

Grice: “Meaning”

INTENTION BASED SEMANTICS

Grice is proposing an **intention based semantics**—i.e., a semantical theory according to which the meaning of an utterance is explicated in terms of the psychological state it is intended to produce in an audience. Such a semantics focuses on the use of language to **communicate**.

Hence Grice begins with an attempt to isolate a particular kind of meaning, which he calls ‘communicative meaning’, or ‘nonnatural meaning’ (meaning_{NN}).

NATURAL VS. NON-NATURAL MEANING

Natural Meaning [“Noncognitive meaning”]

“Those spots mean measles.”

“Those spots didn’t mean anything to me, but to the doctor they meant measles.”

“The recent budget means that we shall have a hard year.”

Nonnatural Meaning (Meaning_{NN}) [“Communicative meaning”]

“Those three rings on the bell mean that the bus is full.”

“That remark, ‘Smith couldn’t get on without his trouble and strife,’ meant that Smith found his wife indispensable.”

Grice’s endeavor is to produce an account of meaning_{NN}.

Tests for Meaning_{NN}

Entailment

In cases of natural meaning, *x means that p* **entails** that *p*; in cases of meaning_{NN}, there is **no such entailment**.

Example

“Those spots mean measles, but he hasn’t got measles” is self-contradictory.

“Those three rings on the bell mean that the bus is full, but the bus isn’t full” is not self-contradictory.

Quotation

In cases of natural meaning, the verb ‘mean’ cannot be **followed by a quotation** (“a phrase in inverted commas”); in cases of meaning_{NN}, it can.

Example

* “Those spots mean ‘he has measles’.”

“Those three rings on the bell mean ‘the bus is full’.”

REJECTION OF CAUSAL ACCOUNT

Grice considers and rejects a **causal** account of meaning_{NN}. Such an account would run roughly like this:

x means_{NN} something iff x has a tendency to produce such and such a cognitive effect in a hearer and to be produced by that state in a speaker.

It is easy to find counter-examples to this account. Here is Grice’s: my putting on a tail coat tends to make an audience think I am about to go to a dance, and I may put on a tail coat because I think I am about to go to a dance. But my putting on a tail coat does not **mean**_{NN} that I am about to go to a dance.

Grice finds two things wrong with the causal account:

1. It omits the notion of **intention**. What needs to be specified is not the effect that **tends** to be produced, but the effect that the speaker **intends** to produce.
2. It concentrates on the idea of a **standard** meaning (of an expression or utterance), and ignores what a particular speaker may mean on a particular occasion.

Grice further objects, more controversially, that the causal theory gets the priorities between “utterance meaning” and “speaker meaning” backwards. That is, “the meaning of a sign needs to be explained in terms of what users of the sign mean by it on particular occasions” (p. 94).

REFLEXIVE-INTENTION ACCOUNT

Grice develops his account in stages. Stage 1 introduces an intention. Stage 2 adds a **reflexive** intention. Stage 3 introduces an additional reflexive intention **connecting** the first intention to the intended effect on the hearer.

Stage 1: Intentions

One might think that all that needs to be done is to take the causal account, and replace ‘tends to produce’ with ‘is intended to produce’. That would yield an account that looks like this:

x means_{NN} something iff x is intended by its utterer to induce a belief in an audience.

x means_{NN} that p iff x is intended by its utterer to induce in an audience the belief that p .

But this is too simplistic. If I leave B’s handkerchief at a crime scene I may induce in the detective the belief that B is guilty, but my leaving the handkerchief does not mean_{NN} this. Indeed, it does not **mean**_{NN} anything.

Stage 2: Reflexive Intentions

What is needed is an intention on the part of the speaker that the hearer recognize the speaker’s intention to induce a belief in the hearer:

x means_{NN} that p iff x is intended by its utterer to induce in an audience the belief that p and the utterer intends that the audience should recognize that intention.

This is not quite right. As Grice’s counter-examples (p. 95: Herod presenting the head of St. John to Salome; leaving the broken china in plain view for wife to see) show, the agent needs to do more than just (i_1) intend to induce a belief and (coincidentally) (i_2) intend that the audience should recognize that he has that intention (i_1).

What’s needed is a **connection** between intention (i_1) and the belief the speaker is trying to induce. That is, it we need it to be **by means of** a recognition of (i_1) that the audience is intended to have that belief.

Stage 3: The Final Account

The speaker must have these **three** intentions:

(i_1) that the audience should believe that p .

(i_2) that the audience should recognize the speaker’s intention (i_1).

(*i*₃) that it be by means of the recognition of (*i*₁) that the audience comes to believe that *p*.

That is: “‘A meant_{NN} something by *x*’ is roughly equivalent to ‘A uttered *x* with the intention of inducing a belief by means of the recognition of this intention” (p. 95).

We can slightly expand (and clarify) this account along the lines of Strawson’s version (“Intention and Convention in Speech Acts,” *Phil Rev* 1964, p. 446). Where *S* is the speaker and *H* is the hearer:

In uttering *x* *S* means_{NN} that *p* iff *S* intends by uttering *x*:

- (*i*₁) to produce in *H* the belief that *p*, and
- (*i*₂) that *H* should recognize *S*’s intention (*i*₁), and
- (*i*₃) that *H* should base his belief that *p* on his recognition of (*i*₁).

[Strawson thinks that we have to add (at least) a **fourth** intention to this, viz.:

- (*i*₄) that *H* should recognize *S*’s intention (*i*₂).]

GENERAL MORAL OF THE ACCOUNT

In a subsequent paper “Utterer’s Meaning and Intentions” (*Phil. Rev.* 1969), Grice offered a much more complex account along the same lines. But the root idea remains the same:

Meaning_{NN} is to be analyzed in terms of **reflexive intentions**—i.e., the intention to induce a psychological state in a hearer by means of a recognition of that very intention.

If Grice is right, **speaker’s** meaning (what a speaker intends to communicate) is a more fundamental notion than **sentence** meaning. That is, sentences mean what they do because of what speakers intend to communicate by means of them; rather than: speakers mean what they do because of what the sentences they use mean (in some non-intentional account of sentence meaning).

As Grice later puts it, we can distinguish between:

Relativized meaning (a kind of meaning the explication of which essentially involves reference to word users or communicators), and

Nonrelativized meaning (where no such reference is required).

Then Grice's claim is that nonrelativized meaning is the secondary notion, capable of being reduced to, or analyzed in terms of, relativized meaning; and no corresponding analysis or reduction in the other direction is possible.

CRITICISMS OF GRICE

There have been many criticisms and amendments, both friendly and unfriendly. We'll look at one from each camp.

Searle

In "What is a Speech Act?" in *Philosophy in America*, 1965.

Suppose that I am an American soldier in WW II and that I am captured by Italian troops. And suppose also that I wish to get these troops to believe that I am a German officer in order to get them to release me. What I would like to do is to tell them in German or Italian that I am a German officer. But let us suppose I don't know enough German or Italian to do that. So I ... put on a show of telling them that I am a German officer by reciting those few bits of German that I know, trusting that they don't know enough German to see through my plan. Let us suppose I know only one line of German, which I remember from a poem I had to memorize in a high school German course. Therefore I, a captured American, address my Italian captors with the following sentence: "Kennst du das Land, wo die Zitronen blühen?"

Searle claims that the three clauses of Grice's account of meaning are satisfied:

I intend to produce a certain effect in them, namely, the effect of (i_1) believing that I am a German officer; and I intend to produce this effect (i_3) by means of their (i_2) recognition of my intention.

But when I say "Kennst du das Land, wo die Zitronen blühen?" do I mean "I am a German officer"? Not at all, says Searle:

... because what the words mean is, "Knowest thou the land where the lemon trees bloom?" ... Meaning is more than a matter of intention, it is also a matter of convention.

On the basis of this example, Searle suggests an additional clause, one that adds (roughly) that the speaker intends to respect the linguistic conventions for the use of the sentence he utters.

Grice responds to this effectively in "Utterer's Meaning and Intentions."

1. He refuses to accept Searle's proposed amendment about "conventional meaning." The reason, he says, is that "I would like to treat meaning something by the utterance of a sentence as being only a special case of meaning something by an utterance" (p. 161). In other words, conventional meaning ("sentence meaning") is to be analyzed in terms of speaker's meaning, and not the other way around. And this refusal is crucial for Grice—if he accepts it, his account of sentence-meaning in terms of speaker's meaning becomes circular (since part of the account of speaker's meaning would, on Searle's amendment, appeal to conventional linguistic meaning).
2. As for the example, Grice's basic line is that it is underdescribed, and can be fleshed out in various ways. In any event, it is not really a counter-example.
3. On one elaboration, the soldier's intention is not to get the Italians to believe that he has said **that he's a German officer**, but just to get them to believe he has been **speaking German**. (He hopes that they'll go on to **draw the conclusion** that he's a German officer—"who else would be speaking German around here?") So although he intends (i_1) them to believe that he's a German officer, he does not intend (i_2) that they should believe this on the basis of their recognition of (i_1) – he intends that they should believe on the basis of their reasoning as above.
4. Fleshed out in another way, the soldier's intention is to get the Italians to believe that he has just *said* that he's a German officer—i.e. that he was uttering a sentence of German whose conventional meaning in German is "I am a German officer." But if so, Grice says, it is not so implausible to suppose that he *did* mean that he was a German officer. After all, he didn't intend the Italians to take his words literally, for he knew they would have no idea what they meant literally. So what **he** meant in the circumstances was not the same as what **his words** literally meant. (It's like the Egyptian shopkeeper who invites his English visitor into his shop: "in dulcet tones and with an alluring smile [the shopkeeper] says to [the visitor] the Arabic for 'You pig of an Englishman'." What his words meant was an insult; but what **he** meant was for the visitor to enter the shop.)

Platts

(In *Ways of Meaning*, 1979.) This line of objection is directed against the entire program of (what Schiffer calls) "intention-based semantics." The objection is that Grice cannot provide a non-circular account of the meanings of (the infinitely many) unuttered sentences.

1. Grice tries to reduce sentence-meaning to the (logically prior) notion of speaker's meaning, which is itself spelled out in terms of speaker's intentions to produce beliefs in hearers. Since belief is a propositional attitude, this means that for Grice the basic unit of meaning is the **sentence**.
2. But natural languages contain **infinitely many meaningful sentences**. And only finitely many of them have ever been uttered. So there are many meaningful sentences that have never been uttered—what accounts for the meaning of these **unuttered** sentences?
3. One line that seems open to Grice is to appeal to **hypothetical** intentions—what a speaker **would have intended** by uttering such a sentence.
4. But there must be some constraints on these hypothetical intentions. Consider some sentence that has never (before now) been uttered: “57% of the armadillos in Texas prefer *Wheaties* to caviar.” One hypothetical intention is that the hearer should believe that snow is white. Clearly **that** hypothetical intention has to be ruled out—otherwise, our sentence could mean **anything**.
5. The problem is to say what would have been intended by an utterance of this sentence, but to do so **without appealing to the meanings of the words it contains**. For to do that would be circular. As Platt says:

“Generally, the constraint upon the hypothetical intentions with which a sentence can be uttered ... is precisely the meaning of the sentence. ... If this is correct, the attempt to define the meanings of unuttered sentences in terms of hypothetical intentions and responses is hopeless: for it presupposes a prior notion of sentence-meaning.”
6. Notice that although natural languages contain infinitely many meaningful sentences, they contain only finitely many words. It is for this reason that Fregean (and truth-conditional) accounts of meaning are not bothered by the “infinity of meaningful sentences” objection. They can handle this by means of the **compositionality** of meaning. (Cf. a Fregean account of the meaning of our example above.) Can a Gricean come up with a counterpart principle of compositionality?

7. Consider the case of the meanings of predicates and proper names. What are the intentions associated with them? They cannot be **propositional attitudes**. That is, the intention associated with the sentence “Brutus slew Caesar” is the intention *that the hearer should believe that Brutus slew Caesar*. But what is the intention associated with “Brutus” and “slew” and “Caesar”? The only plausible candidates are, e.g., the intention *to use “Brutus” to refer to Brutus*, etc. But then we face the circularity problem: we are appealing to the semantic properties of a linguistic expression to spell out the intention with which speakers utter it.

CONCLUSION

An examination of Grice’s account of meaning_{NN} will reveal that very little weight is placed on the role of the words the speaker uses. That is, on Grice’s account, a speaker, in uttering *x*, might very well mean_{NN} something (i.e., reflexively intend to communicate something) that goes well beyond what anyone might think is meant by the **words** that constitute *x*.

The result is that the account of meaning_{NN} so far provided does not distinguish between what a speaker (literally) **says** from what else he may succeed in **conveying** by means of some utterance. Making out that distinction becomes the burden of Grice’s theory of **conversational implicature**, to which we will turn next.