

## Discussion Points for Grice on Meaning Version of: November 8, 2015

### 1. Background

- Grice was a British-trained philosopher who lived from 1913-1988, teaching at Oxford and then at UC Berkeley.
- The paper on meaning was published in 1957, but—like many of Grice’s papers—had been around for several years in manuscript form.
- As far as I know, it isn’t clear how he got interested in this particular issue, but many people at Oxford at the time had been interested in *ordinary language philosophy*, which investigated the meanings of terms by thinking about how they would be used, in the hope that this would illuminate philosophical issues.
- Example: ‘voluntary’ and ‘involuntary’.
- And Grice seems to have become interested in exploring the assumptions of this procedure.
- Which leads to what meaning has to do with use.
- Forget about linguistic meaning, the meaning of a word or sentence.
- Is there some sort of meaning associated with a use, that is with an utterance of an expression?
- And—crucially—can it be defined without presupposing anything about linguistic meaning?
- This is crucial, because of the idea that linguistic meaning depends somehow on use. What makes a word or phrase mean something is what people mean when they use it.
- So you get to the question Grice is asking in the “Meaning” paper. What is it for a person to mean something? Regardless and independent of any language that might be used.
- Like many 20th century contributions to philosophy, the paper offers a *conceptual analysis*, a definition of an important concept.

- There are two criteria for these analyses. (1) They should be illuminating. (2) There shouldn't be counterexamples. Or at least counterexamples that can't be plausibly explained away.

## 2. Some questions about the reading

- Does the distinction between natural and nonnatural meaning make sense?
- Grice provides tests for separating the two. Do they work? Are they convincing?
- Natural meaning is somehow *causal*. You can infer fire from smoke because smoke is a cause of fire.
- This sort of inference, by the way, is called *abductive*, and it's unreliable, because in general the same thing can have many causes. Think about a wet sidewalk.
- Grice thinks that  $\text{meaning}_{\text{NN}}$  is not causal. Why does he reject a causal account?
- In particular, what are the problems with Stevenson's theory of  $\text{meaning}_{\text{NN}}$ ? (Note: this is a Michigan theory.)
- What does the example of the frown show? How does it fit into the argument of this paper?

## 3. The definition

- It has two forms:
  - Declarative:** S  $\text{means}_{\text{NN}}$  something by an utterance to an audience H if and only if A had an intention i that the utterance should produce a belief in H partly by means of the recognition of intention i.
  - Imperative:** S  $\text{means}_{\text{NN}}$  something by an utterance to an audience H if and only if A had an intention i that the utterance should produce an intention in H partly by means of the recognition of intention i.
- It doesn't presuppose anything about language.
- It does assume interpersonal intentions, beliefs, and the ability to recognize intentions. These are all skills we have independently of language.
- It has a peculiar sort of reflexivity. The intention is partly about itself.

- Self-referential intentions are peculiar, but not necessarily impossible. Consider ‘This sentence consists of six words’, for instance. Or ‘This is a very strange belief’.
- It’s not difficult to define, along similar lines, ‘S means that  $p$ ’ (declarative) or ‘S means H to do  $A$ ’ (imperative). You fill in the belief or the intention that is the target of the meaningful act.

#### **4. Counterexamples?**

- Many counterexamples have been offered to this definition.
- Some of the counterexamples do suggest improvements.
- But on the whole, the definition has held up remarkably well.

#### **5. A wedge between meaning and use?**

- On this account, nothing prevents a speaker from using a sentence with a conventional meaning to produce an entirely different speaker-meaning.
- And in fact, this sort of thing happens.
- ‘That was nice’ could be an example, said when something unpleasant has happened.
- ‘I didn’t tell you that the meeting has been cancelled’ looks like another example.
- And in fact, this sort of thing seems to happen a lot.