

Handout 23

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:

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- (23-1) 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

- (23-2) X means_N that Y

for distinguishing between the two senses:

- (A) The statement (23-2) entails ‘It is true that Y .’
(B) The statement (23-2) does not entail ‘What was meant_N by X was that Y .’
(C) The statement (23-2) does not entail ‘Someone means_N by X that Y .’
(D) The statement (23-2) cannot be paraphrased as ‘ X means_N “ Y ”, or that “ Y ”.’
(E) The statement (23-2) 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’, likely explicitly so. 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!).

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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 extant* conventions. But we can also imagine two survivors of a plane crash in a desert that must repeatedly greet each other. A new convention (=a behavioural regularity tied to a particular kind of occasion) would conceivably emerge. A slight nod of the head, half-phrase, half-word, could all be salient enough to establish themselves as such a convention. Once again, no overt 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:

- (23-3) 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 ‘non-natural 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:

- (23-4) 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 non-natural 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 meaning_{NN}? Why can't I say that white smoke means_{NN} the Pope's election with a certain probability?

GRICE'S FIRST SHOT. Having rejected some alternative ideas, like the causal theory of meaning (we skip it here), Grice turns to his positive proposal. Here is the initial idea:

(23-5) 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:

(23-6) 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*'. Consider Grice's examples. In example (1) 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? Not really. In fact, he is telling her nothing at all—he means_{NN} nothing. The child in example (2) doesn't say anything either. He merely 'hopes' that the mother would draw her own conclusions. In example (3) the husband, again, doesn't tell his wife about the daughter's behaviour. These observations correspond to common usage. For example, the husband couldn't well say in the evening:

(23-7) ?? As I *told* you in the morning by leaving the broken china on the floor, Enye misbehaved etc.

In all of these cases the speaker (generally, actor) tries to initiate a causal sequence that would causally lead to the hearer acquiring a certain belief (or any other propositional attitude, like hope, fear etc.). The speaker does not, as a rule, want the hearer to understand any of his (the speaker's) intentions. Indeed, he may want to positively conceal them. Nor, *a fortiori*, does he want the hearer to acquire the belief through the recognition of his (the speaker's) intention.

Consider now the photograph/drawing contrast. When I show you my 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. In this discussion, we must assume that the photograph is entirely *non-artistic*. Perhaps it's accidental in the first place, a photobombing case.

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. Thus you have to recognise the painter's intention to understand that this is a painting of Mrs *Y*. As a further fact, observe that merely knowing that the painter intended to represent Mrs *Y* is not sufficient to infer that the drawing is accurate *of* her. In contrast to natural meaning, non-natural meaning does not entail truth.

Of course, a painter might protest: 'I am not saying anything to you! I'm depicting things as they are!' But however hard he tries, we won't take him as a mere photographer. Any painter, bad or good, depends on our recognition of his intention to paint *this* object, rather than something else. At least, he tells us that the painting is *of* this man, rather than that man. That much is *communicated* to the audience. Even in the case of a crude socialist-realist painting, say, of Lenin, you necessarily assume that the (bad) artist intended to paint Lenin. If the painted figure happens to resemble Stalin, the painting would still *fail* to be of Stalin. That is, unless you calculate the painter's intentions further and conclude, on this basis, that this actually is some post-modernist painting intended to tell us some interesting things about Lenin, Stalin etc.

Remark 4 (Relativism). It is worth comparing Grice's view on the photograph/picture contrast with Goodman's views we examined earlier.

THE FORMULA OF MEANING_{NN} 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.