



# Presumptive Meanings: The Theory of Generalized Conversational Implicature

*By Stephen C. Levinson*

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When we speak, we mean more than we say. In this book Stephen C. Levinson explains some general processes that underlie presumptions in communication. This is the first extended discussion of preferred interpretation in language understanding, integrating much of the best research in linguistic pragmatics from the last two decades. Levinson outlines a theory of presumptive meanings, or preferred interpretations, governing the use of language, building on the idea of implicature developed by the philosopher H.P. Grice. Some of the indirect information carried by speech is presumed by default because it is carried by general principles, rather than inferred from specific assumptions about intention and context. Levinson examines this class of general pragmatic inferences in detail, showing how they apply to a wide range of linguistic constructions. This approach has radical consequences for how we think about language and communication.

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### Editorial Review

#### Review

" *Presumptive Meanings* is a careful and cogent reformulation of linguistic pragmatics based on a sweeping knowledge of the existing literature and a profound understanding of the problem of meaning in natural language. This book presents a significant challenge to both ultra-functionalist views and to the reigning structural theories of the relation between meaning and form. By showing how generalized conversational implicature interacts with both syntactic and semantic description, Levinson has produced the first real advance in the Gricean program in a decade."

(Jerrold Sadock, Glen A. Lloyd Professor of Linguistics, University of Chicago)

" *Presumptive Meanings* is a *tour de force* in the study of language and meaning. It takes us beyond what people say, as they rely on the conventional meanings of words and sentences, into the subtle and complex world of what people mean but do not say. Levinson's account of this world is not only scholarly and articulate, but full of insights. In this book Levinson takes up Paul Grice's notion of 'generalized conversational implicatures,' argues for its importance, and then offers an elegant refinement. Along the way, he presents a scholarly history of Grice's notion, brings a wide range of phenomena to bear on it, and draws out an impressive array of implications of his view. The result is a remarkable achievement--must reading for any serious student of language and meaning."

(Herbet H. Clark, Department of Psychology, Stanford University)

#### About the Author

Stephen C. Levinson is Director of the Language and Cognition Group at the Max Planck Institute for Psycholinguistics in the Netherlands.

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