The psychology of meaning

Lecture 2: Paul Grice's theory of conversation

1. Background

• Grice is an "ordinary language" philosopher, whose work was motivated to a large extent by the fact that he wasn't happy with the way ordinary language philosophy was being practiced in his time.

Example: Ryle about the problem of the free will:

> In their most ordinary employment "voluntary" and "involuntary" are used, with a few minor elasticities, as adjectives applying to actions which ought not to be done. We discuss whether someone's action was voluntary or not only when the action seems to have been his fault [. . .]

> But philosophers, in discussing what constitutes acts voluntary or involuntary, tend to describe as voluntary not only reprehensible but also meritorious actions, not only things that are someone's fault but also things that are to his credit [. . .]

> The tangle of largely spurious problems, known as the problem of the Freedom of the Will, partly derives from this unconsciously stretched use of "voluntary" [. . .] (Ryle 1949)

• Formalist v. informalist responses to alleged discrepancies between logic and language.

  ○ "if . . . then" v. $\rightarrow$
  ○ "or" v. $\vee$
  ○ "some" v. $\exists$

  Neither Aristotelian nor Russellian rules give the exact logic of any expression of ordinary language; for ordinary language has no exact logic. (Strawson 1950: 344)

2. Grice's theory of conversation

The content conveyed by way of an utterance of a sentence divides into several parts:

i. "What is said": (more or less) conventional, truth-conditional meaning. This is the part that licenses *entailments*.

ii. Conventional implicatures: conventional, non-truth-conditional meaning:

(1) a. Harry is rich but dull.
    b. Harry is rich and dull.

(2) a. *Harry is rich but dull, but he isn't rich.
    b. ?Harry is rich but dull, though I wouldn't want to suggest that there is a contrast between these two properties.

(3) a. Harry is rich and dull, and that's a good thing.
    b. Harry is rich but dull, and that's a good thing.

(4) a. Most of these girls are rich and dull.
    b. Most of these girls are rich but dull.

iii. Conversational implicatures: non-conventional, non-truth-conditional meaning:

(5) A: I am out of petrol.
    B: There is a garage round the corner.

(6) There is a garage round the corner, but I'm afraid it is closed.

3. Discourse as a cooperative project

Cooperative Principle
Make your conversational contribution such as is required, at the stage at which it occurs, by the accepted purpose or direction of the talk exchange in which you are engaged. (Grice 1975/1989: 26)

The Cooperative Principle is subdivided into:

Conversational maxims
i. Quantity
   1. Make your contribution as informative as is required (for the current purposes of the exchange).
   2. Do not make your contribution more informative than is required.
ii. Quality: Try to make your contribution one that is true:
   1. Do not say what you believe to be false.
   2. Do not say that for which you lack adequate evidence.

    iii. Relation: Be relevant.
    iv. Manner: Be perspicuous:

        1. Avoid obscurity of expression.
        2. Avoid ambiguity.
        3. Be brief (avoid unnecessary prolixity).
        4. Be orderly.

- This formulation of the maxims shouldn't be taken too seriously.
- Some maxims are clearly more important than others.

4. Conversational implicatures

Grice's "definition":

S's saying that p conversationally implicates q iff:

    i. S is presumed to be observing the maxims, or at least [...] the cooperative principle.
    ii. In order to maintain this assumption it must be supposed that S thinks that q.
    iii. S thinks that both S and the addressee H mutually know that H can work out that to preserve the assumption in (*i*) q is in fact required.

- Conversational implicatures are *not* licensed by sentences, but by speakers' actions (i.e., speech acts). They serve to make sense of what the speaker is doing. They are not inherently linguistic in nature, but to be accounted for by a general theory of rational cooperative behaviour.
- Methodological corollary: If an inference can be explained in terms of conversational implicature, then ceteris paribus such an explanation is to be preferred. ("Modified Occam's Razor")
- Conversational implicatures are *abductive* inferences.

Examples:

- *Relation*
  - (7) A: I am out of petrol.
  -      B: There is a garage round the corner.

- *Manner*

  (8) Miss X produced a series of sounds that corresponded closely with the score of "Home sweet home".

- *Quantity*

  (9) A: Where does C live?
  B: Somewhere in the South of France.

There are several "features" that, according to Grice, are characteristic of conversational implicatures:

- calculability
- detachability

  (10) a. Some of the stewardesses were snoring.
  b. At least two of the stewardesses were snoring.

- cancellability

  (11) a. There is a garage round the corner, but it's closed.
  b. X is meeting a woman this evening—his sister, in fact.

  (12) Harry is either in Antwerp or in Brussels. (uttered in the context of a guessing game)

However, these features do not provide us with a effective test for diagnosing conversational implicatures.

5. Further remarks on cancellability

- Presuppositions are (sometimes) cancellable, too:

  (13) a. Harry doesn't know he got promoted.
  b. Harry doesn't know he got promoted, because he didn't: it was just a rumour.

- It is not at all obvious why conversational implicatures should be cancellable.
- It is not at all obvious that, in examples like (11)-(12), conversational implicatures are literally cancelled.
- Still, cancellability remains a useful diagnostic, because it can be used to rule out the possibility that a given inference is an entailment or a conventional implicature:

(14) *There is a garage round the corner, but it's not round the corner.

Recommended reading

Neale (1992: 509-537)

References

Grice, H. P. (1975). Logic and conversation. In P. Cole and J. Morgan (Eds.), *Syntax and semantics 3: Speech acts*, pp. 41–58. New York: Academic Press. Reprinted in and cited from Grice (1989: 22-40).

Grice, H. P. (1989). *Studies in the way of words*. Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press.

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