

Handout 15

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

- The smoke above yonder field means_N that there is fire there.
These spots on his body mean_N that he has got measles. (15-1)

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

- X means_N that Y (15-2)

for distinguishing between the two senses:

- (A) The statement (15-2) entails ‘It is true that Y .’
- (B) The statement (15-2) does not entail ‘What was meant_N by X was that Y .’
- (C) The statement (15-2) does not entail ‘Someone means_N by X that Y .’
- (D) The statement (15-2) cannot be paraphrased as ‘ X means_N “ Y ”, or that “ Y ”.’
- (E) The statement (15-2) 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 ‘perverse’, ‘against nature’?). It is much better to use his own later terminology in page 215 and dub this meaning ‘conventional’. All the five tests above go a different way for the cases of conventional meaning such as:

214

- The white smoke over the Sistine Chapel means_C that the Pope was elected.
Trump’s utterance ‘You are fired’ meant_C that Tillerson was fired. (15-3)

Question 1. Show the behaviour of conventional meaning across the five tests above.

Remark 2. 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:

- The smoke above yonder field is a sign that there is fire there.
These spots on his body are signs that he has got measles.
The white smoke over the Sistine Chapel is a sign that the Pope was elected.
Trump’s utterance ‘You are fired’ was a sign that Tillerson was fired. (15-4)

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 meaning_C? Why cannot I say that the white smoke means_C 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

- ‘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.
‘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. (15-5)

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.

GRICE'S FIRST SHOT. We now turn to Grice's positive proposal. Here is the initial idea:

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*. (15-6)

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

Smith was regularly beating his wife, (15-7)

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. . . .

YSB