Philosophy of Language // Spring 2020

Handout 19

Meaning: Grice

NATURAL MEANING. Grice begins by distinguishing two senses in which we use the terminology of 'means that' or 'meaning'. The first sense is labelled 'natural'. It soon becomes clear that it is used as a foil for the other 'non-natural' sense. Examples of natural meaning include: 213

(19-1) a. The smoke above yonder field means$_{N}$ that there is fire there.
b. These spots on his body mean$_{N}$ that he has got measles.

Grice enumerates five properties of natural meaning that set it apart from the non-natural one. Consider the statement

(19-2) *X* means$_{N}$ that *Y*

for distinguishing between the two senses:

(A) The statement (19-2) entails 'It is true that *Y*.'
(B) The statement (19-2) does not entail 'What was meant$_{N}$ by *X* was that *Y*.'
(C) The statement (19-2) does not entail 'Someone means$_{N}$ by *X* that *Y*.'
(D) The statement (19-2) cannot be paraphrased as '*X* means$_{N}$ "*Y*", or that "*Y*".'
(E) The statement (19-2) can be paraphrased as 'The fact that *X* means$_{N}$ that *Y*.'

CONVENTIONAL (NON-NATURAL) MEANING. The other kind of meaning is 'non-natural' meaning. Grice's terminology is opaque or even misleading here (does 'non-natural' mean 'unnatural', 'perverse', 'against nature'?). It is, I think, more informative to dub this meaning 'conventional'. Now Grice himself explicitly opposes this terminology. He says that gestures (or their meanings) are not conventional, though non-natural. This shows that by 'conventional' he means 'agreed upon'. Kissing on both cheeks is a non-natural sign of greeting among males in Turkey, but there was, we presume, no official explicit agreement among users to count cheek-kissing as a sign of greeting. Grice's terminology is dated (though his own theories contributed to making it dated!). 214 215

Suppose a European male is visiting Turkey and has to greet a Turkish male. How to behave in the way that would *express* greeting? Presumably by trial and error, but essential too is the *salience* of kissing. The European male would observe that kissing occurs on sufficiently rare occasions, and some of them are greeting-occasions, and every greeting-occasion is also a kissing-occasion.

In that case the European visitor adapts to the *already existent* conventions. But we can also imagine two survivors of a plane crash in a desert that must repeatedly greet each other. A new convention (=regularity in behaviour tied to a particular kind of occasion) would conceivably emerge. A slight nod of the head, a half-phrase, a half-word, could all be salient enough to establish themselves as such a convention. Once again, no explicit agreement is required. All of these gestures and utterances would acquire conventional, non-natural meaning.

Question 1. Reflect on the examples above. What is the nature of greeting that they presuppose?

To return to Grice's discussion, all the five tests above go a different way for the cases of conventional meaning such as:

(19-3) a. The white smoke over the Sistine Chapel means$_{NN}$ that the Pope was elected.
b. Trump's utterance 'You are fired' meant$_{NN}$ that Tillerson was fired.

Question 2. Show the behaviour of conventional meaning across the five tests above.

Remark 3. In what follows, the unsubscripted occurrence of 'mean' and its derivatives will stand for 'conventional meaning'.

WHAT DO THE TWO KINDS OF MEANING HAVE IN COMMON? It is odd that Grice does not pause to ask why the two kinds of relation have come to be denoted by the same term 'meaning'. Consider the following idea: 'meaning' can be paraphrased in the terminology of 'signs'. For example:

(19-4) a. The smoke above yonder field is a sign that there is fire there.
b. These spots on his body are signs that he has got measles.
c. The white smoke over the Sistine Chapel is a sign that the Pope was elected.
d. Trump's utterance 'You are fired' was a sign that Tillerson was fired.

Natural signs are reliable *cues* we receive about the state of the world (test A). If a natural sign is unreliable, we no longer use it as a cue. In contrast, conventional *signals* are deliberately created to transmit information about the state of the world. Notoriously, there are cheaters. We are aware of that: no signal can be as reliable as a cue. We are prepared to continue using such unreliable signals.

This is also an occasion to challenge the test A itself (i.e. the distinction between natural and conventional meaning as far as the entailment condition is concerned). Though we may accept that these spots mean_{N} measles, we do not *logically* infer one from the other. The inference only follows with a degree of credence. But how is this different with $\text{meaning}_{\text{NN}}$? Why cannot I say that the white smoke means_{NN} the Pope's election with a certain probability?

Rejection of the causal theory of meaning. Grice goes on to reject the interpretation of conventional meaning in terms of causal tendencies. On this view, we say things such as: 215

(19-5) a. 'Es regnet' means-in-German that it is raining iff: for most (almost all) German speakers, the utterance 'Es regnet' tends to produce the belief that it is raining.

b. 'Es regnet' means-in-German the same as 'It is raining' means-in-English iff: for most German speakers, the utterance 'Es regnet' tends to produce the same belief as the utterance 'It is raining' produces in most English speakers.

Grice lodges three complaints. (*a*) There are events or utterances that tend to produce certain beliefs, but this fact is not correlated with their meanings (if it is appropriate to talk about their meanings at all). (*b*) Some utterances reliably (though not logically) entail other utterances, so that a number of beliefs are generated by that first group of utterances. But this fact is not relevant in determining their meanings. (*c*) Nothing is said about the speaker's meaning, as opposed to the 'standard' meaning. However, Grice claims, it may be that the former is more fundamental than the latter. 215-217

Grice's first shot. We now turn to Grice's positive proposal. Here is the initial idea: 217

(19-6) An utterance *U* means that *X* iff: the utterer wants the audience to believe that *X* and to specify that belief is to specify the meaning of *U*.

But this cannot be true. Even though I may want the detective to believe that Smith murdered his wife by saying:

(19-7) Smith was regularly beating his wife,

that utterance clearly does not mean that Smith was a murderer (it only means that Smith was regularly beating his wife).

Ways of recognising intentions. The difference we are after is between 'letting people know that *p*' and 'telling that *p*'. One is here reminded of Austin's distinction between illocutionary and perlocutionary acts (see also page 221). Consider Grice's examples. Herod presents Salome with the head of John the Baptist. We imagine that he wants Salome to believe that John is dead. But is he *telling* her that John is dead? No; in fact he is telling her nothing at all—he means_{NN} nothing. The child doesn't say anything either. He merely 'hopes' that the mother would draw her own conclusions. 218

Consider now the photograph/drawing contrast. When I show the photograph of Mrs *Y* in an act with her paramour, I induce the belief in you by the non-natural meaning: you assume that photographs represent reality due to causal laws. The photograph, that is, would produce a belief in you *independently* of your belief of what my intentions were. Suppose, on the other hand, I draw a picture of the same characters. Now drawings do not represent reality simply by standing in a causal relation to them. You have to understand what the painter meant to represent. And moreover, merely knowing that the painter intended to represent is not sufficient to infer that the drawing is accurate (non-natural meaning does not entail truth). 218

So we should say that in making an utterance (generally, performing an act, such as a gesture) with a non-natural meaning the utterer (actor) intends to induce a belief in the audience through the recognition of his intention. 219

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