Grice's Natural Meaning vs. Non-natural Meaning

Herbert Paul Grice was a 20th century British philosopher of language, whose study of meaning greatly influenced the philosophy of semantics. Published in 1957, his seminal article *Meaning* organized meaning into two categories: natural meaning and non-natural meaning. In this paper, I will explain the distinction between the two. I will start by reconstructing Grice's examples of natural meaning. Then I will walk through Grice's three proposals for non-natural meaning and why he adopts the third proposal as the solution. After that, I will argue that Grice's explanation of non-natural meaning is not satisfactory by providing objections from the philosophy community and my own.

In *Meaning*, Grice does not explicitly define natural meaning nor non-natural meaning. Instead, he relies on examples to show that the verb "to mean" can be used in at least two different ways. Let's consider how he describes natural meaning. His first example is "Those spots mean (meant) measles." He argues that it would be contradictory to say, "Those spots meant measles, but he hadn't got measles." The spots are a reliable sign and unique characteristic of having measles. Another example is "The recent budget means that we shall have a hard year." A financial budget is an indicator of how much money is coming in and out. Hence, it is a natural consequence that a shortage of money would result in budget difficulties. To prove that these two sentences use the "natural" sense of the verb "to mean", he provides two tests: entailment and quotation. For natural meaning, there must be entailment. In terms of the first example, those spots are a guaranteed sign of measles; error is impossible. Also for natural meaning, the verb "to mean" can not be followed by a quotation. Considering

the second example, "The recent budget means 'that we shall have a hard year'" is incorrect. The recent budget does not mean the linguistic phrase "that we shall have a hard year", but an actual hard financial year. Although Grice does not explicitly state the definition of natural meaning, we can deduce that natural meaning is the kind of meaning given to something when it has a natural and reliable sign in the world.

Grice introduces natural meaning only to provide a comparison to the motivating idea behind his article, non-natural meaning. Through several examples in his article, Grice demonstrates that non-natural meaning is the sort of meaning that sentences of natural language have. Let's consider his first example of non-natural meaning, "Those three rings on the bell (of the bus) mean that the bus is full." This is an example of conventional meaning. It is just a convention that three rings of a bell mean that the bus is full; the three bells could have easily been four. Using the entailment test to show that this instance of "to mean" uses the non-natural meaning, we see that the three bells do not entail the bus being full. In other words, it's not contradictory to say, "Those three rings on the bell (of the bus) mean that the bus is full, but it isn't in fact full." In this scenario, the conductor could have mistakenly rang the bells three times. Also, in this example, it is correct to follow the verb "to mean" with a quotation. The ringing of the three bells is equivalent to the linguistic phrase "that the bus is full." It is as if someone is saying, "The bus is full", when the bells are rung three times.

For the rest and majority of his article, Grice dives into the question, "What is non-natural meaning?". He provides three different attempts to define non-natural meaning and then concludes that the third attempt is the most accurate. In this

paragraph, I'll describe his first attempt. Just for reference, meansNN is equivalent to non-natural meaning. His first attempt is the causal account, which says "x meansNN 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." Grice easily finds a counterexample to this definition. He considers the case of putting on a tailcoat. A person wearing a tailcoat tends to make observers think that he or she is going to a dance, and that person may put on a tailcoat because he or she is going to a dance. However what's missing is the notion of intentionality. The definition of meansNN needs to specify the effect the speaker intends to produce on the audience, not just the effect itself.

His second attempt is composed of two parts: intentions and reflexive intentions. To account for the failure of the causal account, he considers replacing "tendency to produce" with "is intended to produce". This leads to "x meansNN something iff x is intended by its utterer to induce a belief in an audience." Unfortunately again this will not work. Using Grice's example, imagine leaving an innocent person's handkerchief near the scene of a crime, hoping to induce the belief in the police that this innocent person committed the crime. We do not want the handkerchief, nor the act of leaving it near the crime scene, to meanNN anything, and especially not that the innocent person committed the crime. For anything to meanNN anything, we must not only have the utterer intend to produce a certain belief, but also intend for the audience to recognize the utterer's intention. This leads us to the reflexive-intention part of his second attempt which states, "x meansNN 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." Although close, this definition is still not quite right. To demonstrate this, let's analyze another example he brings up, which is "I leave the china my daughter has broken lying around for my wife to see." We can see that this example fits the aforementioned criteria. The father intends to make his wife believe that his daughter broke the china and also intends for his wife to recognize that belief. However, it isn't enough to coincidentally induce a belief and intend for the audience to recognize the intention. Instead, it needs to be by means of recognition that the audience is tended to have a certain belief.

This leads to Grice final account of meansNN. He compares two sentences: (1) I show Mr. X a photograph of Mr. Y displaying undue familiarity to Mrs. X. (2) I draw a picture of Mr. Y behaving in this manner and show it to Mr. X. Sentence (1) is an example of natural meaning. It doesn't matter what the agent intends to convey with the photograph; the photograph is evidence of something in the world. In this case, it conveys that Mr. Y is inappropriately familiar with Mrs. X. On the other hand, sentence (2) is an example of non-natural meaning. The drawing is intending to inform Mr. X of the affair, and Mr. X recognizes this intention. By means of the drawing, it conveys not only the intention of the artist but also for Mr. X to recognize the intention. From this example, Grice declares that a speaker must have these three intentions: (1) That the audience should believe that p. (2) That the audience should recognize the speaker's intention. (3) That it be by means of the recognition of (1) that the audience comes to believe that p. Put more succinctly, the final account is "'A meantNN 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." This summarizes Grice's account of non-natural meaning, which has been coined as "communicative meaning." Non-natural meaning is the kind of meaning unique to linguistic expressions and communication, which corresponds to the meaning of sentences in natural languages.

Although Grice's work on meaning was groundbreaking in the field of philosophy of semantics, his distinction between natural-meaning and non-natural meaning has undergone many amendments and criticisms. One critique I particularly resonate with is one from Mark Platts, which he wrote about in his 1979 book *Ways of Meaning*. According to Platts, Grice's basic unit of meaning is a sentence. However, if the basic unit of meaning is a sentence, how do you explain how natural language has infinitely many sentences? Platts claims only a finite number of sentences have been uttered, so how do you know the meaning of the unuttered ones? He also raises the concern of appealing to the intention of a sentence without considering the words used within it. Building from the previous concern, how do we address the compositionality of meaning? For the sentence,"Brutus slew Caesar", it doesn't make sense to refer to the intentions of the parts. If we did, we would say something like "Brutus" means the intention to use "Brutus", and similarly so for "slew" and "Caesar." However, this is circular reasoning. We are using the semantic properties of an expression to understand the intention of the speakers. I agree with Platts' concern. I also find Grice's explanation of non-natural meaning unsatisfactory. I have concerns about only addressing the intention of the speaker and the means by which the intention was recognized, but not the actual words used to express the intent. Grice never addresses

the actual content or words of the sentence, causing me to question if his theory of meaning allows for compositionality as we see it in natural language.

In conclusion, I examined the distinction between natural and non-natural meaning. Grice describes natural meaning through the example of "Those spots mean (meant) measles." Those spots are reliable evidence of measles, and hence an indicator of measles. He introduces natural meaning only to contrast it with non-natural meaning. Non-natural meaning is the kind of meaning linguistic expressions and communication has. His final account of non-natural meaning describes the speaker as having three intentions: (1) for the audience to believe his belief, (2) for the audience to recognize the speaker's intention, and (3) that it is by means of recognition that the audience believes the speaker's belief. He uses the example of showing a drawing to Mr. X of Mr. Y and Mrs. X getting unduly familiar to demonstrate his point. In this example, the artist draws the image to convey information with the intent of showing Mr. X, and Mr. X recognizes that intent through the drawing, satisfying the above criteria. However, I do not find Grice's explanation of non-natural meaning satisfactory. As philosopher Mark Platt remarked and I believe as well, Grice does not account for how non-natural meaning lends itself to compositionality, which is a core tenet of natural language. Therefore, in my opinion, Grice's theory of meaning is not robust enough and hence not valid.