

# Davis' neo-Gricean theory

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Many of the problems we found with the Gricean analysis of speaker-meaning stemmed from the Gricean idea that speaker-meaning is fundamentally a matter of intentions to bring about effects of some sort in an audience. The problem was that there seem to be no class of intended effects which all instances of speaker-meaning have in common. This by itself does not, even if correct, show that speaker-meaning cannot be analyzed in terms of speaker intentions. One might still try to analyze speaker meaning in terms of intentions other than intentions to bring about effects in an audience. This idea is pursued by Wayne Davis in his *Meaning, Expression, and Thought*.

Davis's idea is that speaker-meaning (at least in the case of declarative sentences) is a matter of intentions to provide indications of certain beliefs. To mean  $p$  by an action is to intend that that action indicate that the speaker occurrently believes  $p$ . (This skips some subtleties in Davis's view; see ch. 2-3 for the full account.)

Davis suggests that indication is indefinable, but gives the following gloss: when one says that  $A$  indicates  $B$  one "says roughly that there is a causal or statistical relation between  $A$  and  $B$  in virtue of which  $A$  would give a suitably placed observer a reason to expect  $B$ " (69).

Some thoughts about Davis's account:

- This sort of view does seem to solve many of the problems with Grice's analysis, including audienceless cases, examples of persuasive discourse, and examples of reminding and confession.
- More needs to be said about indication, and in particular more needs to be said about the identities of the suitably placed observers. I presumably never intend that an utterance of mine give evidence which would lead *anyone* — even someone who does not speak English — to think that I believe  $p$ . So presumably what I intend is (something like) that an English speaker be in a position to conclude that I believe  $p$ . But this leads to worries about circularity. What is an English speaker? Plausibly, someone who speaks a language which has a certain syntax and semantics. But facts about the semantics of natural language are what we're supposed to be analyzing.
- Maybe instead of 'an arbitrary English speaker' I could intend that my utterance indicate something to my current audience. But that reinstates the

Gricean worries about audienceless cases. Maybe instead we could try something like ‘an average person around here.’ But obviously this won’t work for all cases.

- This view is also open to a version of the ‘Moore’s paradox’ argument. It seems that if I feel misunderstood enough, I could seriously utter the following sentence, and express a truth: ‘ $p$ , but I don’t expect anyone to be able to figure out that I believe  $p$ .’ So long as intention entails expectation (as Davis thinks), and speaker-meaning distributes over conjunction, this seems to show that Davis’s account fails to give necessary conditions for speaker-meaning.
- Does it at least give sufficient conditions? This is not clear. One worry here is the same as the one discussed in connection with Grice’s distinction between exhibitiv and protreptic utterances. It seems that I can mean that I believe  $p$  without also meaning  $p$  by an utterance. But suppose that I say something which indicates that I believe  $p$ . Suppose that I say ‘I believe  $p$ .’ As Davis’ account requires, this will give a suitably placed speaker evidence that I believe that I believe that  $p$ . But in such a situation it seems plausible that I will also intend that my utterance provide evidence that I believe  $p$ . But then my utterance will satisfy Davis’ conditions for meaning  $p$  — which it shouldn’t, since it should be possible to mean that you believe  $p$  without also meaning  $p$ .