

Topic (3), Gricean Meaning

Gricean meaning (in the 1957 paper) is based around the concept of meaning derived from “speaker intention”, rather than on meaning derived mostly or entirely from the constituents of the sentence. He distinguishes between two types of meaning, the natural and non-natural, and formulates, through a series of revisions (achieved by alternating counterexamples and additions, starting from an overly-simple starting hypothesis), an explanation for meaning. Discussed here, in response to his theory, are: (a) the distinction between non-natural and natural meaning, (b) why Grice believes an intention to produce a belief by means of the recognition of this intention is so important, (c) whether his final hypothesis is necessary for non-natural meaning, and (d) whether his final hypothesis is sufficient for non-natural meaning.

(a) Natural meaning is, intuitively, the kind found in sentences such as:

1. “The spots meant measles” (“the spots” = a, “measles” = b)
2. “To me the spots meant nothing, but to the Doctor they meant measles.”

In these cases, the verb “meant” (or an equivalent word or phrase) appears in the sentence and establishes a kind of causal or definitional relation between its object and subject (syntactically, between the two phrases or words which take its agent- and patient- theta-roles). For example, to roughly approximate the meaning of 1, we might say a IMPLIES b (since a certain kind of spot only occurs as the result of measles - or might only occur if measles occur, regardless of the exact causal link).

Grice uses the word “entailment” to capture this relation: an utterance x entails a IFF a happens - or “is true” - whenever x (to clarify, whatever x describes) happens/ is true.

(Entailment is not the same as identity: x entails a can be true at the same time that a entails x is not.)

Grice gives us several ways to identify natural meaning besides checking for the verb “mean” or an equivalent. He points out that entailment can be identified by checking if the negation of the entailed portion of the sentence yields a contradiction, and the sentence must include an entailment relation to have natural meaning, specifically between “a means b” and b. For example, if we check a sentence based on 1 for entailment:

3. “Henry’s spots meant measles, but he didn’t have measles.” (Assume “he” is “Henry”.) Grice says that this sentence can’t be said without the listener judging it as ungrammatical/ yielding a contradiction, since it is hard to understand how Henry could have displayed the sort of spots that only come with measles if he didn’t actually have measles (and it’s hard to extract a meaning where Henry’s spots are the real deal, for example, aren’t painted on to feign illness - intuitively we’d say something like “Henry’s spots seemed to mean...” for that). Since 3 yields a contradiction under the entailment test, Grice says that we know that the sentence “Henry’s spots meant measles” conveys a natural meaning. Another way to talk about this entailment test is to say that if there is natural meaning, then it is presupposed (or entailed) that b exists, which is why sentence 3 seems contradictory.

Grice gives us several other tools by which to recognize natural meaning, for example, he says we can’t passivize (intuitively, reverse) the utterance and have a grammatical (grammatical in the sense that the sentence sounds as if it makes sense/ has meaning/ is not nonsensical) result. For example,

4. “What was meant by those spots was that he had measles,” doesn’t seem to be the same as 1, and, to go further, seems to claim some kind of action that resulted in the meaning that he had measles. Beyond intuition, following Grice’s logic, 4 is not the same as 1, since it is easy to imagine circumstances when 1 is true but 4 is not (or is, at least, impossible to judge), but if 1 and 4 were the same (had the same meaning) they should have the same truth values in the same circumstances. Personally, I have trouble judging 4 but

no trouble judging 1, which to me indicates that they are not the same (4 is ungrammatical, but intelligible if I heard someone say it in a context that made it clear they meant 1).

Another tool for recognition is that any natural meaning utterance can be rephrased as one starting with “the fact that...”, as in,

5. “The fact that he has those spots means that he has measles.”

However, a natural meaning utterance cannot be rephrased with single quotations around the entailed portion, as in,

6. “Those spots meant ‘measles’.”

7. “Those spots meant ‘he has measles’.”

Our truth value judgments should reflect that 5 has a meaning/ is grammatical, but 6 and 7 seem nonsensical/ ungrammatical.

In contrast to natural meaning is non-natural meaning. This is the kind of meaning Grice is more concerned with (and which he discusses for the rest of the paper). Natural meaning doesn’t occur because of the use of the verb “mean” or an equivalent (although they can have the verb “mean” or an equivalent); every grammatical sentence has meaning. Examples of sentences which include non-natural meaning in the same manner that the previous sentences included natural meaning are,

8. “The statement ‘the man died yesterday’ means that yesterday the man’s life ended.

9. “Those four marks on the wall mean the prisoner was kept here for four days.”

These sentences have a non-natural meaning, just as every grammatical sentence does, but they also happen to discuss or refer to a non-natural meaning event, which makes them useful examples. For example, 9 refers to the non-natural meaning imparted by the four marks, that is, that the prisoner was kept in some place for a certain length of time.

Intuitively, natural meaning seems to me to be a subset of non-natural meaning - that is, natural meaning is not the counterpart or opposite of non-natural meaning, but is a class of meaning which can be conveyed using non-natural meaning. Natural meaning is only internal to

the sentence (it is always a concept discussed in the sentence); non-natural meaning is external (it is what the sentence means - it can also be discussed in the sentence, as in 8 and 9). Non-natural meaning conveys some information; that information is, in a certain class of sentences, a natural meaning; in other classes (of which the set of 8 and 9 is a subset), that information is a non-natural meaning.

(b) To see why Grice believes an intention to produce a belief by means of the recognition of this intention is so important, we have to look at his analysis:

The meaning p derived from the utterance x is analyzed as follows by Grice:

(*) I intend x to bring my audience to believe that p , not for some arbitrary reason, but because they recognize that I intend x to have this result.

Grice believes it is important to include that the the recognition by the listener that the speaker intends x to bring the listener to believe that p because there are scenarios in which intuitively he does not want to assign non-natural meaning, but is required to if his explanation stands without this final qualification (that is, if (*) were "I intend x to bring my audience to believe that p and I intend my audience to know that I intend to bring them to believe that p "). One of the examples he gives of such a problematic scenario is along the following lines:

1. "Say that I am grading tests. I may fail a student with the intent of causing him unhappiness and anxiety. Further, say that I am vindictive - then I may also intend him to know that I intend him to feel unhappy and anxious."

In this scenario, Grice doesn't want to say that his failing the student would have some non-natural meaning. He does want to say that a somewhat similar scenario has non-natural meaning:

2. "Say that I am driving. I may cut someone off with the intent of signaling my anger with him and making him feel angry in response. If I cut him off expecting him to become angry, and to realize that I have intentionally cut him off in order to anger him, then my cutting him off means that I want him to feel angry."

The meaning the driver derives from Grice's action is based on his belief in the intention of Grice to make him angry by cutting him off (otherwise, he might be angry with Grice, but he wouldn't believe that Grice wanted to make him angry; he would probably believe that Grice was an incompetent driver - so Grice's cutting him off wouldn't mean that he wanted to make him angry, but it may cause him to believe as a result of the evidence presented to him that Grice was a bad driver).

Grice emphasizes the importance on recognition by the listener of the intention of the speaker to make them believe that p by saying that x by means of this recognition to distinguish between the types of scenario above in which his intuition tells him that some actions or utterances have non-natural meaning but that some shouldn't, despite having some kinds of speaker intention in common.

(c) If the final hypothesis (*) is necessary for non-natural meaning, then non-natural meaning must imply (*) (that is, whenever we have non-natural meaning, we should also have (*)). In order to determine whether non-natural meaning implies (*), consider the following scenario:

3. "Three people are watching a wedding. The bride makes a dramatic appearance amid doves and rose petals and spotlights, which both speakers believe to be tasteless and rather ridiculous. The information they wish to convey is that the entrance of the bride was a tasteless one.

Speaker 1 says to the listener, 10. "The bride certainly seems to know how to make an entrance."

Speaker 2 says, 11: "The bride's entrance was tasteless."

The listener in this scenario might say that 10 and 11 have the same non-natural meaning, based on all of the conscious intentions of the relevant speakers and on their expectation that the listener understands them because of his recognition of their intentions. However, we might not want to say that 10 and 11 have the same non-natural meaning. For example, we might say

that 10 is only appropriate - or, at least, much more appropriate - when the tastelessness of the bride's entrance is the result of her own tastelessness (not caused by, say, poverty, or an overbearing mother-in-law, or culture clash between the speaker and the bride), whereas 11 is appropriate whenever the bride's entrance is tasteless. So there is some quality inside 10 and 11 that is independent of the intention of the speaker which determines their precise range of possible meaning (this might be the words, syntax, and prosody, for example, the tone of the speakers, and the choice of the verb "know" by speaker 1 - although on what level that choice is made is not necessarily clear (is it part of the conscious intention of the speaker?)).

This difficulty might be surmounted based on the interpretation of the depth of the phrase "non-natural meaning", which is not rigidly defined. If the scope were widened to include the sort of sense Frege talks about (or which Grice talks about with implicature), then 10 and 11 do not have the same non-natural meaning.

However, this is not the only possible counterexample. We might argue that non-natural meaning does not have to result in listener belief that p; it might result only in listener belief of speaker belief that p, or weaker yet, in listener belief in speaker's belief that someone might believe that p. It's easy to find an example of a scenario such as this:

4. "Say speaker 1 says to the listener that 12. "Purple squirrels live in Kansas," but that speaker 1 does not believe that purple squirrels live in Kansas, nor that the listener will actually believe that it's so. Say speaker 1 is the little brother of the listener. Then he might be trying to aggravate the listener."

In this scenario, we wouldn't want to say that, even though the listener knows her brother is trying to get on her nerves, and she knows that he's trying to get on her nerves by saying 12, it doesn't seem to make sense to talk about the sentence meaning that he wants to aggravate her, nor does it seem to make sense to talk about the sentence as representing anyone in the scenario's beliefs. Yet the sentence isn't meaningless; it has no meaning particularly influential on her or on him, but they might still picture purple squirrels and Kansas.

Which means they couldn't help but compute some meaning of the sentence, without any change in belief state, and without being confused as to the intentions of the other or themselves. Even if they don't picture the squirrels or Kansas, ever, the option of doing so seems to imply a meaning inherent in the sentence and apart from the intentions of the speaker. This might be a case of sentence meaning rather than speaker meaning, but since the speaker had to choose the words and formulate the sentence, it seems that at least part of what the speaker intends by using that sentence in particular is the sentence meaning itself, regardless of what else they are trying to convey, or even whether they would consciously prioritize that sentence meaning as something they wish to convey.

Scenario 4 is the opposite in some ways of 3: 3 refers to a sentence where the words are not nearly as important as the tone and context and intention of the speaker, and 4 refers to a sentence where the words determine a kernel of meaning which exists either regardless of speaker intention, tone, context, etc., or as a default (in lack of speaker intention, etc).

(d) If (*) is sufficient for non-natural meaning, then (*) implies non-natural meaning, so whenever we have (*) we should also have non-natural meaning. In order to determine whether this is true, consider the following, based on Searle's example, keeping in mind that we want

5. "The listener recognizes that I uttered x in order to bring him to believe that p, and I intend this to cause him to believe that p, but I don't mean that p,"
to be true.

6. "An American soldier wants a group of Italian soldiers to think he is German, so he says 13. "Wo ist mein bruder?". He doesn't speak German, but he knows this one phrase because he heard a German say it. The American assumes the Italians don't speak German either, but can recognize it as German as opposed to English."

I don't agree with Searle that this is a counterexample, but I couldn't think of my own, so I'll explain why it isn't a counterexample and why counterexamples are hard to find (I don't want to say they are impossible).

If this checks out as a counterexample, then it should be true that,

7. "The American intends "Wo ist mein bruder?" to bring the Italians to believe that he is a German, not for some arbitrary reason, but because the Italians recognize that the American intends "Wo ist mein bruder?" to have this result. But the American does not mean that he is a German."

First of all, I think that the American does mean that he is a German; he's lying with his actions in order to save his life. The sentence itself does not mean "I am a German", and the fact that we can distinguish between these two things seems to mean that some important parts of the correct theory are missing.

Secondly, I don't think the Italians recognize that the American intends "Wo ist mein bruder?" to have the result that they believe he is a German, and I don't think they believe he is a German as a result of this recognition.

For example, the Italians might believe he is speaking German, but they might think that he is not speaking German to them to prove his German-ness; they might reasonably assume that he has recognized their uniforms as Italian, and, assuming they would likewise recognize his as German, has asked them for some water, or for directions to his troop, or something along those lines. They don't know that he feels the need to make them believe that he is a German. Even if they do realize that he is speaking to them in German to prove his German-ness, through his facial expressions or hand gestures, then those are part of the utterance Grice is considering. If they recognize it without any clues from the American, through their own thought, then it is not part of the meaning of the utterance, but a conclusion they have drawn from the utterance at hand.

A counterexample of the sort sought by Searle is difficult to find because if we have (*) then we have an utterance, issued with the intent of the speaker that it convey information. If it does convey information, then we can enlarge the definition of utterance to any size in order to explain how the causation occurred - that is, there's no reason to explicitly restrict "utterance" to

words (and Grice doesn't), which means we might include hard-to-quantify entities as part of the information-transfer mechanism (for example, prosodic information, body language, facial expressions, and even surrounding context which the speaker might somehow take into account or repurpose). That is, with no clearly stipulated limit on what we include as part of the utterance, when the listener successfully ends up with the information the speaker intended to convey, it is hard to say that it isn't the utterance as defined by (*) which actually conveyed the information, although it seems possible that the listener actually acquired the information through some other process. If, for example, the listener guessed correctly at the speaker's meaning through their own knowledge and reasoning abilities, then the utterance of the speaker might have been insufficient to convey the information intended. However, since the listener has to do some computation - some parsing and analysis - of the utterance, it is hard to find a clear line (again) for when an utterance was sufficient versus when it was the agility of the listener which allowed information to be conveyed.

MIT OpenCourseWare
<http://ocw.mit.edu>

24.251 Introduction to Philosophy of Language
Fall 2011

For information about citing these materials or our Terms of Use, visit: <http://ocw.mit.edu/terms>.