

Grice on Meaning: 50 Years Later

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RESUMEN

“Meaning”, un importante artículo de Grice, intenta analizar el significado en términos de la intención de comunicar. Este análisis ha estado sujeto a muchos contraejemplos. Grice confunde el significado con la comunicación. Presento una explicación del significado en términos de intensionalidad que evita los contraejemplos, pero su espíritu es griceano, puesto que preserva la autorreferencialidad de la intención de comunicar.

ABSTRACT

Grice’s important article attempts to analyze meaning in terms of the intention to communicate. This analysis has been subject to many counterexamples. Grice confuses meaning and communication. I offer an account of meaning in terms of intentionality which will avoid the counterexamples, but is Gricean in spirit because it preserves the self-referentiality of the intention to communicate.

I

In order to explain the significance of Grice’s important article “Meaning”,¹ I have to say a little bit about the historical context in which it was produced. In the Oxford of the 1950s, the study of ordinary language was the dominant paradigm in philosophy. The prevailing idea was that traditional philosophy had, for the most part, been replaced by something that was variously described as “conceptual analysis” or “linguistic philosophy”, or simply “ordinary language philosophy.” A leading historical influence, though an ambiguous one, was Wittgenstein, whose *Philosophical Investigations* had just been published in 1953. Wittgenstein’s later ideas were already widely known in part because of the earlier distribution of two typescripts: *The Blue Book* and *The Brown Book*, which were widely circulated among philosophers in Oxford. (I still own faded carbon copies of these manuscripts.) The dominant figure in Oxford was, by far, Austin, though Strawson, of the younger generation, was also becoming very influential. Strawson worked closely with Grice,

and on at least one occasion they produced a coauthored publication. I said Wittgenstein's influence was ambiguous, because Austin, for example, found Wittgenstein very uncongenial and was totally uninfluenced by him. Strawson wrote a review of the *Investigations* that was regarded by Wittgenstein's disciples as uncomprehending.² Wittgenstein's chief message about meaning was that meaning is use. Meanings of words are not introspectable entities such as mental images (ideas, as Hume called them) nor are they abstract Platonic entities (senses, as Frege called them). Rather, to explore meaning we should examine how words are actually used. One ambiguity in this approach is that it failed to distinguish between meaning as a matter of established conventional usage and the meaning of a particular utterance on a particular historical occasion. In short, it failed to distinguish between sentence and word meaning on the one hand, and speaker or utterance meaning on the other hand. Grice was very clear about this distinction and he saw the primacy of speaker meaning over sentence meaning.

Now what does that mean exactly? What does it mean to say that speaker meaning is logically prior to sentence meaning? It means at least this much: the best way to understand the meaning of a sentence is to see it as a potential utterance. We understand the meaning of the *sentence* "It is raining" because we understand that it can be, in appropriate circumstances, used to make the *statement* that it is raining. The sentence is to its use as the tool is to its use. You can have a hammer that you don't hammer with, but you don't understand what a hammer is if you don't know what hammering is. Analogously you can have a sentence that you never use to say anything, but to understand the sentence is to understand what it could be used to say. The importance of Grice's article lies in large part in its effort to give us an analysis of speaker's utterance meaning.

II

In the spirit of ordinary language philosophy Grice begins by distinguishing between what he calls natural meaning and non-natural meaning. This is a distinction we need to make for the English verb "mean", which is used for both sorts of cases. In English, we can illustrate the distinction by contrasting the sentence "Those clouds mean rain" with the sentence "When John said 'It is raining,' he meant that it is raining." In the first case, we have natural meaning. There is a natural correlation between clouds and rain that enables the former to be a sign of the latter. In the second case we have non-natural meaning. The meaning in question is not a natural phenomenon, but rather a matter of human intentionality, and Grice's effort is to analyze speaker's non-natural meaning, what Grice called meaning_{nn}. The analysis is famous, but I will repeat its central details. To say that a speaker meant_{nn}

something by an utterance u is to say that the speaker uttered u with the intention to produce a certain effect on the hearer by getting the hearer to recognize the speaker's intention to produce that effect.

It is tacitly assumed in this analysis that there is a systematic correlation between what the speaker meant and the effect that the speaker intended to produce. Examples make such a correlation clear. So for example, to say that the speaker meant that it is raining when he uttered the sentence "It is raining" is to say, according to Grice's original analysis, that he intended to produce on the hearer the effect of *believing* it is raining by getting the hearer to recognize his intention to produce that effect. And, for example, to say that the speaker meant that the hearer was to leave the room when the speaker said "Leave the room" is to say that the speaker intended to produce on the hearer the effect of his leaving the room, by getting the hearer to recognize the speaker's intention to produce that effect.

Part of the appeal of the analysis was its simplicity. Meaning is simply a matter of making utterances with the intention of producing effects on hearers. The special twist that Grice added was the self-referentiality of the intention: the intention is not just to produce an effect, but to produce an effect by getting the hearer to recognize the intention to produce that very effect. So the intention refers to itself. It is an intention part of whose content is that it produces an effect on a hearer by getting the hearer to recognize that very intention to produce that very effect.

This self-referentiality is seldom remarked on, but I think it is an important development, one that Grice himself later used in his analysis of perception.³ In a particular perceptual experience you perceive an object only if the object itself causes that very perceptual experience. I am not sure that Grice was aware of the formal similarity of the self-referential component in his analysis of meaning intentions and the causal self-referentiality of the intentionality of visual experiences; but in any case I extended this notion in *Intentionality*⁴ to other forms of self-referential intentional contents such as perception, memory, prior intention and intention-in-action. It is important to remark on this, because at that time there was still a fear of self-referentiality. Self-referentiality was regarded as dangerous because it was supposed to lead to the famous semantic paradoxes, especially the paradox of the liar. And Tarski had taught us, or at least many people thought that Tarski had taught us, that self-referentiality of any kind is to be avoided because it leads to paradoxes.

Not surprisingly, there was a flood of counterexamples, comments and objections to Grice's analysis. Some of the counterexamples became legendary and were much discussed in the literature and by Grice himself. These included Strawson's caveman, my American prisoner of war, Stampe's bridge player, Schiffer's money thrower, Urmson's thumbscrew and no doubt others. Grice patiently answered all of these and revised the definition of speaker meaning in ways that were supposed to deal with them. The original

simple analysis was revised and refined in ever more complex forms and these refinements were carried further by Schiffer in his book *Meaning*.⁵

Whether or not these revisions blocked all possible counterexamples, one thing is clear: the original simplicity of Grice's 1957 analysis was lost. The redefinitions became ever more complicated, and the need to produce these complex epicycles suggested, to me at least, that there was a fundamental misconception in the sort of analysis that Grice was providing. When I wrote *Speech Acts*⁶ in the 1960's, it seemed to me that the most serious objection was that the analysis was always in terms of the intention to produce what Austin called perlocutionary effects. That is, effects on the hearer such as getting the hearer to believe something or getting him to do something. The objection to Grice's analysis is that one can say something, mean something by what one says, and still not intend to produce any perlocutionary effects on the hearer. It seemed to me the intended effect of speaker meaning is *not perlocutionary* but rather *illocutionary*. In ordinary language we could say that the essential intended effect of a meaningful utterance is to produce *understanding* on the part of the hearer, not to get the hearer to make some further response. In light of this objection, when I wrote *Speech Acts*, I used Grice's analysis but redefined the notion of speaker meaning in terms of intended illocutionary effects, what I called "illocutionary effects" and what Austin called "illocutionary uptake". The decisive proof that Grice was wrong to define speaker meaning in terms of intended perlocutionary effects is that one can say something, mean what one says, and not intend to produce any perlocutionary effects. It is easy to state counterexamples to Grice where one makes a meaningful utterance without intending to achieve the corresponding perlocutionary effect. One can only intend what one believes possible to achieve, yet one can make meaningful utterances even when one believes that achieving the corresponding perlocutionary effect is impossible. For example, suppose I am accused of a crime. I know I did not commit the crime, and I say to the police "I am innocent of the crime", but I say that knowing full well that they will not believe me, that it is not possible for me to produce the appropriate perlocutionary effect of their believing. One of Grice's efforts to deal with this was to say that the utterances need not provide the whole of the cause of the perlocutionary effect, but rather provide a reason. So for example, if I say "It is raining" and mean that it is raining, then my utterance will be a *reason*, but not necessarily the only reason for the speaker to have the intended perlocutionary effect on the hearer, to come to believe that it is raining. For reasons having to do with their complicated personal relationships and Grice's own character, it was difficult if not impossible for Grice to use any of Austin's technical vocabulary. As far as I know, he never in print used expressions such as "perlocutionary", "illocutionary", "locutionary", or even "speech act".

In any case, Grice was fully aware of this objection and saw its power. How did he deal with it? In some of his subsequent writings, he redefined the notion of the intended effect. For example, when I say “It is raining” and mean that it is raining, my intention, according to one of Grice’s revised analyses, was not to produce the belief in the hearer that it is raining, but rather to produce the belief in the hearer that the speaker believes that it is raining. But this analysis fails for the same reason that the earlier analysis failed. One may produce an utterance, mean exactly what one says, and nonetheless not intend to produce either the corresponding belief in the hearer, or even the belief in the hearer that the speaker believes it. A speaker can say something and mean what she says in the full knowledge that the hearer is so convinced of her insincerity that it is impossible to produce the effect of getting the hearer to believe that she believes what she is saying. As I remarked earlier, the speaker cannot have the intention to produce an effect that she believes it is impossible to achieve. When I wrote *Speech Acts*, I thought that these objections were decisive, and that the way around this problem was simply to redefine speaker’s meaning in terms of understanding; in terms of producing the illocutionary, not the perlocutionary effect or any variant of the perlocutionary effect. Now of course “understanding” by itself cannot be used as a basis for defining meaning, because what is understood is precisely meaning, and to define meaning in terms of understanding would be much too circular. It would be like saying that meaning consists in the intention to produce the understanding of meaning. So I tried to unpack the notion of understanding in terms of the conditions on the performance of the speech act by the speaker and thus I tried to avoid the charge of circularity. I could keep Grice’s self-referential component but avoid the counterexamples which seemed to me decisive. Speaker meaning in literal utterances consists in intending to produce in the hearer the knowledge that the conditions set by the rules for the performance of the speech act as determined by the literal meaning are satisfied, by getting the hearer to recognize the intention to produce that knowledge.

But later it seemed to me that the same objection I originally made to Grice could be extended to my account of understanding. For just as one may say something and mean it without intending to produce a corresponding belief in the hearer, and one can say something and mean it without intending to produce a belief in the hearer that the speaker believes what he is saying, so one can say something and mean it and not even intend to produce understanding, if one knows for example, that the hearer is too stupid, ill-informed, inattentive or linguistically inept to be able to understand the utterance.

Now why didn’t I see this point when I wrote *Speech Acts*? Well, I think the answer is that in such cases the speech act is defective. If you make a statement without even the intention to produce understanding and you do fail to produce understanding, then your speech act is thereby defective; and I

thought the analysis of meaning had to be given in terms of the intention to perform non-defective speech acts, speech acts that are what I call both “successful” and “non-defective”. It is a valid point that the speech act performed without any intention of communicating is thereby defective. But the objection still remains. Yes, the speech act is defective if I intend to produce it without intending to produce understanding, and if no understanding takes place. All the same, I did mean what I said: *The notion of speaker meaning is not coextensive with the notion of intended successful speech act.* One can still have a meaningful utterance even though it is not intended to be a successful act of communication and is in fact not successful.

Grice’s correct insight was to see the self-referentiality of the intention in human linguistic communication; his mistake was to think that he could define meaning in terms of intending to produce effects on hearers.

III

So back to the drawing board. How do we get an analysis of intended speaker’s meaning which avoids these objections? It now seems to me, and has seemed to me for several decades, that the real weakness of Grice’s account is that it confuses meaning and communication. The definition of meaning is in terms of the intention to communicate, but one may say something and mean what one says without any intention to communicate. This is the decisive objection to Grice and it shows us that we must preserve what is correct in Grice’s account, namely, the self-referential intention involved in linguistic *communication*, but we must separate the analysis of communication from the analysis of *meaning* narrowly construed. How then do we construct an analysis that respects the distinction between meaning and communication? In order to do this, I had to assimilate speaker’s meaning to the theory of intentionality generally.

The analysis of speaker’s meaning has to be given in terms of prelinguistic forms of human intentionality, in terms of such things as beliefs, desires and intentions. Why? Language and linguistic meaning are based on and derived from prelinguistic forms of intentionality. How does it work? Well, there is an extremely complicated set of relationships between language and prelinguistic forms of intentionality, and I have tried to explain some of these elsewhere.⁷ But for present purposes we need only to explain how it works for the concept of speaker’s meaning.

In general, intentional states such as beliefs, desires and intentions (what philosophers misleadingly like to call “propositional attitudes”) are representations of their conditions of satisfaction. Thus a belief is a representation of its truth conditions, a desire is a representation of its fulfillment conditions and an intention is a representation of its carrying out conditions. The notion

of a “condition” has the usual process/product ambiguity between the notion of a requirement and the notion of the thing required by the requirement. Thus, for example, the truth-conditions of the statement “It is raining” are: that it is raining. The statement sets a *requirement*, but if the requirement is in fact satisfied, there will be an actual condition in the world, namely the *fact* that it is raining, which is the truth-condition of the statement, in the sense of the thing required. Leaving out all sorts of details and qualifications which would be needed to cover every case, one can say *in general* that intentional states are representations of their conditions of satisfaction. The notion of conditions of satisfaction covers both the requirement that the intentional state sets, in order that it be satisfied, and the actual fact or state of affairs in the world which constitutes the thing required by that requirement. Meaning—both speaker meaning and sentence meaning—is a higher level form of intentionality dependent on the first order prelinguistic forms of intentionality. How exactly does it work? Suppose I believe that it is raining. And suppose I express that belief in a literal utterance. Suppose I utter the sentence in French “Il pleut”. There is clearly a difference between uttering the sentence and meaning it and uttering it without meaning it. I might just be uttering the sentence as a way of practicing French pronunciation, even though I know that the sentence means: It is raining, and I might even have been prompted to practice my French pronunciation by observing that it is raining. All the same there is a difference between saying “Il pleut” and meaning it, that is, meaning that it is raining, and saying it without meaning it. But what then is exactly the difference between saying something and meaning it, and saying it without meaning it? Wittgenstein often asks us questions like this to remind us that meaning is not the name of an introspective process. All the same, there is a difference between uttering the sentence and meaning it and uttering it without meaning it.

In both cases, where I utter the sentence and mean it and I utter the sentence without meaning it, there is an intentional act on my part, the act of producing that utterance. The conditions of satisfaction of the intention in both cases include the condition that the intention itself should cause that utterance. I say “Il pleut” and if I say it intentionally, then that utterance, the occurrence of that very sequence of sounds, will be the condition of satisfaction of my intention to make those sounds. The distinction between making the sound intentionally, but without meaning it, and making the sound intentionally and meaning that it is raining, is that in the second case, the conditions of satisfaction of my intention are not only that an utterance be produced, but the utterance itself now has further conditions of satisfaction, in this case truth conditions to the effect that it is raining. That may sound complicated, but the idea is in fact very simple. The meaning intention consists in the *intentional imposition of conditions of satisfaction* (in the sense of requirement) on conditions of satisfaction (in the sense of things required).

The initial condition of satisfaction is simply that I produce the utterance, but the distinction between the utterance made without meaning it, and the meaningful utterance where the meaningfulness is intended, is that the utterance itself, the condition of satisfaction of my intention to produce that utterance, has further conditions of satisfaction. In this case it has truth conditions. The intention is a representation of its conditions of satisfaction. But its conditions of satisfaction include both (a) that it should cause the sounds to be produced and (b) those sounds should have further conditions of satisfaction, in this case truth conditions. By uttering the sentence and meaning what I say, I have now turned the utterance into a *representation* of its truth conditions. Meaning is a higher level form of intentionality because it involves the intentional imposition of conditions of satisfaction on conditions of satisfaction. Analogous remarks can be made about directives and other forms of speech acts. Thus if I utter the French sentence “Fermez la porte” without meaning it, but just, for example, as practicing French pronunciation, the condition of satisfaction of my intention in action is simply that that intention in action should produce that utterance. But if I not only utter it but mean it, that is, mean it as a directive, then the conditions of satisfaction include that the hearer close the door. So the representing part of the speech act consists in the intention that the utterance itself should have further conditions of satisfaction where the utterance itself is the condition of satisfaction of the intention to utter it.

But now if all of this is to be a successful speech act, something must be communicated to the hearer. Here is where the truth in Grice’s account is manifest: if the speaker intends to communicate his representation to the hearer, the hearer will understand the utterance only if he recognizes the intention to represent, and further recognizes that he is intended to recognize it. The analysis is thus Gricean in spirit, but the Gricean portion is the analysis of communication, not the analysis of representation. The hearer recognizes not only the fact that the speaker is representing the state of affairs that it is raining, but further that the hearer is intended to so recognize it.

Well, why couldn’t we have done the whole thing in terms of communication by itself as Grice attempted to do? The answer is that the communication presupposes something that is communicated, namely the representation. If we think of the speech act as having the structure, F(p) where the “F” marks the illocutionary force and “p” the propositional content of the speech act, then in order that the speaker communicates the illocution to the hearer, the speaker must create this entity, this structure F(p), and then communicate that structure to the hearer by getting the hearer both to recognize the structure and to recognize that he is intended to recognize the structure. The structure is one of representation of conditions of satisfaction in one of the possible illocutionary modes, and the communication is a matter of transferring that struc-

ture from the speaker to the hearer. One might say, paraphrasing a traditional political slogan, *no communication without representation*.

Notice here that we are no longer primarily concerned with the analysis of the English verb “mean”. It is an extremely complicated verb in any case, and does not really distinguish the components we need to distinguish. Thus if Bill says to Sally, “I love you”, Sally might ask, “But do you really mean it?” where her question is not about the semantic content, but about the sincerity. So in this part of our discussion, I have stopped using the word “mean” and am just sticking with “representation” and “communication”. Representation, in the sense important for speaker meaning, is a matter of the intentional imposition of conditions of satisfaction on conditions of satisfaction. Communication is a matter of intentionally getting the hearer to recognize the representing intention by getting him to recognize that he is intended to recognize it. From the hearer’s point of view, the illocutionary uptake is of the form: this speaker is not just making noises; he is trying to tell me something. But telling me something is a matter of representing something as being the case and communicating that representation to me by getting me to recognize his intention to so communicate it.

I really think this analysis is superior to Grice’s, but I think it is Gricean in spirit, and it is certainly inspired by his work. It is superior because it avoids the counterexamples that I am familiar with, but it is Gricean in spirit because it keeps the self-referential intention which Grice originally introduced. The main shift is that it changes the Gricean analysis from meaning narrowly construed, by which I mean representation, to communication. To repeat a point I made earlier, Grice’s analysis is one of communication, not of meaning, and it is easy to make the confusion because of course what gets communicated in successful communication is meaning, at least in the sense of representation.

IV

What objections can be made to the analysis I have given? Well, one of the most interesting objections was made to me by John MacFarlane. MacFarlane says there ought to be a condition on intending to do something that the intention could fail. But how could this intention fail: the intention that my utterance should have further conditions of satisfaction? In general, there is a class of intentions which cannot in the usual way fail in the sense of failing to achieve a desired effect. Among these are meaning intentions or what we might think of as more generally a class of expressive intentions. If Robinson Crusoe alone on his island decides to say “yecch!” every time he sees something that disgusts him, and he intends that this will be an expression of disgust, then he cannot fail to express disgust every time he successfully utters

the expression “yecch” with that intention. He might fail to produce the utterance, but in producing the utterance with that intention he cannot fail to express disgust. And I think this is true of this class of meaning intentions generally. If I say “It is raining”, and by saying “It is raining” I mean that it is raining, then I cannot fail with my representing intention. I might fail to get the utterance out if I am tongue-tied, suffering from laryngitis, or my jaw suddenly becomes paralyzed. But if I produce the utterance, I cannot in the usual ways fail to give it the conditions of satisfaction that I give it because that intention is already achieved by the mere production of the utterance with the intention that it should have those conditions of satisfaction.

V

There were two crucially important ideas that came out of the philosophy of language practiced in Oxford in the 1950’s. These were Grice’s theory of meaning and Austin’s theory of illocutionary acts. When I wrote *Speech Acts*, I tried to combine these two into the beginnings of a general theory of speech acts. I think those ideas remain fundamental to the theory of speech acts and the research project that they initiated is one that still goes on, and one that has revolutionized and deepened our conception of language.

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NOTES

¹ H.P. Grice, “Meaning”, reprinted in: *Studies in the way of words*, Cambridge MA: Harvard University Press, 1989, pp. 213-223. Further references to Grice’s work will all be to this volume.

² Strawson, P.F., “Wittgenstein’s *Philosophical investigations*: critical notice”, in: *Mind* 1954 LXIII, pp. 70-99.

³ H.P. Grice, “The causal theory of perception”, *op. cit.*, pp. 224-247.

⁴ John R Searle, *Intentionality. An essay in the philosophy of mind*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983.

⁵ Stephen Schiffer, *Meaning*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1972.

⁶ John R. Searle, *Speech acts. An essay in the philosophy of language*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1969.

⁷ John R. Searle, “What is language: some preliminary remarks”, forthcoming in: Savas L. Tsohatzidis (ed.), *John Searle’s philosophy of language: force, meaning and mind*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, forthcoming.