

Reducing Linguistic Content to Mental Content, Part I:
Grice on Meaning

1. The Problem of Intentionality and Theories of Meaning

Today we're beginning a new unit in the course: we're transitioning from the connections between language and thought (Does language suffice for thought? Is language necessary for thought?), to the problem of intentionality: how is it that thoughts and sentences succeed in being about anything in the first place?

Intentionality = the property of being *about* something.

Things that have intentionality:

- i) Words and sentences (e.g., the word, "Singapore" refers to Singapore).
- ii) Thoughts (My Singapore-thoughts are also about Singapore).

(Q: Is this list exhaustive? Does anything else have intentionality?)

OK, so what's the *problem*, exactly?

The Problem of Intentionality: The problem of explaining why it is that things with intentionality (paradigmatically, thoughts and sentences) have this property. What explains why the word "Singapore" is about Singapore, as opposed to being about something else (say, Paris, or a chair), or nothing at all?

2. Intention-Based Theories of Meaning and Grice's Project

We've seen that there are (at least) two things that have intentionality: (i) language, (ii) thoughts. This raises the question: can we explain the intentionality of one in terms of the intentionality of the other?

A number of philosophers have been inclined to think the answer is "Yes". In particular, many have been attracted to a *thought-first* picture:

Thought-First View: We should explain the intentionality of language in terms of the intentionality of thought.

There is something rather natural about this view. The idea is that we first start by having various thoughts that are about the world. We then use language to communicate these thoughts. The "aboutness" of language of language, on this picture, is derived from the "aboutness" of thought: a speaker's use of the word, "tree" only succeeds in being about trees because – very roughly – the speaker has certain thoughts which are already about trees, and they use the word "tree" to communicate these thoughts.¹

¹ Note that the Thought-First Picture still leaves open the question: *what explains the intentionality of thought?* This is a topic we'll tackle in a couple of weeks.

Ok, but how should we spell out the details? How exactly does the intentionality of language derive from the intentionality of thought?

We'll look at two of the most influential and detailed attempts to spell this out:

1. Grice's Explanation
2. Lewis' Explanation (which we'll cover next week)

While there are important differences between Grice's explanation and Lewis', there is also an important commonality. In particular, both are versions of an intention-based view:

Intention-Based View: The meanings of words/sentences are explained in terms of speakers' communicative intentions.²

3. Grice on Two Types of Meaning

Grice opens the influential paper, "Meaning" by distinguishing between two types of meaning: *natural and non-natural* (*Means_N* vs. *Means_{NN}*)

Examples of Natural Meaning:

- "The spots mean measles"
- "The budget means we will have a hard year"

Examples of Non-natural meaning:

- "Those rings on the bell mean that the bus is full"
- "When Jones said, 'I might stay at the office', he meant that we shouldn't wait up"

Differences between the two types of meaning:

- 1) Natural meaning is *factive*, non-natural meaning is not

An expression is *factive* if it entails the truth of the complement clause – e.g., "knows" is *factive*, since "John knows that it's raining" entails that it's raining.

- # "Those spots meant measles, but he hasn't got measles" vs.
- "Those rings on the bell mean that the bus is full; however, the bus isn't full – the conductor made a mistake"

- 2) Natural meaning is not *agential* (does not involve an agent/person), whereas non-natural meaning is *agential*

- From "Those spots meant measles" we cannot infer that there was someone who meant something by those spots.
- By contrast, from "Those rings on the bell meant that the bus is full" we can infer that there was somebody (e.g., the conductor) who meant by those rings on the bell that the bus is full.

² The notion of an "intention" here is the ordinary notion of a *goal* or *plan* – as when we say, "Claire intends to submit her report by midnight" or "Brandon intended to stop by the store, but he forgot." This is different from the notion of "intentionality", which, as we have seen, is a technical notion meaning *aboutness*. If you find this terminological mess a bit confusing, you are not alone!

For most of the paper, Grice sets aside meaning_N – Grice wants to focus on giving an account of meaning_{NN} . In particular, he tries to analyze non-natural meaning in terms of certain *intentions* of the speaker. (It is this sense in which he is giving a thought-first view, and an intention-based one at that.)

4. Towards an Analysis of Non-Natural Meaning

In attempting to give an account of non-natural meaning, Grice proceeds by trial and error: he starts with a simple view, proposes a counterexample, then develops a more sophisticated view, gives a counterexample, etc. Let's take this step-by-step.

An initial strategy for analyzing meaning_{NN} is to do everything in terms of the belief. For example, Grice attributes the following account to Stevenson:

First analysis of meaning_{NN}:

“S’s utterance x meant_{NN} that p ” is true iff both:

- (i) S uttered x while believing p ,
- (ii) utterances of x typically cause other people to believe that p .

Counterexample: Let x be the act of putting on a tailcoat. Suppose Ronald performs this act (makes this utterance³) because he’s going to a dance. Ronald believes he’ll go to a dance. Plausibly, the act of putting on a tailcoat will cause other people to believe that Ronald is going to a dance. But, Grice thinks, the act of putting on a tailcoat does not mean_{NN} that Ronald will go to a dance.⁴

Where did we go wrong? Grice thinks the problem was that we made no reference to the speaker’s *intention*. While the act of putting on the tailcoat caused the onlooker to have a certain belief, Ronald didn’t perform this act with the *intention* of causing this belief.

Second analysis of meaning_{NN}:

“S’s utterance x meant_{NN} that p ” is true iff S uttered x intending to induce a belief that p in some audience.

Q: How does this apply to the following examples:

- 1) Those rings on the bell mean_{NN} that the bus is full.
- 2) Sally’s remark, “It’s raining outside” means_{NN} that it’s raining outside.
- 3) A teacher says, “You might want to double-check your work”, meaning_{NN} that the student had made a mistake.

³ Note that Grice is relying on an unusually broad conception of an utterance. An utterance is not restricted to spoken or written words/sentences – it can also include a variety of actions.

⁴ Throughout, Grice is focused on attempts to provide both necessary and sufficient conditions for meaning_{NN} . As a result, the analyses he looks at take the form, “S’s utterance of x meant_{NN} that p if and only if conditions $C_1 \dots C_n$ obtain.” There are two general strategies for counterexamining an analysis of this form: either show that the proposed conditions are not necessary for meaning_{NN} , or show that they are not sufficient. Most of Grice’s counterexamples are to the sufficiency direction.

Grice thinks the second analysis is considerably more plausible than the first. But it still faces counterexamples:

Counterexample: I leave B's handkerchief near the scene of a murder in order to induce the detective to believe that B was the murderer, but we don't want to say that the handkerchief (or my leaving of it) meant that B was the murderer.

Third analysis of meaning_{NN}: "S's utterance x meant_{NN} that p " is true iff both:

- i) S uttered x intending to induce a belief that p in some audience
- ii) S intended the audience to recognize the intention behind the utterance.

Q: How does this deal with the handkerchief case?

Better, but still not good enough! *Counterexamples:*

- a) Herod presents Salome with the head of St. John the Baptist on a charger.
-H intends S to believe St. John is dead, and also intended Salome recognize that he had this intention. But does the head mean that St. John the Baptist is dead?
- b) A child who fills ill lets its parent see how pale it is.
- c) I leave the china my child has broken lying around for my spouse to see

Distinction between *deliberately leading A to think something* and *telling A something*

Grice's suggested fix: For S to mean p by x , S must intend to induce a belief in an audience, and S must intend their utterance to be recognized as so intended. That is:

Fourth (and Final) Analysis of meaning_{NN}: "S's utterance x meant_{NN} that p " is true iff S uttered x intending for:

- i) some audience A to believe that p
- ii) A to recognize that S had the intention in i)
- iii) A to fulfill i) on the basis of their fulfillment of ii) (that is, to believe that p **on the basis of** recognizing that S intends them to believe p)

How this applies to the Herod example (a): Herod intends Salome to believe St. John is dead. But does Herod intend Salome to believe St. John is dead on the basis of a recognition of Herod's **intention** to get Salome to believe St. John the Baptist is dead? No: Herod wants her to believe St. John is dead just on the basis of seeing his head.

Exercise: Explain how the fourth analysis gets around the other counterexamples (b) and c))

5. Generalizing to Speech Acts beyond Assertion

So far we've been focused on attempts to impart *beliefs* in one's audience. But it doesn't seem all speech acts work this way:

Imperatives: "Give me a hand!"

Questions: "What's your favorite restaurant in Singapore?"

How would you generalize the account to handle these speech acts?

Generalized Version of Grice's Analysis

“S means_{NN} something by uttering *x*” is true iff, for some audience A, S uttered *x* intending:

- (i) A to produce some response *r*
- (ii) A to recognize that S intends *i*)
- (iii) A to fulfill *i*) on the basis of their fulfillment of *ii*)

6. Objections to Grice's Analysis

6.1 Objections to the Sufficiency of Grice's Analysis

- *Sarcasm/irony.* Josh is talking to Wendy about Bill. Bill has just betrayed Josh's confidence, and both of them know this. So Josh says, “Bill is a good friend”. But Josh is speaking sarcastically – what he intends to convey is that Bill is not a good friend at all. Moreover, it would seem, he intends to get Wendy to believe this on the basis of a recognition of his intention to get her to believe it. But that's not what the sentence “Bill is a good friend” literally means.

Q: Is this a convincing objection? How might you reply to this objection on Grice's behalf?

Possible Route: Distinguish between sentence meaning and speaker meaning⁵

Similar issue arises for malapropisms:

- “Criminals will be persecuted” meaning “Criminals will be prosecuted”
- “Texas has a lot of electrical votes” meaning “Texas has a lot of electoral votes”
- *Searle's Counterexample.* An American soldier in WWII is captured by Italian troops. The soldier wishes get troops to believe he's a German officer, in order to get them to release him. What he would like to do is to tell them that he's a German officer, but he doesn't know any German besides a single line that he learned at school, a quote from Goethe: “Kennst du das Land, wo die Zitronen bluhnen”, which really means, “Knowest thou the land where the lemon trees bloom”. However, he banks on the assumption that the Italian officers don't know German either, and so he barks this line out in a very authoritative fashion, with the hopes that this will convince them that he's a German officer.

Searle's claim: According to Grice's account, the soldier's utterance means_{NN} that that he is a German officer. But this is intuitively wrong – what his utterance means is simply, “Knowest thou the land where the lemon trees bloom?”

Q: Is Searle's objection convincing? Is he right that Grice's account entails the soldier's utterance means_{NN} that that he is a German officer? If so, is this a problem? And if it's a problem, is there any way of revising Grice's analysis to get around the problem?

⁵ Cf. Grice on “timeless” meaning: very roughly, *x* means_{NN} (timeless) that *p* iff in most normal conditions where someone uttered *x*, in doing so they would mean_{NN} that *p*.

6.2 Counterexamples to the Necessity of Grice's Analysis

There are also a variety of cases that seem to show Grice's analysis is too strong – one can mean_{NN} something without satisfying the conditions in Grice's analysis.

Exercise: Think through why the following cases pose an apparent problem to Grice's analysis, and discuss whether there is any way of revising Grice's analysis to get around them.

- *Audience-less cases* – soliloquizing, muttering to oneself
- *Examination*
Teacher: When did WWI start?
Student: It started in 1914
- *Confessing to a crime that the interrogator knows about*
Q: it's no good denying it – you broke the window.
A: Yes, I did it.
- *Refusing to confess, knowing that the interrogator won't believe you*
- "I know you won't believe me, but I didn't do it!"

7. General Upshot?

Some general takeaways:

- Grice sought to explain meaning_{NN} in terms of a speaker's intentions to produce certain effects in their audience.
- While there is something attractive about this idea, his proposed analysis faces a number of apparent counterexamples.

Important Question to Think About: Are the proposed counterexamples to Grice's analysis successful? If so, is getting around them just a matter of fiddling with the details – that is, can we tweak Grice's analysis to avoid them? Or do the counterexamples spell doom for his whole project?