachusetts Institute of Tech-
nology, 1967

meow