

Lecture 1: **Theories of meaning**

H.P. Grice (1957), 'Meaning', *The Philosophical Review*, Vol. 66, No. 3. (Jul., 1957), pp. 377-388.

Two kinds of theory of meaning

Foundational theory of meaning:

In virtue of what does a sentence (or part of a sentence) have the meaning or meanings it has?

Semantic theory of meaning:

What is the meaning of this or that (part of a) sentence?

The Gricean programme

Paul Grice offers a foundational theory of the meaning of natural language. When I say 'I went to Spain', then how is this meaningful? To understand Grice's answer we need to understand two distinctions.

1. **Natural vs. nonnatural meaning**

An example of natural meaning: 'those spots mean you have measles'. An example of nonnatural meaning: 'the sound of the gong means that dinner's over'. When we ascribe natural meaning, we presuppose some sort of causal connection between two phenomena (e.g. spots and measles, smoke and fire, etc.). When we ascribe nonnatural meaning, we presuppose some sort of communicative or conventional connection between two phenomena (e.g. sounding a gong and getting up from the dinner table)

Grice gives us some tests to distinguish these uses of 'means'. Take a sentence of the form 'x means y'. (i) if x entails y, we are talking about natural meaning; (ii) if 'the fact that x means y' is true, we are talking about natural meaning; (iii) if it makes sense to talk about what is meant by x, then we are talking about nonnatural meaning; (iv) if it makes sense to say that someone meant y, then we are talking about nonnatural meaning.

2. **Sentence meaning vs. Speaker meaning**

When I say 'I went to Spain', then the sentence I use is meaningful. For example, 'I went to Spain' means that the utterer of the statement went to Spain. But when I utter 'I went to Spain', then I also mean something with this sentence, namely that I went to Spain. We see that what the sentence means and what I mean diverge slightly. But they are also clearly related: the one seems to explain the other.

But in what direction? Answer A: sentence meaning explains speaker meaning. Answer B: speaker meaning explains sentence meaning. I mean what I do when I utter 'I went to Spain' because the sentence 'I went to Spain' means what it does; the sentence 'I went to Spain' means what it does because of what I mean when I utter 'I went to Spain'. Compare this to the dilemma in Plato's *Euthyphro*: "Is the pious (τὸ ὅσιον) loved by the gods because it is pious, or is it pious because it is loved by the gods?". (Ask yourself, are A and B the only available answers?)

Grice argues that speaker meaning_{nn} explains sentence meaning_{nn} (though not always directly: some meanings_{nn} become conventional). If this is so, then a foundational theory of meaning_{nn} will have to start with a theory of speaking meaning.

A theory of speaker meaning

What are the necessary and sufficient conditions for a speaker *a* to mean_{nn} something by sentence *s* (on a particular occasion)? Grice's aim here is to capture the idea of a *communicative intention*.

Example: "*I went to Spain*". What do I intend to do when I say this? Grice's starting point is that this is an intention to cause a hearer to believe something, namely that I went to Spain.

Revision 1: we need a second-order intention

However, just acting on such an intention is not enough. Imagine I place some cocaine in Fred's drawer in order to induce in a detective the belief that Fred is a drug dealer. In such a case the intention behind my act was that the detective form the belief that Fred is a drug dealer. But my act didn't mean_{nn} that Fred is a drug dealer. For a genuine communicative intention, what is also necessary is that the speaker intends the audience to recognise the speaker's intention of inducing a specific belief.

Revision 2: we need a third-order intention

But intention to cause to belief + intended recognition of this intention is still not sufficient. Imagine that I show you a photograph of my on the beach in Malaga. In such a case, I could do so with the intention of causing in you the belief that I went to Spain, and do so with the intention that you recognise that I intended to cause in you the belief that I went to Spain. But neither my act of showing you the picture nor the photograph itself means_{nn} that I went to Spain.

The problem is that my intention and your recognition of it are here irrelevant to *why* you come to believe that I went to Spain. You form the belief because you can *see* that I went to Spain, simply by looking at the photograph. In genuine communication, I should intend also that your recognition of my intentions should play a part in why you come to form a certain belief.

Definition of a communicative intention

So S means_{nn} P by their utterance of X iff:

1. S intends the utterance of X to induce in some audience the belief that P
2. S intends this audience to recognise the intention in (1)
3. S intends that (2) explains why the audience forms the intended belief, if they form it

(Can you still find counterexamples?)

A theory of sentence meaning

The Gricean theory of sentence meaning is that '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'. This gives us an explanation of how 'x' comes to mean what it does.

But we should be careful! This explanation only works for the meaning of *tokens* of 'x' (i.e. utterances on an occasion). We also ascribe meaning to *types* of sentence: e.g. we like to say that the sentence type 'I went to Spain' means that the person who uttered the sentence went to Spain.

The type/token distinction. Very useful and widespread, it was introduced by C.S. Peirce.

Example: 'Rose is a rose is a rose is a rose'. Contains 10 token words, but only 3 word types. (The distinction implies that there are at least two different ways of counting things.)

How do we extend the theory? Grice: 'The sentence type 'x' means_{nn} that so-and-so' is equivalent (roughly) to a statement or disjunction of statements about what people, vaguely construed, intend communicatively to effect by sincerely uttering 'x'.