

# Unit V: Grice's analysis of meaning

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## 1 Foundational theories of meaning vs. semantic theories

This unit marks a new segment of this course: we are no longer looking at semantic theories, but at foundational theories of meaning. It is good to be clear about the distinction between the two.

To a first approximation, the difference is this: semantic theories pair expressions of a language with their meanings; they say, for each expression of a language, what the meaning of that expression is. Foundational theories of meaning, on the other hand, do not state the meanings of expressions of a language. They say, rather, what it is for an expression to have a meaning. They explain the nature of the facts that a semantic theory states.

An analogy with ethics.

## 2 Mentalism as a view about the relationship between mind and language

Once you begin to think about this question, one natural answer to it suggests itself: linguistic expressions get their meaning from the mental states of speakers. This is a natural view for a number of reasons.

1. Animals and babies.
2. Communication as the expression of mental states.

## 3 Grice's distinction between conventional and natural meaning

Grice calls the sense of 'means' in which he is interested non-natural meaning, or  $\text{meaning}_{\text{NN}}$ , to distinguish it from another use of the word 'means,' which he calls natural meaning. Natural meaning is exemplified by the following sentences:

Smoke means fire.

Those spots meant measles.

and is to be contrasted with instances of  $\text{meaning}_{\text{NN}}$ , such as

Jones meant that he found his wife indispensable.

Tom meant that the stranger should get off of his foot.

The ringing of the bell means that the bus is full.

We might also call Grice's 'non-natural meaning' 'conventional meaning.' This is the kind of meaning of which he wants to give an analysis.

One criterion for distinguishing natural from non-natural uses of 'means' is that  $x$  means<sub>n</sub>  $p$  entails  $p$ , whereas  $x$  means<sub>nn</sub>  $p$  does not. E.g., the fact that that smoke means fire entails that there exists some fire, and the fact that her spots mean measles entails that she has measles. But from the fact that Tom meant that the stranger should get off of his foot, it does not follow that the stranger should get off of his foot.

## 4 The analysis of speaker-meaning

### 4.1 *Meaning<sub>NN</sub> as tending to cause belief*

Grice's first attempt is to give a causal analysis of  $\text{meaning}_{\text{NN}}$ , so that

$x$  means<sub>NN</sub> that  $p$  if and only if  $x$  has a tendency to cause and be caused by the belief that  $p$

He gives two arguments against this: (i) the example of putting on one's tailcoat, and (ii) 'Jones is an athlete' and 'Jones is tall.'

### 4.2 *Speaker-meaning as intending to induce belief*

His second attempt focuses not on the causes and effects of an utterance, but rather the intended effects of the utterance, so that

$x$  means<sub>NN</sub> that  $p$  if and only if  $x$  was done with the intention of causing the belief that  $p$

Grice's three counterexamples to this analysis.

Another counterexample: a surgeon manipulating someone's brain to give them an extra belief.

### 4.3 *Speaker-meaning as intending to induce belief via recognition of intention*

Grice's final suggestion is as follows:

“ $A$  meant<sub>NN</sub> something by  $x$ ' is roughly equivalent to 'A uttered  $x$  with the intention of inducing a belief by means of the recognition of this intention'" (384).

## 5 **Grice's strategy: analyzing meaning in terms of speaker-meaning**

### 5.1 *A problem with Grice's exposition*

He fails to distinguish between the meanings of expressions and what speakers mean by using them when talking about meaning<sub>NN</sub>.

### 5.2 *The resolution of this problem*

Grice's basic idea in working this out is that we should analyze the meaning of an expression in terms of what speakers use it to communicate. (See (3) on p. 385.)

## 6 **Convention-based analyses of the meanings of expressions**

Roughly: a sentence  $S$  means that  $p$  in a population if and only if (i) if most people were to use  $S$  in normal circumstances, they would use it to mean that  $p$ , (ii) it is mutual knowledge among members of the population that (i) is true, and (iii) (i) is true because of (ii).

For (much) more detail, see the Schiffer reading in the coursepack.

## **7 Objections to Grice on speaker-meaning**

*7.1 Reminding*

*7.2 Confession*

*7.3 Argument*

*7.4 Audienceless cases*

## **8 Objections to convention-based analyses of meaning**

It over-intellectualizes language use.

## **9 Broader objections to mentalism**

We sometimes come to have thoughts because of language; the order of explanation does not always run from thought to language.