

Grice, "Meaning"

1.  
**Natural and Non-Natural Meaning**

Grice begins by making an important distinction between two species of meaning that it is particularly easy to confuse, which he labels **natural meaning** and **non-natural meaning**.

**Natural meaning** is attributed in (a):

- (a) Those spots on your face mean *you have measles*.

This claim could be true only if the italicized sub-sentence is true, i.e. only if you really do have measles. If you had spots but you didn't have measles, the spots would not mean that you had measles. They would have to have some other source.

- (b) Those spots didn't mean anything to me, but to the doctor they meant measles.  
(c) The recent budget means that we shall have a hard year.

**Non-natural meaning** is attributed in (b):

- (d) The symbols in the arrangement below mean *you have measles*.

YOU HAVE MEASLES

This whole assertion would be true even if the italicized sub-sentence were false. That is, an assertion of (d) would still be correct even if you did not have measles.

- (e) Those three rings on the bell mean that the bus is full.  
(f) That remark, 'Smith couldn't get along without his trouble and strife', meant that Smith found his wife indispensable.

**Generalizing, the difference between the two kinds of meaning is this:** it is consistent with something's having non-natural meaning that what it non-naturally means is false; but it is not consistent with something's having natural meaning that what it naturally means is false.

**Grice's concern:**

Grice sets aside those senses of 'mean' that are not his immediate concern and focuses on understanding the nature of those that are. Examples of meaning that involve language are typically cases of meaning<sub>NN</sub>, and no one has so far come up with a good theory of meaning<sub>nn</sub>.

Natural meaning does not really have much to do with the meaning of words or utterances, and is in any case relatively non-mysterious. 'X means<sub>N</sub> that p' can be understood as a substitute for one or other of various simple phrases, e.g.:

- X causes it to be the case that p
- X is conclusive evidence for p
- X is not possible unless p is true
- X entails that p

### What about these? Meaning<sub>N</sub> or meaning<sub>NN</sub>?

- (i) John is sneezing. This means he has a sinus infection.
- (ii) The French sentence, 'Pierre aime les chats', means that Pierre likes cats.
- (iii) In saying what he did, John meant that he would be late.
- (iv) Failure to bring an accurate map with him meant that John would be late.

### 2.

#### Grice's Theory of Meaning<sub>NN</sub>

He aims to show that the meaning of an expression (e.g. a word or a sentence) is derivative, definable in terms of how that expression is typically used in meaningful utterances. The meaning of individual utterances is, he concludes, more fundamental than the meaning of expressions. More fundamental than both, though, are the contents of the speakers' minds, and in particular the intentions that give rise to the production of utterances.

#### A distinction:

- (1) meaning<sub>NN</sub> timelessly (expression meaning)
- (2) meaning<sub>NN</sub> on a certain occasion

(2) is more fundamental and can be defined in terms of the psychological states of the speaker. Both kinds of meaning, then, ultimately have their source in the content of psychological states, something he seeks to show in two steps:

**Step One:** give a definition of the meaning of single, isolated utterances couched entirely in terms of what the speaker *intends* to bring about.

**Step Two:** give a definition of expression meaning ('timeless meaning') couched entirely in terms of the definition of the meaning of single isolated utterances given in Step One.

### 3.

#### Step One

Grice asks us to consider **linguistic acts**.

One thing all acts, linguistic or non-linguistic, seem to have in common is that they are performed with an intention, even if that intention is not always fulfilled. Grice's hunch is that it is the intention behind the production of a meaningful act that gives it its meaning.

But all acts are intended but not all acts are meaningful. So, we have to ask after the form of the intention, or the kind of intention, for the case of meaningful acts.

#### Which intentions?

**First try:** A specific utterance U means that p if, and only if, in performing U, the speaker intends an audience to come to believe that p.

Why isn't this good enough?

Suppose that, for some reason, C wants D, a monolingual English-speaker, to believe that D's house is haunted by the ghost of the Russian émigré who used to live in it. At night, from inside a cupboard in D's bedroom, C produces Russian-sounding nonsense using a guide to Russian enunciation. We would not say that C's utterances mean that D's house is haunted.

**Second try:** A specific utterance U means that p if, and only if, in performing it, the speaker intends:

- (a) that an audience will come to believe that p, and
- (b) that this audience will recognize intention (a).

Why isn't this good enough? A case where both (a) and (b) are satisfied:

Grice imagines himself supplying Mr. X with a photograph of Mr. Y 'showing undue familiarity to Mrs. X'. He supplies it with the intention that Mr. X will come to believe that 'there is something between . Y and Mrs. X'. If we take U to be the act of supplying the photo to Mr. X, and p to be that there is something between Mr. Y and Mrs. X, clause (a) is satisfied. Suppose moreover that Grice, in this imaginary scenario, wishes his intention to be recognized. So, rather than posting the photo anonymously, Grice hands it to Mr. X. This means that clause (b) is also satisfied. But we would not really want to say that Grice's act *means* that Mr. Y and Mrs. X are joined in some illicit union.

**Third try:** A specific utterance U means that p if, and only if, in performing it, the speaker intends:

- (a) that an audience will come to believe that p, and
- (b) that this audience will recognize intention (a), and
- (c) that the recognition in (b) will cause the belief in (a).

4.

**Next time**

We will finish Step One and turn to Step Two.