Some Issues in the Intentionalist Program

Intention & Acts of Meaning Seminar, Week 2

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- What kinds of things is intentionalism trying to explain?

- What are the components of the overall explanatory project, and how are they connected?

- What theoretical choices have to be made within these projects?

- What are the opposing views and objections to each part?

1 Explananda

According to Neale, "A semantic (pragmatic, syntactic, morphological, phonological) theory is substantive only to the extent that it can be construed as part of a larger—much larger—theory that potentially answers a [Master Question]" (Neale, 2016, 32).

In particular, Neale says that we're in the business of explaining the facts that "by producing or displaying" "noises, bodily movements, and marks", we are able to:

- "express…our thoughts"

- "sharpen our thoughts", and

- "communicate to others information about the external world or about our own beliefs, desires, plans, commitments, hopes, fears, feelings etc. so efficiently (i.e. so quickly, systematically and consistently)".

Question: does Neale leave anything out? Some would like to add the following to the list:

- The language we use influences the kinds of thoughts that we can (or tend to) have (Sapir, Whorf, Searle, Boroditsky, etc.).[1] These claims seem to be stronger than Neale's idea that using language allows us to 'sharpen our thoughts'.

- Some utterances ("assertions") allows us to transmit *knowledge* (as opposed to mere belief) (Dummett, Williamson, etc.).

- Some utterances ("directives", "commands") allow us to create obligations for our addressees (Searle, Portner, Kaufmann, Raz, etc.).

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[1] For a recent collection of papers on this issue, see Gentner and Goldin-Meadow (2003). Searle's version of the claim is more glib than empirical: "So, for example, some of my friends claim that they suffer, let's say, the angst of post-industrial man under late capitalism. Now, I don't suffer from that. If I did, I'd run out and buy a beer. But people who do suffer from the angst of post-industrial man under late capitalism, have got to have words to do that. In fact, you've got to be able to string a lot of words together to have that" (Searle, 2014).

- Some utterances allow the speaker to undertake commitments (Searle, Vlach, Brandom, Lance & Kukla).

- Some utterances are necessary and/or sufficient for the performance of complex, social practices/rituals (Austin, Bach & Harnish, Searle).

2   Important Distinctions

The Master Question breaks down into three sub-questions, which we mustn't confuse (Neale, 2016, 65–66):

(CQ) THE CONSTITUTIVE QUESTION (METAPHYSICS OF MEANING)
In virtue of what facts does someone, S, mean whatever he or she means by performing something, x, on a given occasion?

(EQ) THE EPISTEMIC QUESTION (PRAGMATICS, INTERPRETATION)
What sorts of information, what principles, and what types of cognitive states and processes are involved in the (typically spontaneous) arrival in the mind of an interpreter of a (typically resilient) conclusion about what S means by performing x on that occasion?

(AQ) THE AETIOLOGICAL QUESTION (FORMATICS, UTTERANCE PLANNING)
What sorts of information, what principles, and what types of cognitive states and processes are involved in the formation of the communicative intentions S has in performing x on that occasion?

"…it is a virtue of Gricean theories that CQ, EQ, and AQ are not conflated while the proffered answers are nonetheless tightly interlocked", says Neale. They are related as follows (Neale, 2016, 73):

> The question of what **constitutively** determines what S meant by uttering X (on a given occasion) and the question of what is involved in **epistemically** determining (ascertaining, identifying, or at least arriving at a conclusion about) what S meant by uttering X (on that occasion) are

conceptually distinct, even though the formation of the communicative intentions that **constitutively** determine what S meant is typically **aetiologically** determined, in part, by S's conceptions of the sorts of things S may reasonably presume to be potentially involved in A's **epistemically** determining what S meant.

3   Accounts of Speaker Meaning

We answer CQ by giving a theory of speaker meaning (a.k.a. 'utterer's meaning' (Grice, 1957), 'utterer's occasion meaning' (Grice, 1969), S-Meaning (Schiffer, 1972)). Intentionalists do this by spelling out the nature of communicative intentions (a.k.a. 'meaning intentions' (Grice, Strawson), M-Intentions (Schiffer, 1972), 'illocutionary intentions', 'reflexive intentions' (Bach and Harnish, 1979)).

Grice, 'Meaning' (1957, 385):

> "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"[2]

Strawson (1964, 446) reveals the structure of Grice's proposal (while also implying that a communicative intention is actually three distinct intentions):

> S nonnaturally means something by an utterance x if S intends (i_1) to produce by uttering x a a certain response (r), in an audience (A) and intends (i_2) that A shall recognize S's intention (i_1) and intends (i_3) that this recognition on the part of A of S's intention (i_1) shall function as A's reason, or a part of his reason, for his response r.

In 'Utterer's Meaning and Intentions' (Grice, 1969, 151), Grice borrows Strawson's structure, but puts all three clauses inside the scope of a single intention:

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[2]"…and we may add that to ask what A meant is to ask for a specification of the intended effect (though, of course, it may not always be possible to get a straight answer involving a "that" clause, for example, "a belief that…")"

"U meant something by uttering x" is true iff, for some audience A, U uttereed x intending

(1) A to produce a particular response r

(2) A to think (recognize) that U intends (1)

(3) A to fulfill (1) on the basis of his fulfillment of (2).

(The rest the essay consists of Grice entertaining (if not quite endorsing) complicated amendments (epicycles?) to this formulation on the basis of a variety of possible counterexamples.)

Some objections:

- Sperber & Wilson (1995; 2015), Neale (1992), and others argue that we should drop Grice's third clause.

- Schiffer (1972) argues that no definition of the Grice/Strawson variety can ever work, as it is possible for the speaker to have ever more "sneaky" intentions. He makes various amendments, including the idea speaker meaning involves intending to produce mutual knowledge. (This is picked up by Stalnaker (1978), Thomason (1990), Roberts (2012), and others.

- Searle (1965; 1969) uses his German soldier example to argue that speaker meaning requires that the speaker intend for the hearer to recognize their intention by relying on conventions.

- Bach & Harnish (1979), Davis (1992; 2003)

- Etc!

4 Speech Acts and Kinds of Speaker Meaning

Most of Grice's examples are of assertion-like cases of meaning, in which a speaker communicatively intends to produce a belief.

But Grice also considers directive-like cases of meaning, which, he argues, are constituted by the communicative intention to get one's addressee to act (1957, 384) or to form an intention to act (Grice, 1989, 105).

In other words: Grice seems to suggest that we individuate kinds of speech acts in terms of the kinds of communicative intentions with which they're performed (and specifically, in terms of the kinds of responses their speakers intend to produce in addressees). This idea is taken up by Bach and Harnish (1979); Schiffer (1972); Strawson (1964), and we'll take it up in a few weeks.

5 Pragmatics and Formatics

Construed as an answer to EQ, pragmatics is the study of the psychological processes that guide interpretation. Neale argues that any such theory will be a part of cognitive psychology.

If what a speaker means is constituted by their intentions, then interpreting what they mean is inferring the best explanation of their utterance by identifying the intention with which it was produced. (This is a special case of action explanation in general.) This is a kind of non-demonstrative (abductive) inference, and an instance of mindreading (metarepresentation, folk psychological explanation).

The Central Problem of Pragmatics: psychological processes of this kind are computationally intractable (See also Chomsky (2000)):

> I should like to propose a generalization; one which I fondly hope will some day come to be known as 'Fodor's First Law of the Nonexistence of Cognitive Science'. It goes like this: the more global (e.g. the more isotropic) a cognitive process is, the less anybody understands it. (Fodor, 1983, 107)

In other words: pragmatics is a black box. Three kinds of response:

- WORK AROUND THE BLACK BOX
  Try to infer, as best we can, what kind of assumptions or information the black

box *must* be drawing on. This is, I think, what Grice is doing when he posits the cooperative principle and the maxims of conversation. His point is not that "calculations" of implicatures are tight deductive arguments; he is postulating that whatever the relevant psychological processes are, they must be drawing on the assumptions in his "premises".[3]

- FIGURE OUT THE BLACK BOX
  Try to develop a theory of the inner workings of the black box. Relevance Theory is the most serious attempt at this (Sperber and Wilson, 1995), and it's no accident that RT is also intended to be a general theory of non-demonstrative inference.

- SHRINK THE BLACK BOX
  Try to find as many aspects of interpretation that we can algorithmize, and thus locate outside the black box, as possible. This is the strategy of many people working on formal semantics and formal pragmatics. A prominent recent example is Lepore and Stone (2015). But ultimately this doesn't solve the problem, it just makes it easier to ignore.

(*Mutatis mutandis* for formatics, but very little work on it has been done.)

6   The Role of Utterance-Type Meaning

What about the kind of meaning studied by semantics? Grice calls it 'timeless meaning' (because it transcends particular occasions of use) and 'utterance-type meaning' (because it is predicated of utterance types, incl. words and sentences). (Notably: Grice avoids 'linguistic meaning' because non-linguistic utterance types can have it.)

Some key points:

- The intentionalist model applies in cases that involve neither language nor utterance-type meaning, and in cases that involve utterance-type meaning but not language.

- Utterance-type meaning "plays no role whatsoever in answering CQ" (Neale, 2016, 75). I.e., (contra Searle): the meanings of the words one uses do not constitute what S means by uttering them.

- The role of meaning is to provide evidence to A of S's communicative intentions, thus constraining A's pragmatic search space. Thus, A's sensitivity to the relevant utterance type's meaning may play a role in answering EQ.

- Since S is sensitive to how the utterance will affect A, and cannot (rationally) intend what their expectations rule out, S's senitivity to the meaning of the utterance type they token will constrain which intentions they wind up forming. Thus, S's sensitivity to the relevant utterance type's meaning may play a role in answering AQ.

7   Metasemantics

In virtue of what do utterance types, including words and sentences, have the meanings that they do? This is often labeled a 'metasemantic' question.[4]

Intentionalists answer this question by saying that the meaning of an utterance type boils down to facts about regularities, or procedures, or conventions, or dispositions connecting speakers' uses of utterance types with certain types of acts of speaker meaning.

Here's Neale, motivating this idea:

> So a word's meaning at a given time is effectively its potential for use in acts of speaker meaning at that time…a potential that derives from its history in acts of speaker meaning. (Edmunds and Warburton, 2015, 246–247)

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[3] A common misinterpretation of Grice is to think that pragmatics, or the maxims, come into play once the hearer has worked out 'what is said', which is the domain of semantics—e.g., Korta and Perry (2008); Stojanovic (2014). This is wrong.

[4] Neale dislikes this label because it seems to imply that semantics can be studied in isolation from metasemantics: "semantics done without taking into account issues the fashionable take to be the subject matter of metasemantics is just semantics done badly" (Neale, 2016, fn.17).

7.1 Grice on what Constitutes Utterance-Type Meaning

Here's Grice's original formulation of the idea (1957, p.385):

> "x means$_{NN}$ (timeless) that so-and-so" might as a first shot be equated with some statement or disjunction of statements about what "people" (vague) intend (with qualifications about "recognition") to effect by x.

In 'Utterer's Meaning, Sentence-Meaning, and Word-Meaning' (1968), Grice gives a much more complex account. Here's his theory of what constitutes the meanings of complete, unstructured utterance types (1968, p.233; 1989, 127):

> "For group G, utterance-type X means "$\star_\psi$qp" =df. 'At least some (? many) members of group G have in their repertoires the procedure of uttering a token of X if, for some A, they want A to $\psi^\dagger$ that p; the retention of this procedure being for them conditional on the assumption that at least some (other) members of G have, or have had, this procedure in their repertoires'.

Grice goes on to give even more complex accounts of what constitutes incomplete utterance types (e.g., words) and structured utterance types (e.g., sentences). The basic idea: the meanings of sentences are constituted by our "resultant procedures" to mean certain kinds of things with them. They're "resultant" in the sense that they are in turn constituted by our procedures to mean certain kinds of things with their parts.[5]

7.2 Schiffer on the Actual-Language Relation

A better-known line of investigation is Schiffer's attempt to ground facts about linguistic meaning in facts about linguistic convention. Schiffer borrows and modifies Lewis's (Lewis, 1975) theory of convention, roughly along the following lines:

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[5] What the hell are "procedures"? Grice doesn't have an answer for us (see 1968, 234). In my dissertation, I argue that we can replace Grice's talk of procedures with talk of performative and interpretive dispositions (Harris, 2014, ch.4).

- A language L is a function that maps sentences to utterance-type meanings (say, types of communicative intentions).

- A convention is a system of mutual knowledge that a community has about its own practices.

- A practice of meaning in L is a practice of uttering a sentence that L maps to X when one has a communicative intention of type X.

- A language L is the actual language of a population P just in case there is a conventionalized practice of meaning-in-L among the members of P.

- A sentence means X for a population P just in case, for some language L that maps the sentence to X, L is the actual language of P.

For fuller statements of this idea, see Schiffer (1993). Elsewhere, Schiffer argues that we have to ground facts about the linguistic meaning more directly in psycholinguistic facts about the processes by which hearers recognize communicative intentions (Schiffer, 2003, 2006). Elsewheres, Schiffer argues that none of this can possibly work and his life's work has been totally misguided (1987).

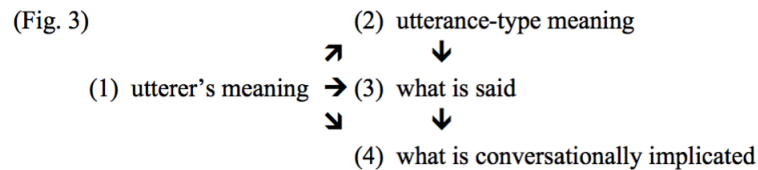## 8 Saying vs. Implicating (Direct vs. Indirect Speech Acts?)

It is an important component of Grice's theory that saying p and implicating p are both ways of meaning p, and so one cannot do either of the former without doing the latter. This seems counterintuitive to many, but if we take the project to be one of explanation rather than analysis, the question is ultimately not whether these concepts yield predictions that sound right, but whether they do the right explaining.

How are saying and implicating to be explicated? This is controversial, and Grice is not totally clear on the issue. Neale (1992) reads Grice 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 '$\alpha \to \beta$' is understood as 'α (or its analysis) plays a role in the analysis of β (but not vice versa)'"):

(Fig. 3)

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

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