Indirect Speech Acts

Intention & Acts of Meaning Seminar, Week 7

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1 Saying vs. Implicating: Interpretive Questions

Suppose that, in S addressing an utterance of x to A, S says (or makes as if to say) p, and by doing that, S implicates q. Some questions:

Q1 How does A recognize that the content of what S says (or makes as if to say) was p?

Q2 How does A recognize that S is implicating something or other?

Q3 How does A recognize what S is implicating?

These are all interpretive questions—questions about what's going on in A's mind that allows A to correctly interpret S. These questions take for granted the existence of some facts about what S meant, said (or made as if to say), and implicated.

The theory of implicature is Grice's answer to Q2–Q3.[1]

2 Saying vs. Implicating: The Constitutive Question

- Saying p and implicating p are both ways of meaning p, and so one cannot do either of the former without doing the latter.

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[1] This is not to say that the elements of the theory won't also be involved in Grice's answer to 1. Contrary to what many seem to assume, they will!

- Lots of people have misinterpreted or disregarded Grice on this point (for a book-length example, see Davis 1998).

- But it's not just an exegetical issue; it's important!

  - Saying and implicating are both acts by way of which a speaker can communicate with an addressee.

  - So if we think that communicative intentions do important work in explaining human communication, we need them for both cases.

  - By contrast, if you read implications into my speech act that I genuinely didn't intend (even unconsciously), then we haven't thereby communicated. You've either misinterpreted me or you've otherwise inferred something about me that I wasn't trying to communicate.
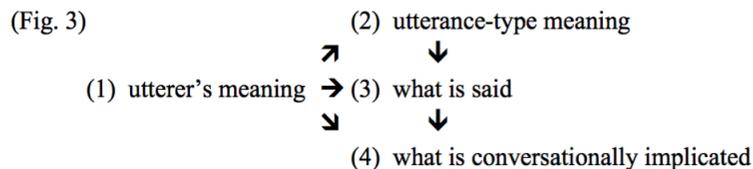
This raises the question:

- Assuming a speaker has meant p in uttering x, what makes it the case that this act of meaning was an act of saying vs. an act of implicating?

Grice is not totally clear on the issue, but Neale (1992) reconstructs his view as follows:

- Saying p requires both (a) meaning that p and (b) using an utterance-type that means something "closely related" to p. (See (Grice, 1989, 86–88))

- Implicating p requires (a) meaning that p and (b) neither saying nor conventionally implicating that p.

Neale therefore maps out Grice's hierarchy of concepts as follows ("where '$\alpha \rightarrow \beta$' is understood as 'α (or its analysis) plays a role in the analysis of β (but not vice versa)'"):

(Fig. 3)
                                    (2) utterance-type meaning
                                ↗   ↓
        (1) utterer's meaning → (3) what is said
                                ↘   ↓
                                    (4) what is conversationally implicated

This way of setting things up leads to some problems:

- It seems like we might want to draw something similar to the saying/implicating distinction even when the utterer is not using a meaningful utterance type. (E.g., conspicuously faking a yawn at a party in order to *directly* inform a friend that you're bored and *indirectly* inform them that it's time for the next party.) This is not possible on the proposed way of analyzing things.

- As Grice's own struggles demonstrate, it's not easy to cash out the phrase "closely related" in Grice's explication of saying.

- There are problems with explicating utterance-type meaning directly in terms of speaker meaning (i.e., because there are some phrases, like 'can you pass the salt', that we almost never use literally). So it would be nice to be able to invoke saying in our explication of utterance-type meaning.

One way to solve these problems: explicate saying and implicating directly in terms of different kinds of communicative intentions ("direct" vs. "indirect" speaker meaning). Then explicate utterance-type meaning in terms of saying only. We'll explore this idea in later weeks.

A slightly different option, which I am tempted by: what makes a case of speaker meaning direct or indirect is its position within a broader communicative plan. Here's how saying and implicating would boil down to intentions:

Saying p and thereby Implicating q
The fact that U said p and thereby implicated q in addressing an utterance x to a A is grounded in the fact that U uttereed x intending:

(1)   (SAYING p)
    (i) A to believe p;
    (ii) A to recognize U intends (1i);
    (iii) A to fulfill (1i) on the basis of his fulfillment of (1ii);

(2)   (IMPLICATING q)
    (i) A to form a belief that q;
    (ii) A to recognize U intends (2i);
    (iii) A to fulfill (2i) on the basis of his fulfillment of (2ii); and

(3) (INDIRECTNESS CONDITION)
    A to recognize U intends (2i) partly on the basis of his recognition of U's intention (1i);

3 Making as if to Say

Making as if to say p, and thereby Implicating q
The fact that U made as if to say p and thereby implicated q in addressing an utterance x to a A is grounded in the fact that U uttereed x intending:

(1)   (SAYING p)
    (i) A to consider and reject the possibility that S meant p;
    (ii) A to recognize U intends (1i);
    (iii) A to fulfill (1i) on the basis of his fulfillment of (1ii);

(2)   (IMPLICATING q)

(i) *A* to form a belief that *q*;

(ii) *A* to recognize *U* intends (2i);

(iii) *A* to fulfill (2i) on the basis of his fulfillment of (2ii); and

(3) (INDIRECTNESS CONDITION)
A to recognize *U* intends (2i) partly on the basis of his recognition of *U*'s intention (1i);

4 Generalizing Grice's Theory to Other Speech Acts

In several respects, Grice's theory of utterer's meaning/saying/implicating is only really set up to handle assertoric speech acts. I see three problems that must be overcome in order to allow us to generalize to other cases.

4.1 Terminology

In saying that S meant *p*, said *p*, or implicated *p*, we seem to presuppose that we're talking about an assertoric speech act.

- 'Stephen said that Grice was right.' sounds a lot like 'Stephen asserted that Grice was right'.

- There is no natural way to report what Stephen said in a case where what he did was request for you to do your homework by uttering 'do your homework'.

  - Schiffer's attempt: 'Stephen said that you should do your homework'

  - But then how to distinguish this from the case in which Stephen asserted that you should do your homework by uttering, 'You should do your homework'?

The solution:

- replace 'meant' with 'performed a communicative act' (or 'asserted'/'commanded'/'asked', as the case may be).

- Replace 'said' with 'performed a *direct* communicative act' (or '*directly* asserted', etc.).

- Replace 'implicated' with 'performed an indirect communicative act' (or '*indirectly* asserted', etc.)

4.2 What Makes it the Case that Someone Performs an Indirect Speech Act?

We can easily generalize from my answer to the constitutive question about saying and implicating. E.g.:

Directly asking-whether A can ψ in order to indirectly direct A to ψ
The fact that *U* requested for a certain addressee *A* to ψ in uttering *x* is grounded in the fact that *U* uttereed *x* intending

(1) (DIRECTION)

(i) *A* to form an intention to say whether they can ψ;

(ii) *A* to recognize *U* intends (1i);

(iii) *A* to fulfill (1i) on the basis of his fulfillment of (1ii);

(2) (EXPRESSION OF DESIRE)

(i) *A* to form an intention to ψ;

(ii) *A* to recognize *U* intends (2i);

(iii) *A* to fulfill (2i) on the basis of his fulfillment of (2ii); and

(3) (INDIRECTNESS CONDITION)
A to recognize *U* intends (2i) partly on the basis of his recognition of *U*'s intention (1i);

4.3 Generalizing the Maxims

The cooperative principle and maxims of relevance and manner seem to apply well enough to non-assertions. But not the maxims of quality and quantity:

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 evidence.

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.

The problem:

- The maxim of quality assumes that a conversational contribution is truth-apt and something for which one can have evidence.

- The maxim of quantity assumes that the purpose of a contribution is to inform.

These don't seem to make sense for requests, questions, etc.

The solution might be to formulate counterparts of these maxims for other speech acts. And I think we can take some inspiration from what Searle calls "preparatory" and "sincerity" conditions for speech acts.

Searle thinks of these conditions as constitutive rules for performing the acts in question, but this is obviously wrong. Instead, they're something like norms that are particular to the acts.

Here are some examples of preparatory and sincerity conditions posited by Searle

PROMISING

- H[earer] would prefer S[peaker]'s doing A[ct being promised] to his not doing A, and S believes H would prefer his doing A to his not doing A.

- It is not obvious to both S and H that S will do A in the normal course of events.

- S intends to do A.

REQUESTING

- His able to do A. J believes H is able to do A.

- It is not obvious to both S and H that H will do A in the normal course of events of his own accord.

- S wants H to do A.

(see others on Searle handout)

These seem to play roles very similar to Grice's quality/quantity maxims. (They aren't quite right, but I think they're an interesting start.)

References

Davis, W. (1998). *Implicature: Intention, Convention, and Principle in the Failure of Gricean Theory*. Cambridge University Press.

Grice, P. (1989). *Studies in the Way of Words*. Harvard University Press, Cambridge, Mass.

Neale, S. (1992). Paul grice and the philosophy of language. *Linguistics and Philosophy*, 15:509–559.