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Critical Reflections on Intentions and Linguistic Communication

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Critical Reflections on Intentions and Linguistic Communication

Abstract

This paper has the following structure: first, Paul Grice's original account of non-natural meaning (in "Meaning") is critically discussed; second, Stephen Neale's analysis (in "Paul Grice and the Philosophy of Language") is critically discussed; third, Kent Bach and Robert Harnish's analysis of linguistic communication is critically discussed; lastly, due to considerations detailed in the previous section, doubts are raised about the viability of intentional based semantics. In discussing Neale and Bach and Harnish, two novel counter-examples are employed to show their analyses to be inadequate.

Critical Reflections on Intentions and Linguistic Communication

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Abstract

This paper has the following structure: first, Paul Grice's original account of non-natural meaning (in "Meaning") is critically discussed; second, Stephen Neale's analysis (in "Paul Grice and the Philosophy of Language") is critically discussed; third, Kent Bach and Robert Harnish's analysis of linguistic communication is critically discussed; lastly, due to considerations detailed in the previous section, doubts are raised about the viability of intentional based semantics. In discussing Neale and Bach and Harnish, two novel counter-examples are employed to show their analyses to be inadequate.

The word 'mean' can be used in a variety of ways. Sentences like 'Those spots mean measles', 'Smoke means fire' and 'Those red dots mean that the spider is poisonous' are all well formed and informative. Those uses of 'mean' contrast sharply with such sentences as 'Jack meant for you to get out by saying "Out!"' and "'Jack loves his wife' means that Jack loves his wife', which are also all well formed and informative. These two uses of 'mean' get at a distinction between what Grice calls natural meaning in the former case (hereafter meaning_N) and non-natural meaning in the latter case (hereafter meaning_{NN}).¹ Grice extends the use of the word 'utterance' to apply to any candidate for meaning_{NM}; hand gestures and similar performances can be candidates for meaning_{NN} and therefore they are utterances. When we ask "What does a speaker mean by x?" or state that "Jack means by x that...", x is an utterance act. A request for the meaning of an utterance act is a request for the "utterer's occasion-meaning."² A request for the utterer's occasion-meaning is a request for the value of P in 'U meant by uttering x that P.'

¹ H.P. Grice, "Meaning" in *Studies in The Ways of Words*, (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1991), 213-215.

² H.P. Grice, "Utterer's Meaning and Intentions" in *Studies in the Ways of Words* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1991), 90.

Grice's analysis of the meaning_{NN} of utterance acts is as follows. For an utterer U, an utterance act x and an audience A:

U meant_{NN} P by uttering x if and only if (iff) U uttered x intending

- (1) A to produce a belief that P, and
- (2) A to produce the belief that P by means of A's recognition of U's intention for A to produce the belief that P.³

There has been a proliferation of counterexamples to this account of meaning_{NN}. The two counterexamples that I will mention will both be cases where U meant_{NN} something by uttering x, but the right-side of the biconditional is false, thereby making the analysis incorrect.

The first counterexample attacks requirement (1). A family of cases where the left-side of the biconditional is true and requirement (1) is false, following Vlach, are cases of Duty.⁴ Suppose for example that a prophet (U) is to be burned at the stake if she refuses to renounce that she is specially connected to God. Let the 'something' that U means be the proposition that U is specially connected to God (P). U recognizes that the executioner will never come to believe P, suppose God told her that the executioner would not believe P. U does not care about the executioner's obstinance and, believing herself to be bound by her duty to God, utters 'U is specially connected to God' (x). So, U means_{NN} P by uttering x and U did not utter x intending the executioner to believe P. This is a counterexample to the proposed account of meaning_{NN} because the left-side of the biconditional is true, U really did mean P by uttering x, but requirement (1) is false.

The second counterexample also attacks requirement (1). The second counterexample is an accusing case. Suppose a copper (U) accuses a burglar (A) of burgling. In such a case, U meant_{NN} that A is a burglar (P) by uttering 'A is a burglar' (x). U does not utter x intending A to produce the belief that P; U knows that A was at the scene while A was burgling and therefore U knows that A believes that P. Therefore, (1) is false.

Neale, in "Paul Grice and the Philosophy of Language," succeeds in formulating an analysis of speaker meaning that confronts these two counterexamples.⁵ Neale recognizes that the two counterexamples are successful due to the overly strong

³ Grice's analysis, in his own words, is "'A meant_{NN} something by x' is (roughly) equivalent to 'A intended the utterance of x to produce some effect in an audience by means of the recognition of this intention.'" Grice, "Meaning," 220.

⁴ Frank Vlach, "Speaker's Meaning," *Linguistics and Philosophy* 4 (1981): 367.

⁵ Stephen Neale, "Paul Grice and the Philosophy of Language," *Linguistics and Philosophy* 15 (1992).

requirement that a speaker must intend her audience to believe what she states. Neale agrees with Searle that “by defining meaning in terms of intended effects, [Grice’s analysis] confuses illocutionary with perlocutionary acts. Put crudely, Grice in effect defines meaning in terms of intending to perform a perlocutionary act [i.e. producing a belief in an audience], but saying something and meaning it is a matter of intending to perform an illocutionary act.”⁶ Instead of incorporating the perlocutionary effect of production of a belief into an analysis of meaning_{NN}, Neale incorporates the illocutionary effect of actively entertaining. Neale contends that the second requirement (i.e. the reflexive requirement (2) in Grice’s analysis) is both not necessary and, when paired with the first requirement, not sufficient. I will only focus on Neale’s argument for the second requirement not being necessary.

The second requirement is not necessary because it disallows Herod from meaning_{NN} that John the Baptist is dead by showing John the Baptist's head to Salome. Herod (U) meant_{NN} that John the Baptist is dead (P) by revealing John the Baptist’s head and U revealed John the Baptist’s head to Salome (A) intending A to produce a belief that P, but not intending A to produce a belief that P by means of A’s recognition of U’s intention for A to produce a belief that P. This is the case because U believes that A will produce the belief that P upon seeing John’s head, not by recognition of U’s intention. Grice in “Meaning” and Bach and Harnish contrasts with Neale in having the intuition that Herod did not mean_{NN} anything by revealing John the Baptist’s head; so, for those who share Grice’s and Bach and Harnish’s intuition, this is not a counterexample to (2) being necessary.⁷

Neale, taking into account all the counterexamples so far mentioned, formulates the following analysis.

- “By uttering x, U meant that p iff for some audience A,
- (1) U uttered x intending A actively to entertain the thought that P (or the thought that U believes that P)
 - (2) U uttered x intending A to recognize that U intends A actively to entertain the thought that P. and
 - (3) U does not intend A to be deceived about U’s intentions (1) and (2).”⁸

Neale is using ‘actively’ in the same way as Grice in “Utterer’s Meaning and Intention.”⁹ To actively have some attitude towards P is to have an attitude towards P

⁶ John Searle, *Speech Acts An Essay in the Philosophy of Language* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1976), 43-44.

⁷ I have no clear intuition in the Herod case. Many prominent philosophers side with Neale including Schiffer, *Meaning*, 56.

⁸ Neale, “Paul Grice and the Philosophy of Language,” 37.

that is occurrent and not merely dispositional. Neale does not define what he means by ‘entertain’, but the way that he uses it leads me to believe that to entertain a proposition P is simply to think of P or to consider P.¹⁰ Neale’s requirements (1) and (2) are not a single complex reflexive intention. Neale follows Schiffer in *Meaning and Grice* in “Utterer’s Meaning and Intentions” and moves to an iterative account. This is not a reflexive account because it does not include a reflexive communicative intention (i.e. an intention to produce an effect on an audience by means of the audience’s recognition of that very intention). Requirement (3) is not an intention of U, but rather a requirement on the kinds of intentions that meaning_{NN} something requires.

The following counterexample to Neale’s analysis is a case where the left-side of the biconditional is false but the right-side is true. Suppose A always entertains the proposition that A would be happier if A were married whenever U talks about his wife. Suppose U knows that A knows that U knows this oddity about A (this will be important to avoid falsifying Neale’s third requirement). Suppose also that A become sad when he entertains this proposition. Suppose A makes U angry by eating U’s lunch. U, in retribution, says “My wife is at work” (x). U utters x intending A actively to entertain the thought that U’s wife is at work and A would be happier if A were married. U utters x intending A to recognize that U intends A actively to entertain the thought that U’s wife is at work and A would be happier if A were married (because U is angry at A, U wants A to recognize that U is purposefully causing A sadness). U also does not intend A to be deceived about U’s intentions; this is the case because U knows that A knows that U knows this oddity about A. So, the right-side is true. Is this a case where by uttering ‘My wife is at work’, U meant that U’s wife is at work and A would be happier if A were married? I have the strong intuition that it is not such a case. All that U meant was that U’s wife is at work. So, by uttering x, U did not mean that U’s wife is at work and A would be happier if A were married. Therefore, the left-side of the biconditional is false and the analysis is incorrect.

Bach and Harnish recognize that “communicative success does not require that [the audience] responds as you wish, such as to believe you... It is enough for the hearer to understand the utterance, that is for the speaker to achieve uptake.”¹¹ Uptake consists in the hearer identifying the attitude that the speaker is expressing. Because of this, the illocutionary intent is the expression of an attitude. By ‘expressing an attitude’ Bach and Harnish mean something very specific. “For S to *express* an attitude is for S to

⁹ Grice, “Utterer’s Meaning and Intentions,” 109-111.

¹⁰ See Neale, “Paul Grice and the Philosophy of Language,” footnote 53 and page 35.

¹¹ Kent Bach, “Saying, Meaning, and Implicating,” in *Cambridge Handbook of Pragmatics*, ed. K. Allan and K. Jaszczolt (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012), 8 (page references are to the author’s manuscript available at <http://userwww.sfsu.edu/kbach/Bach.SayMeanImpl.pdf>.)

R-intend the hearer to take S's utterance as reason to think S has that attitude."¹² To R-intend is to reflexively intend; so, if I R-intend the hearer to take my utterance of 'Jack is tall' (x) as reason to think that I have the belief that Jack is tall (P), then, for some audience A, (1) I intend A to take my utterance of x as reason to think that I believe P and (2) I intend A to take my utterance of x as reason to think that I believe P by means of A's recognition of my intention for A to take my utterance of x as reason to think that I believe P.¹³

Let us define linguistic presupposition (hereafter LP) as "the mutual belief in the linguistic community CL that i. the members of CL share [a language] L, and ii. that whenever any member S utters any [expression, typically a sentence,] e in L to any other member H, H can identify what S is saying, given that H knows the meaning(s) of e in L and is aware of the *appropriate background information* (emphasis added)."¹⁴ Communicative presupposition (CP) is "the mutual belief in C that whenever a member S says something in L to another member H, he is doing so with some recognizable illocutionary intent."¹⁵

For Bach and Harnish, in the case of constatives, an utterer (U) attempts to linguistically communicate that U believes some proposition P by uttering some utterance x to a hearer (A) iff U "R-intends the hearer to identify his illocutionary intent on the basis of what he uttered in accordance with the linguistic presupposition and the communicative presumption."^{16 17}

Bach and Harnish opt to give an analysis of attempted linguistic communication opposed to meaning_{NN} because Bach and Harnish doubt that "there is a single, stable, pre-theoretic notion of speaker meaning capable of bearing the theoretical weight put upon it in many analyses."¹⁸ Bach and Harnish also doubt that "there really is a sense of the term 'meaning' that corresponds to just the idea of attempted communication in the sense which Grice seeks to elucidate."¹⁹

The, admittedly fantastical, counterexample to the above analysis is as follows. Suppose a rich audiophile (A) loves to hear squeaky voices. Indeed, he loves to hear

¹² Kent Bach and Robert Harnish, *Linguistic Communication and Speech Acts* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1982), 7.

¹³ (2) can be more cleanly stated as: (1) by means of A's recognition of (1).

¹⁴ Bach and Harnish, *Linguistic Communication and Speech Acts*, 7.

¹⁵ *Ibid*, 7.

¹⁶ *Ibid*, 84.

¹⁷ Cases such as commissives don't have an evident proposition that can be the P that is meant; but "there is no [similar] problem with constatives [such as assertion]." Bach and Harnish, *Linguistic Communication and Speech Acts*, 151.

¹⁸ *Ibid*, 150.

¹⁹ *Ibid*, 152.

them so much that he had a device implanted in one of his ears (his left ear to be exact) that turns all noises squeaky. After a few years of living with every voice sounding squeaky, at least when he muffles his right ear, A begins to search for the best squeaky voice in all the land. A holds auditions, which he delegates to his non-implanted henchmen; so, A does not meet any of the competitors until there is a finalist. The finalist is Mr. Squeaky (U). At this point I will consider two different situations. In situation (1) the henchmen mistakenly tell U that the device is in A's right ear; in situation (2) the henchmen correctly tell U that the device is in A's left ear. U believes, in each respective situation, what U is told. Other than this difference in U's belief about which ear has the implant, both situations are identical. U walks into A's chambers and sees that A has noise proof headphones on A's right ear. In situation (1) A wrongfully deduces that A will hear a normal (non-altered) voice. In situation (2) A correctly deduces that A will hear an altered voice. U then utters 'I can speak in a squeaky voice' (x) in a squeaky voice.

The LP is operative in (1) and (2) because (i) A and U are both members of CL; they both are English speakers. (ii) For any member of CL A, U can utter x in L to A and A can identify what U is saying; both A and U, we can stipulate, have the exact same linguistic beliefs. One might object that in (1) U is not aware of the appropriate background information, namely which ear the device is in; but this is an invalid objection. The kind of background information that Bach and Harnish are discussing has to do with linguistic background information and relevant non-linguistic background information such as who is speaking; both A and U can be stipulated to share both these types of information in (1) and (2). Interestingly, I do not think that the CP is operative, more on this later in the next paragraph.

In analysing this case I am going to assume two things. First, that the difference in belief between U in (1) and U in (2) does not affect whether U attempts to communicate in either case. So, U attempts to communicate that U believes P to A by uttering x in (1) iff U attempts to communicate that U believes P to A by uttering x in (2). Second, I will assume that it is impossible for some utterer U to have an r-intention that U believes is impossible for U's audience A to reason by.²⁰ So, in case (1), because U believes that A will think that U believes that U can speak in a squeaky voice (P) by means of hearing U speak in a squeaky voice, not by means of A's recognition of U's intention for A to take U's utterance of x as reason to think that U believes P, U does not have the relevant r-intention in (1). As a note of clarification, U thinks that U is in

²⁰ If a defender of Bach and Harnish's analysis rejects this assumption, then Herod can R-intend Salome to take the showing of John's head as reason to think that Herod believes that John is dead and at the same time Herod can believe that Salome will not take the showing of John's head as reason to think that Herod believes that John is dead. This is an unwelcome commitment (at least it appears like one to me), so one should not reject this assumption lightly.

the same position as Herod in the John the Baptist case.²¹ U thinks that U is in a case of openly and deliberately showing; therefore, U thinks that it would be impossible for A to take U's utterance of x as reason to think that U believes P by means of A's recognition of U's intention for A to take U's utterance of x as reason to think that U believes P. So, by our second assumption, there is no r-intention that U intends in case (1). Therefore, the CP is not operative. This is the case because illocutionary intent is the expression of an attitude (in this case belief); expression of a belief requires a relevant r-intention; there is no relevant r-intention.

Does U attempt to communicate in case (2)? Yes. In (2) U uttering x in a squeaky voice would be equally a case of showing as uttering 'There is a city of over one million people'; that is, uttering x in a squeaky voice is not a case of showing when U believes A to be hearing via the implant. Because U has the belief that A is hearing via the implant, U r-intends A to take U's utterance as reason to think U has the belief that P. In (2), U r-intends the relevant intention and the CP is operative (remember that the LP is operative in both (1) and (2)). The CP is operative because there is a relevant r-intention; therefore, there is an expression of a belief; therefore, there is illocutionary intent. So, (2) is a case where U attempts to communicate that U believes P to A by uttering x.

By our first assumption, that U attempts to communicate in (2) entails that U attempts to communicate in (1), U attempts to communicate in (1). But, U does not intend a relevant r-intention in (1). Therefore, U attempts to communicate and U does not intend a relevant r-intention in case (1). This makes the claim that "the intended 'effect' of communicating is for the hearer to recognize one's communicative intention" false.²² This is false because in (1) there is no communicative intention but there is communication.

As an additional note, the counterexample to Neale's analysis can be reformulated as a counterexample to Bach and Harnish's analysis. The following counterexample to Bach and Harnish's analysis is a case where the left-side of the biconditional is false but the right-side is true. Suppose A always thinks that U believes A would be happier if A were married whenever U talks about his wife. Suppose U knows that A knows that U knows this oddity about A. Suppose also that A becomes sad when he thinks that U believes this proposition and A knows that U knows that A becomes sad when A thinks that U believes this proposition. Suppose that U is not malicious and A knows this and

²¹ U will not r-intend the relevant intention because U believes that it is impossible for A to reason through U's intention to the proposition expressed; this is the case because U thinks that A will recognize the proposition expressed the moment that U utters anything in a squeaky voice, not by means of recognition of an intention, but merely by means of hearing U speaking in a squeaky voice.

²² Bach, "Saying, Meaning, and Implicating," 9.

U knows that A knows this; so, if U does something to make A sad, A knows there is a reason. Suppose A makes U angry by eating his lunch. U, in retribution, says “My wife is at work” (x).

U utters x intending (1) A to take x as reason to think that U has the belief that U’s wife is at work and A has harmed U (P) and (2) (1) by means of A’s recognition of U intending (1). The CP and LP are also operative. So, does U attempt to communicate that U believes P to A by uttering x? I have the strong intuition that U does no such thing. All U is attempting to communicate is that U’s wife is at work.

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