Third Essay

In his "Logic and Conversation"[1], H. P. Grice describes the notion of 'implicature' not in terms of what is actually *said* by the speaker, but rather in relation to what the speaker "implied, suggested, meant, etc." by a particular utterance (p. 166). What is said often conveys more than just the literal meaning of the words spoken, and this additional information is the 'implicatum' (i.e., that which is communicated without being explicitly stated).

Grice divides implicatures into the following general categories: 'conventional' and 'non-conventional'. A conventional implicature can be derived from the literal meaning of the speaker's words. For example, consider the following sentence: "Bobby quit smoking." The meaning of the word 'quit' results in the implicature that Bobby *had* a smoking habit (at some time prior to the utterance of the aforementioned sentence). Grice is not concerned with this type of implicature, but rather, focuses on a specific kind of non-conventional implicature, which he names "conversational implicature" (p. 167). Grice's definition of 'conversational implicature' is expressed in relation to his 'Cooperative Principle' and to a series of maxims that characterize typical conversation.

According to the 'Cooperative Principle', people engaged in any kind of verbal exchange customarily have certain expectations as to what constitutes an appropriate (or inappropriate) contribution to the conversation. These expectations are summarized in the Cooperative Principle, which can be defined as follows:

> "a rough general principle which participants will be expected (ceteris paribus) to observe, namely: Make your conversational contribution such as is required, at the stage at which it occurs, by the accepted purpose or direction of the talk exchange in which you are engaged" (p. 167).

[1] From *The Philosophy of Language*, A. P. Martinich. (Oxford University Press, 2001), pp. 165-175.

The central idea is, as the name of the principle suggests, to cooperate with the other person so that effective communication can occur. Grice's conversational maxims specify how to comply with the Cooperative Principle. There are four categories to which the maxims belong. They are Quantity, Quality, Relation, and Manner. Two maxims are grouped under Quantity. The first states that the speaker should provide as much information as the situation requires. The second Quantity maxim calls for the speaker to give no unnecessary information. With respect to Quality, there is a general expectation (a 'supermaxim') that the speaker will contribute only that which is true. This expectation is made more precise by the following two maxims:

1) Do not say what you believe to be false.
2) Do not say that for which you lack adequate evidence. (p. 168)

The Relation category has only one maxim, which requires a contribution to be relevant. (Note that this maxim is very similar to the second Quantity maxim.) The Manner category contains a supermaxim, which requests perspicuity, and four specific maxims, which require the speaker to be clear ("avoid obscurity of expression), unambiguous, brief, and "orderly" (p. 168).

In order for a speaker's utterance (call it 'p') to result in a conversational implicature ('q'), three requirements must be met. First, the speaker must follow (or appear to follow) the Cooperative Principle and at least some of the maxims. The speaker must also be thought to believe (or 'mean') 'q', even though he said 'p'. Finally, both the listener and speaker believe that the speaker believes that the listener is capable of reinterpreting 'p' to arrive at 'q'. When the speaker does not comply with a maxim, he cues a reinterpretation of 'p' on the part of the listener.

The speaker has a variety of options when he decides not to satisfy a maxim. The speaker may discreetly "violate" the maxim (i.e., not fulfill the requirements of the maxim in such a way that the listener may not realize he has done so). Or the speaker may "opt out" of the

Cooperative Principle (and the maxims) by openly refusing to be as helpful as is required by the situation. Grice also mentions that a "clash" (i.e., conflicting maxims) might force the speaker to satisfy one maxim at the expense of another. [However, as A.P. Martinich indicates (in his "A Theory for Metaphor"[2]), a clash of maxims is more of a *reason* not to comply with a maxim than a *way* of failing to comply (p. 449).] Finally, a maxim can be "flouted" (i.e., violated in a very obvious way). If a conversational implicature is produced by the flouting of a maxim, then the maxim is said to be "exploited" by the speaker (i.e., the flouting of the maxim is used specifically for the creation of a conversational implicature) (p. 170).

The listener will reach a new interpretation of the speaker's utterance based on the following information: the literal meaning of the words; the Cooperative Principle and the conversational maxims; the specific circumstances of the conversation (i.e., the context); and background information related to the conversation. Finally, the interpretation is based on the assumption that both listener and speaker have access to (or are thought to have access to) all of the previously mentioned information.

According to Grice, irony and metaphor both result from the flouting of the Quality maxims. When the speaker uses irony in a conversation, he often says the opposite of what he truly believes. Such statements fail to satisfy the first maxim of Quality: "Do not say what you believe to be false." Recognition of the blatant falseness of an ironic statement is supposedly what causes the listener to reinterpret the statement. For instance, Grice gives the example of an ironic statement made by a man whose (former) friend, 'X', has betrayed him. The man comments to a listener who knows what X has done, "X is a fine friend." (p. 172). The listener

[2] From *The Philosophy of Language*, A. P. Martinich. (Oxford University Press, 2001), pp. 447-458.

will have no trouble understanding the irony of such a statement because he can easily recognize that it is contrary to what the speaker really believes of X.

Metaphor also is said to be created when the speaker says what he obviously does not believe. The speaker utters a "truism", which means that he states that one thing *is* another (p. 172). The listener recognizes that the truism must be false, because it would be absurd if interpreted literally. He will then seek an alternative interpretation of the truism to make it meaningful, which is the metaphorical interpretation. Consider the famous example "Juliet is the sun". Clearly the speaker does not mean literally that Juliet *is* the sun, but rather that she and the sun share some of the same characteristics (such as beauty, warmth, a certain significance, etc.).

Grice's analyses of both irony and metaphor are convincing, especially in relation to the examples in the above paragraphs. However, it seems that he has overlooked violations of the maxim of Relation as an indicator of irony and metaphor. In many situations, what actually prompts the listener to reinterpret a statement is not its falsehood, but rather the irrelevance of its literal meaning to the conversation. Consider the following example:

A: Casey thinks Michigan has the best academics in the country.
B: Yeah, he's a cheerleader for the university.

The term 'cheerleader' in B's remark could be understood in two distinct ways. Either Casey is literally a *cheerleader* for the university (i.e., he stands between sports fans and the athletes, trying to engage the crowd in peppy chants). Or, alternatively, saying Casey is a cheerleader could be interpreted metaphorically to mean that Casey avidly promotes the university (i.e., constantly seeks opportunities to say something good about the university). Taking into consideration what A said, the metaphorical interpretation seems more logical than the literal one. If B means that Casey is *literally* a cheerleader (i.e., a cheer-leader), then his comment is completely irrelevant to the conversation. However, as a metaphor, the term cheerleader seems

like an appropriate response to A. The maxim of Relation seems to be what causes a second interpretation of the statement "he's a cheerleader". Assuming that A does not know whether or not Casey is a cheer-leader , the truth value of the literal interpretation of B's statement is not important. If Casey really were a cheer-leader, A would still recognize that B is in violation of the maxim of Relation, and would thus be lead to a metaphorical understanding in order for B's comment to be meaningful in the conversation.

Along with ignoring the maxim of Relation as an indicator of irony and metaphor, Grice's analysis also ignores true metaphors. His account of how the listener reaches a metaphorical meaning relies on violation of the maxims of Quality, which suggests that it assumes all metaphors to be false. While most metaphors are indeed false, occasionally they are not. For example, consider the following newspaper headline: "These bell-ringers really are cut out for the job."[3] At first glance, the phrase 'cut out' may be interpreted as the stale, boring metaphor meaning 'apt' or 'suitable' (for a particular assignment). However, the subtitle of the article reveals that 'cut out' (which normally is ridiculous if interpreted literally), in this case has a meaningful literal interpretation, in addition to the customary metaphorical evaluation. The subtitle reads: "Mechanized cardboard characters man some Salvation Army kettles." A person reading the headline together with the subtitle would not be able to use the maxim of Quality to judge whether the phrase 'cut out' is meant metaphorically or not. The literal significance does not violate the Quality maxim nor the maxim of Relation, because the cardboard characters are, in fact, *cut out* by their creators. Grice's account of metaphor does not seem to provide a sufficient explanation for true metaphors such as the one described above.

A similar vagueness in Grice's analysis of irony and metaphor is related to the way in which the listener arrives at the interpretation of the irony or metaphor that was intended by the

[3] *The News-Sentinel* of Fort Wayne, Indiana. December 15, 2004, page 3A.

speaker. An apparent failure to satisfy the Cooperative Principle and its maxims may be a hint to the listener that the speaker does not mean his statement to be understood literally. However, according to Grice, the reinterpretation finally reached by the listener must be based on the literal meaning of the words, the context and "other items of background knowledge" (p. 172). In his assessment of irony, Grice relies on the statement being so obviously false that nobody could actually believe it to be taken literally. Also, Grice claims that in order to understand the irony of the speaker's remark, the listener must recognize that the remark is contradictory to the true beliefs of the speaker. Thus, the listener must have sufficient background knowledge of the speakers beliefs to be able to detect irony. If the listener does not know the speaker very well, interpreting irony should be very difficult (if not impossible) unless the literal meaning of the statement is completely unbelievable. However, people often alert their audiences that they are speaking ironically through gestures, facial expressions, vocal inflection, etc. These techniques of communicating irony can replace the need for the listener to be familiar with the speaker's beliefs. Grice's account of irony does not take these indicators into consideration.

Returning to the metaphor of Juliet and the sun (from page 4), there are many characteristics that could be attributed to the sun, such as radiance, heat, power, eminence, color (red, orange, yellow), etc. Knowing the literal meaning of "sun" will not help the listener to select between the various characteristics associated with the word. The statements preceding and following the remark "Juliet is the sun" should tell the listener if the speaker is likely to mean that Juliet is particularly beautiful, or bright, or powerful. However, the exact meaning intended by the speaker could depart significantly from the literal meaning of the words spoken.

It becomes especially difficult for the listener to arrive at the speaker's intended meaning when the phrase in question is a 'live' metaphor (as opposed to a 'dead' metaphor which has

become a cliché). Live metaphors are original creations of the speaker (i.e., the listener will never before have heard the metaphor). Therefore, the possible explanations of live metaphors are not as likely to appear in the listener's 'background knowledge'. For example, if I say "Juliet is the 10th planet", it is unclear whether I mean something like "Juliet is distant", or "Juliet is elusive", or "Juliet is sought by many", etc. Thus, the listener has only the conversational context to reveal to him the speaker's intended meaning. If there is little context to explain a live metaphor, it is unlikely to be understood by the listener as the speaker intended.

The above paragraphs point out some of the difficulties of clearly and accurately defining irony and metaphor using Grice's account of conversational implicature. However, the criticism is not that he should extend his definition of metaphor and irony to include all of the cases mentioned above. Rather than becoming more specific about what *exactly* is a metaphor, or what *exactly* is irony, Grice's analysis should be more general. It is difficult to so precisely define something as extensive and ambiguous as metaphor and irony. Grice's view of metaphor and irony requires that they be literally false statements, and that their falsehood cause the listener to reach the speaker's intended meaning. However, as shown above, metaphor and irony need not always be blatantly false.

Moreover, it is doubtful that the listener will ever be able to *fully* understand the speaker's intended metaphoric/ironic meaning of a phrase. This is so because the listener's background knowledge of the speaker's beliefs will *always* be imperfect, and his interpretation of the context will *always* vary somewhat from the speaker's.

Finally, the speaker's use of relatively sophisticated metaphorical and ironical expressions may imply too many possible meanings. That is, some uses of metaphor and irony

are so complex that they may cause the listener to arrive at a series of plausible alternatives, without knowing which one the speaker actually meant. However, the magic of metaphor and irony is their characteristic indeterminacy. Metaphors (and irony to an extent) are so appealing to the speaker because they can be used playfully. A conversation is much more engaging when the listener must interpret what is heard, because the act of interpreting meaning is a much more intense form of participation. Grice should not be expected to remove the ambiguities of irony and metaphor, thereby stripping them of their allure. Therefore, his definition of them should be more general and inclusive.