

Grice on (Speaker Occasion) Meaning

Two Targets for Grice:

1. The nature of communicative action.
2. The ground and constitution of linguistic meaning.

The Upshot

- Communicative action is *rational, intentional* behavior with distinctive aims of producing cognitive effects in an audience through their own exercise of rational judgment.
- Linguistic meaning is grounded in standardized routines for communicative action.

The *avowed* target: one thing we mean by “mean”

Given the foundational, theoretical goals, it is curious that “Meaning” proceeds as a *conceptual analysis* of what Grice takes to be an ordinary concept we sometimes express with the verb “mean,” the concept to which he gives the technical name ‘speaker occasion meaning.’

What is the project of conceptual analysis?

- Establish that there is something to analyze -- i.e., that there is a certain concept that we already understand -- in a way that allows us to assess the adequacy of proposed definitions.
- Suggest an analysis: for instance, a condition that is (according to the proposed analysis) necessary and sufficient for the concept to apply.
- Test the definition by looking for counterexamples:
 - Evaluate *necessity* by looking for actual or possible cases to which we are confident (using our conceptual competence) that the concept applies but the definition does not.
 - Evaluate *sufficiency* by looking for a case where the definition applies but the concept does not.
- Refine the definition to accommodate the counterexamples.
- Repeat.

Two ways of assessing Grice's account

- As conceptual analysis: does it successfully identify and explicate an ordinary concept?
- As foundational philosophy of language: does it develop a concept (whether an ordinary one or not) that is of particular interest in the serious explanation of communication and linguistic meaning?

The Gricean analysis, first step: pointing at the target

- By "means" sometimes we mean something like "indicates", "entails" or "makes likely", with no special communicative connection (many tree-rings *means* the tree is old). We are not interested in this sense (the "natural" sense) of "means".
- Sometimes, too, we just mean "intends", again without any necessary connection to communication (they meant to call their mother). We are not interested in this sense of "means" either.
- But sometimes we are talking about "meaning" in one or another broadly communicative or linguistic sense. Such senses of "means" we call *non-natural* meaning (maybe a better term would have been *artifactual*). Our target is a concept for one variety of non-natural meaning.

Varieties of non-natural meaning

- Speaker occasion meaning: Agent A meant something in performing action U. This is what Grice is interested in in this paper.
- Expression timeless meaning: The expression E means something in community C.
- Utterance literal meaning: A's utterance U literally meant something.

Speaker occasion meaning is supposed to be *propositional*, whereas the others are propositional only as applied to sentences (if even then).

Attempt #1

A meant something or other by utterance U iff ...

A intended U to cause an audience to believe something.

Counterexamples to sufficiency:

- Fiddling with your phone to make people think you are busy.
- Secretly planting evidence to implicate someone in a crime.

Attempt #2

A meant something or other by utterance U iff ...

A intended U to cause an audience to believe something, and to recognize that they are so intended.

Counterexamples to sufficiency:

- Merely showing:
 - Herod presents Salome with John the Baptist's head.
 - Giving someone a photo versus drawing them a picture of a theft.

Final proposal

A meant something or other by utterance U iff ...

A intended U to cause an audience to believe something by reason of the recognition that they were so-intended to believe.

This sort of intention (to produce an effect by reason of the recognition of the intention), is known as a Gricean (or “reflexive”) intention, and has been argued to be relevant to many philosophically interesting interpersonal phenomena.

Observations

- On this account, *meaning* is a species of *intending*.
- The notions of intending, believing, and judging for a reason are essential components of the *explanans* (the stuff forming the explanation).

Worry: intended “perlocutionary” effects

If I try to motivate you to vote for Brown by telling you that he once ran a marathon, does this analysis entail that I meant "you should vote for Brown"?

- Grice: no, because it is not my plan that you will believe that you should vote for him *because* you recognize that that's my plan for you. It's my plan that you will believe that you should vote for him because you are impressed by marathoners (whereas it is my plan that you will believe *that he's a marathoner* because you recognize that that's my plan for you).

Worry: peopling our talking lives with armies

Does this account amount to "peopling all our talking life with armies of psychological occurrences"?

- Grice: no, because even in the absence of conscious, explicit plans "we are presumed to intend the normal consequences of our actions," and in judging intentions we ask "which intention in a particular situation would fit in with some purpose [the agent] obviously had, and in some unusual cases we ask the agent afterwards and the answer is "like a decision, a decision about how what he said is to be taken" (113).
- Another way to answer: yes, and real ones rather than merely imputed ones, but only psychological occurrences that are typically routinized, unconscious and tacit. What is intended to happen and not to happen when you throw a dart? Arguably, lots of complex things that are not on the conscious surface of your cognition.

Alleged counterexample to sufficiency (Schiffer)

Planting evidence, hoping to be observed, but hoping to look like you were trying not to be observed, expecting the audience, in reasoning to the belief that p , to take it that the best explanation of your wanting them to believe p involves p being true.

- Possible response: The audience must be intended to recognize not only the belief-producing intention, but also that they are intended to recognize the belief producing intention.
- This sort of problem has been argued to iterate, which may require that all intentions about the recognition of the belief-producing intention be intended to be recognized.
 - This can be thought of as requiring a kind of openness philosophers call “common [or mutual] knowledge:” “It is common knowledge between us that p ” = (?) We both know that p and we know that we know that p and we know that we know that we know that p and . . .

Alleged counterexamples to necessity

- You don't expect them to believe you (plea of innocence to a skeptical judge)
- You think they already believe it (exam answer)
- You don't have an audience (soliloquy)

Other worries about the reductive strategy

- Reductive circularity? Is the complex intention that is needed, on this account, to mean that I'll be on American Airlines flight 77 to Boston two weeks from Tuesday, really an intention that anyone could have prior to having a sentence that means that I'll be on ... (etc.)?
- Explaining the clear by the obscure? Are facts about what people intend and believe really suited to provide explanations of meaning---are they better understood, less mysterious, easier to explain than facts about what words mean?

Sketch of the rest of the reductive strategy

Grice's explanation of "timeless" linguistic expression meaning (word-meaning, sentence-meaning) as *standardized speaker meaning*:

- Expression E means M in community C iff members of C have it in their repertoire to (speaker-) mean M by using E, expecting the success of their Gricean intentions to depend on the audience's knowledge that E has been so used in the past. (You'll remember that Evans borrows this idea in "The Causal Theory of Reference".)
- Connection to the notion of a common practice being *conventional*:
 - David Lewis: a conventional practice is one that has a certain kind of rational inertia: it continues because the common knowledge that it has been followed gives us good reason to keep following it and to expect others to keep following it as well. (Grice's notion of having a tool in one's "repertoire" seems to me better suited to explaining linguistic conventions, among others, but it is less well worked-out. More on this when we get to Millikan.)

Utterance literal meaning and *what is said*

- Both in this paper and in “Logic and Conversation,” in an important sense Grice’s *ultimate* target is a concept that he calls *what is said* when a speaker uses a sentence.
- It is a species of “utterance literal meaning,” and it is closely akin to what Frege and Russell called the proposition expressed by the speaker with the sentence.
- Grice ties *what is said* to *truth* (does the speaker literally speak truly?) and to the conventional meanings and syntactic arrangement of the expressions that make up the sentence, but he (neither in these papers nor elsewhere) finds a more detailed account that satisfies him.