



MEANING

H. P. Grice

What is meaning?

Or, put in linguistic terms:

**What do the words ‘meaning’ and
‘means’ mean?**

In particular:

**What are we saying when we say
that a something or someone
‘means’ something?**

meaning

[**mee**-ning]

Spell

Syllables

[Synonyms](#)

[Examples](#)

[Word Origin](#)

[See more synonyms on Thesaurus.com](#)

noun

1. what is intended to be, or actually is, expressed or indicated; signification; import:
the three meanings of a word.
2. the end, purpose, or significance of something:
What is the meaning of life? What is the meaning of this intrusion?
3. *Linguistics.*
 - a. the nonlinguistic cultural correlate, reference, or denotation of a linguistic form; expression.
 - b. linguistic content (opposed to [expression](#)).

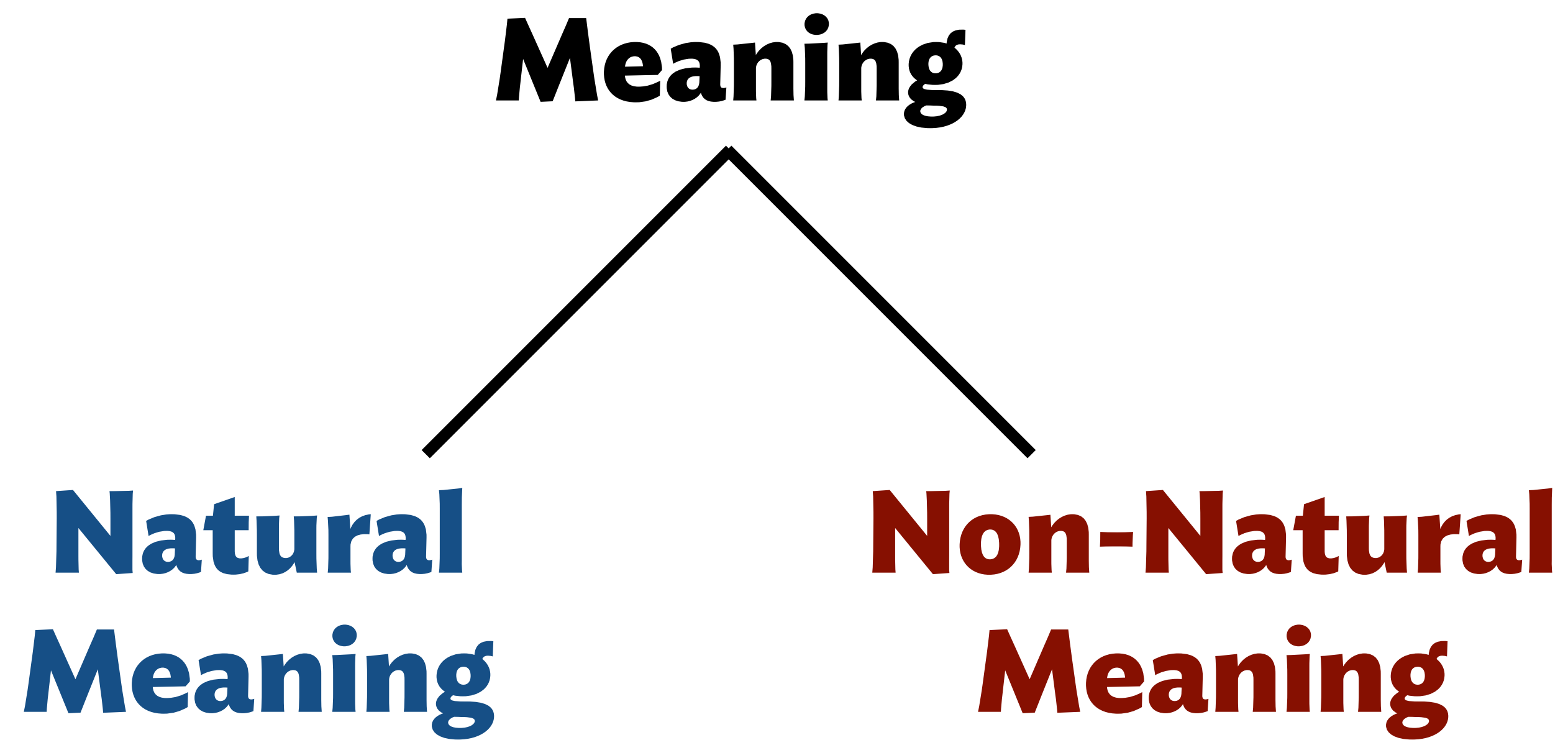
adjective

4. intentioned (usually used in combination):
She's a well-meaning person.
5. full of significance; expressive:
a meaning look.

Comparison

The word 'newspaper' has (at least) the following two senses:

1. A printed publication with unstapled sheets consisting of news, articles, and advertisements.
2. An organization that produces publications of this kind.



*note: there are also other senses of 'meaning'
e.g., 'the meaning of life'

Examples of ‘means’ in its natural sense:

“Those spots **meant** measles.”

“The budget **means** we will have a hard year.”

Examples of ‘means’ in its non-natural sense:

“Those rings on the bell **mean** that the bus is full”

“That remark, ‘Smith couldn’t get along without his trouble and strife’ **meant** that Smith found his wife indispensable.”

‘meant_N’ = ‘naturally meant’

‘meant_{NN}’ = ‘non-naturally meant’

Two Questions:

How can we be sure that these really are two different senses of 'means'?

How can we test which sense of 'means' is being used in a given case?

Grice offers us five usage tests.

Test 1: **Means_N** is Factive, **Means_{NN}** Is Not

I cannot say, “Those spots meant measles, but he hadn't got measles” ... That is to say, in cases like the above, *x meant that p* and *x means that p* entail *p*.

I can use [“Those rings on the bell mean that the bus is full”] and go on to say, “But it isn't in fact full—the conductor has made a mistake”.

More generally:

If *X means_N P* is true, then *P* has to be true too

But if *X means_{NN} P* is true, *P* might be false.

Test 3: **Means_{NN}** is Agential, **Means_N** is Not

I cannot argue from “Those spots meant measles” to any conclusion to the effect that somebody or other meant by those spots so-and-so.

I can argue from [“Those rings on the bell mean that the bus is full”] to the conclusion that somebody (viz., the conductor) meant, or at any rate should have meant, by the rings that the bus is full...

More generally:

But if X **means_{NN}** something, then someone meant something by X.

If ‘X **means_N** P’ is true, there needn’t be anyone who meant anything by X.

Grice on Stevenson's Causal Theory of Meaning:

“We might try to say, for instance, more or less with C. L. Stevenson, I that for x to mean_{NN} something, x must have (roughly) a tendency to produce in an audience some attitude (cognitive or otherwise) and a tendency, in the case of a speaker, to be produced *by* that attitude, these tendencies being dependent on “an elaborate process of conditioning attending the use of the sign in communication.” This clearly will not do.”

QUESTION

Why won't it do?

Meaning

**Natural
Meaning**

**Non-Natural
Meaning**

**Utterer's
Meaning**

**Timeless
Meaning**

What a person means by
a particular utterance on
a particular occasion.

What a type of word or sentence
means, independent of any
particular occasion of use.

Grice's Examples of Meaning_{NN} (Part 1)

Those three rings on the bell (of the bus) mean that the bus is full.

That remark, 'Smith couldn't get along without his trouble and strife', meant that Smith found his wife indispensable.

I draw a picture of Mr. Y [displaying undue familiarity to Mrs. X] and show it to Mr. X. ... [T]he picture (or my drawing and showing it) meant_{NN} something (that Mr. Y had been unduly familiar), or at least that I had meant_{NN} by it that Mr. Y had been unduly familiar.

If I frown deliberately (to convey my displeasure), an onlooker may be expected, provided he recognizes my intention, ...to conclude that I am displeased. [Grice goes on to argue that this case counts as meaning_{NN} provided that the frowner intends the addressee to conclude that the frowner is displeased via the recognition of the frowner's intention.]

If...I had pointed to the door or given him a little push, then my behavior might well be held to constitute a meaningful_{NN} utterance, just because the recognition of my intention would be intended by me to be effective in speeding his departure.

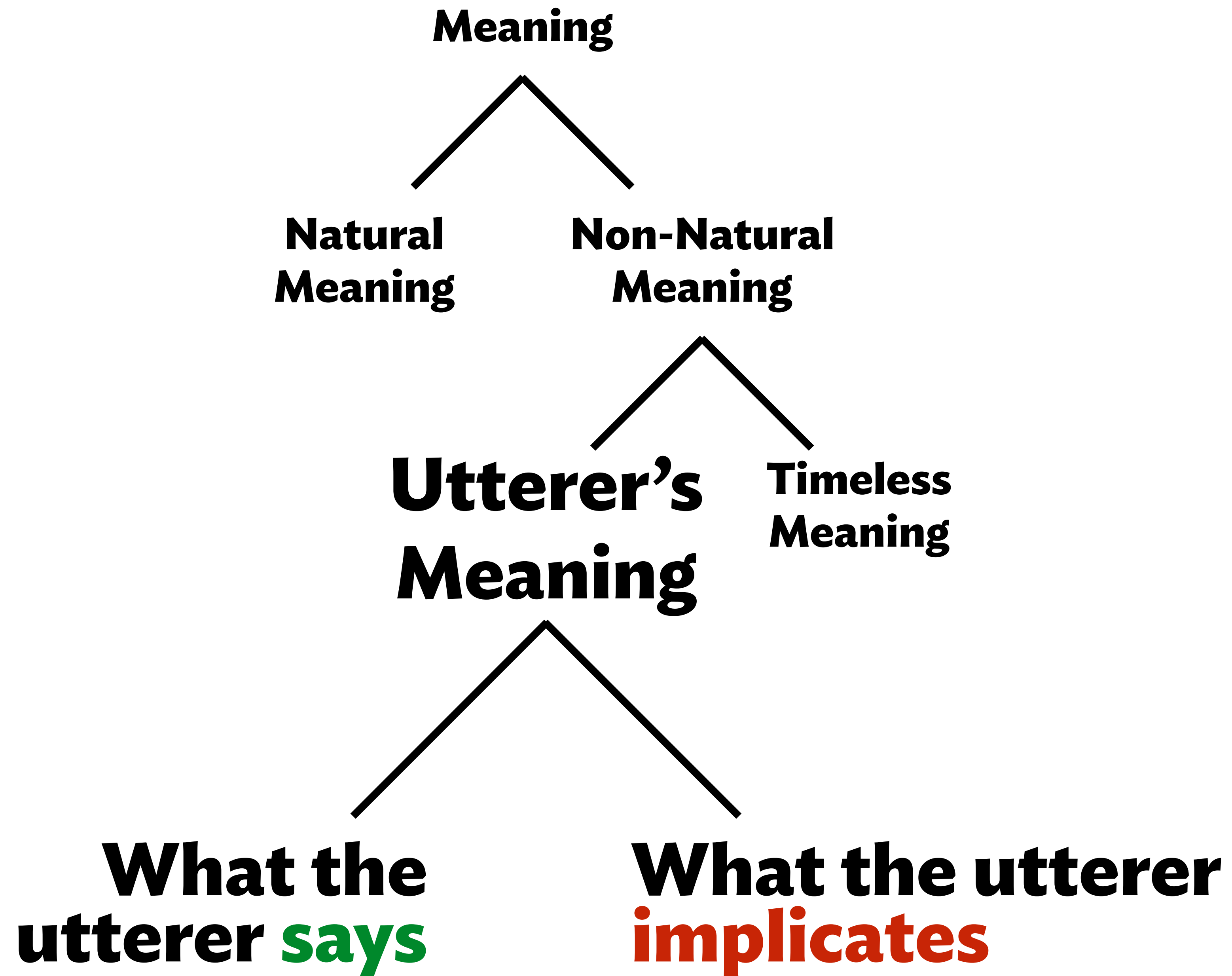
Grice's Examples of Meaning_{NN} (Part 2)

If...I had pointed to the door or given him a little push, then my behavior might well be held to constitute a meaningful_{NN} utterance, just because the recognition of my intention would be intended by me to be effective in speeding his departure.

...a policeman who stops a car by waving.

...if I cut someone in the street, I do feel inclined to assimilate this to the cases of meaning_{NN}, and this inclination seems to me dependent on the fact that I would not reasonably expect him to be distressed (indignant, humiliated) unless he recognized my intention to affect him in this way.

If my college stopped my salary altogether, I should accuse them of ruining me; if they cut it by one pound, I might accuse them of insulting me [This example immediately follows the previous one, and the implication is that the latter case is an example of meaning_{NN}.]



Expression Meaning

(a.k.a linguistic meaning, timeless meaning)

EXPLAINED IN TERMS OF

Speaker Meaning

(a.k.a utterer's meaning)

EXPLAINED IN TERMS OF

Mental States

Specifically:

Communicative Intentions

Grice's 1957 Theory of Utterer's Meaning:

“A meant_{NN} something by [an utterance] 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”

(A is an arbitrary speaker)

(x is an arbitrary utterance)

Grice's 1968 Analysis of Utterer's Meaning

S means something by uttering u if and only if S utters u intending:

- (1) to produce thereby a certain response Δ in a certain addressee A;
- (2) that A recognize S's intention (1);
- (3) that A's response Δ be at least partly based on of her recognition of (1).

(This is a *meaning intention*.)

An Example:

By staring at student A who has come to class late, I meant that student A should not come in late iff, by staring at them I intended:

- (1) to produce in A a belief that they should not come to class late;
- (2) that A recognize my intention (1);
- (3) that A's belief that they should not come to class anymore be at least partly based on their recognition of (2).

Asserting (Stating)

S **asserts p** by uttering u if and only if S utters u intending:

- (1) to produce thereby a **belief that p** in a certain addressee A;
- (2) that A recognize S's intention (1);
- (3) that A's belief be at least partly based on of her recognition of (1).

Directing (e.g. Requesting, Commanding)

S **directs A to do X** by uttering u if and only if S utters u intending:

- (1) to produce thereby **an intention to do X** in a certain addressee A;
- (2) that A recognize S's intention (1);
- (3) that A's intention be at least partly based on of her recognition of (1).

Scott-Phillips' Simplified Version

In order to engage in ostensive-inferential communication, I must have intentions of these two kinds:

(1) The Informative Intention

An intention to produce a certain effect in a certain addressee, A.

(2) The Communicative Intention

An intention that A recognizes my informative intention.

Two Models of Communication

1. The Code Model

2. The Ostensive-Inferential Model

1957 Expression Meaning:

“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

(x is an arbitrary utterance-type)

Malapropisms

"Texas has a lot of electrical votes"

(Yogi Berra)

"Bicycling in New York is dangerous
because everyone drives so erotically."

Spoonerisms

"Three cheers for our queer old dean!"

"Is it kisstomary to cuss the bride?"

"The Lord is a shoving leopard."

(taken from Wikipedia, 'Spoonerisms')

Some Advantages of Grice's Theory

Suggests an explanation of how linguistic conventions can arise in the first place:

- We start out communicating non-conventionally.
- Our ways of non-conventionally communicating sets precedents.
- Conventions emerge from those precedents.

By contrast, Austin struggles to explain how felicity conditions could arise in the first place.

Some Advantages of Grice's Theory

- Grice's theory makes communication (both linguistic and nonlinguistic) a special use of metacognition (a.k.a. mindreading, theory of mind, folk psychology).
- Metacognitive explanations of social phenomena are well supported by experimental research.
- See, e.g., the enormous literature in developmental psychology on theory of mind.

Some Advantages of Grice's Theory

- Grice's theory gives us a way of understanding what makes human communication so special, and of explaining how it evolved.
- See the rest of Thom Scott-Phillips' book.
- But also, see work by many other anthropologists and cognitive ethologists on mindreading and communication in apes, dogs, and other animals.

Advantages of Grice over Austin

- By contrast, it's hard to see how Austin could explain the origin of speech acts.
- It's also unclear how a conventionalist like Austin could explain non-linguistic, non-conventional communication.

Advantages of Grice over Austin

- Intentionalism also offers a better explanation of the context-sensitivity of speech acts.
- E.g.: ‘Give me some money.’
- Is this a command, a polite request, or some advice?
- You can’t know just by knowing the relevant conventions. Plausibly, it is the speaker’s intentions that make it one kind of speech act rather than another.

Advantages of Grice over Austin

- Intentionalism also suggests a way of understanding indirect speech acts.
- E.g., commanding someone to move by saying, in the right circumstances, ‘you’re in my way’.
- Similarly metaphor, irony, sarcasm, hyperbole, etc.
- It’s hard to see what Austin could say about these.
- (We’ll return to this topic.)

Some Common Objections to Grice

- Are we really making any progress by analyzing linguistic concepts in terms of psychological concepts like *belief* and *intention*?
- Aren't the beliefs and intentions that Grice posits are too complicated? "I don't have all those thoughts every time I speak!"
- Should we really think that the mind is more explanatorily basic than language? Don't we also use language to think? How is that possible according to Grice?

Some Common Objections to Grice

- Don't we use language for lots of things other than to communicate? How could Grice explain those uses?
- Grice's theory seems to entail that I can mean anything with any words I want. Doesn't that seem wrong? (See Searle's German Soldier example.)

Some Common Objections to Grice

- Grice says that expressions have “timeless” meaning because of what speakers have used them to mean in the past.
- How is this idea compatible with the fact that there are meaningful sentences that haven’t yet been used?
- Doesn’t this show that meaning isn’t (just) use?



**LOGIC
&
CONVERSATION**
H. P. Grice

'and': logic vs. natural language

She got married and had a baby.

↳ The marriage was first.

She had a baby and got married.

↳ The baby was first.

Stocks dipped and demand plunged.

↳ The dip preceded (caused?) the plunge.

'or': logic vs. natural language

You can have a dog or you can have a cat.
↳ Not both!

'if': logic vs. natural language

If Beyoncé releases a death metal album, it will be awesome.

↳ The speaker thinks there is some possibility that this will happen.

If the moon is made of cheese, then Hunter College is a lunar colony.

(This seems false, but is true according to classical logic.)

Assuming that logic doesn't work like language, two options:

The Formalist

The simplified, well-behaved logical meanings are more useful for doing philosophy and science. For some purposes, we should work with the logical versions.

The Informalist

Throw logic in the garbage. It doesn't tell us anything interesting about natural language, and it misses all kinds of important inferences.

Implicature

The Banker Case

Suppose that A and B are talking about a mutual friend, C, who is now working in a bank. A asks B how C is getting on in his job, and B replies, *Oh quite well, I think; he likes his colleagues, and he hasn't been to prison yet.*

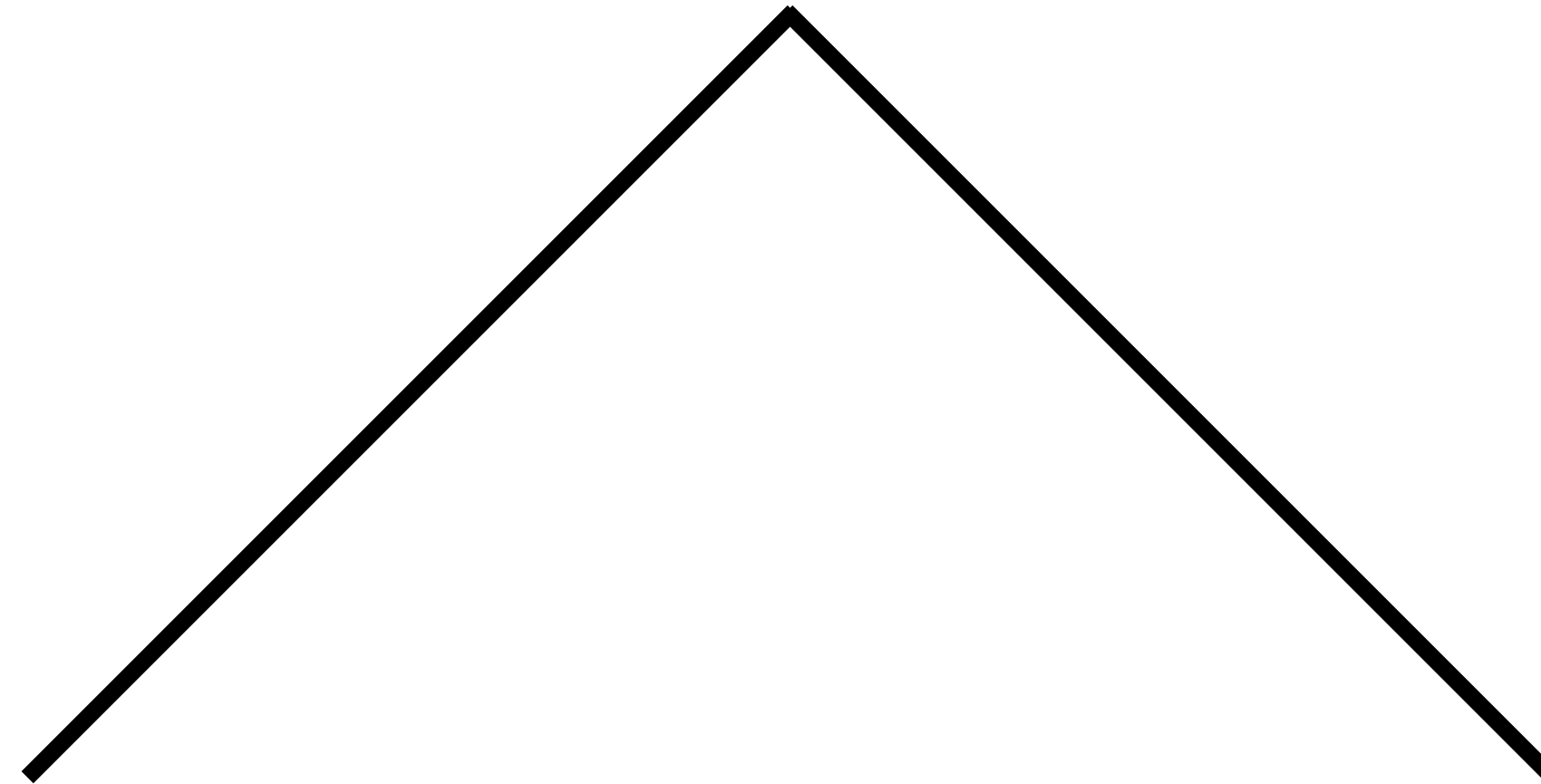
The Reference Letter Case

A is writing a testimonial about a pupil who is a candidate for a philosophy job, and his letter reads as follows: "Dear Sir, Mr. X's command of English is excellent, and his attendance at tutorials has been regular. Yours, etc."

The “Fine Friend” Case

X, with whom A has been on close terms until now, has betrayed a secret of A's to a business rival. A and his audience both know this. A says X is a fine friend.

What an utterer (speaker) means



**What an utterer
(speaker) says**

**What an utterer
conversationally
implicates**

S said *p*

VS.

S made as if to say *p*

S said *p*

VS.

S made as if to say *p*



entails that *S meant p*

Grice's Banker Case

In uttering 'quite well...he hasn't been to prison yet', A :

...**said** that the banker is doing well and hasn't been to prison.

...and **conversationally implicated** that the banker is up to no good (or that his colleagues are out to get him, etc.).

Grice's Fine Friend Case

In uttering 'X is a fine friend', A:

...made as if to say that X is a fine friend.

...and conversationally implicated that X is not a good friend.

Grice's Reference Letter Case

In uttering 'Mr. X's command of English is excellent, and his attendance at tutorials has been regular', A :

... **said** (or **made as if to say?**) that Mr. X is fluent and punctual.

...and **con conversationally implicated** that Mr.X is not a good philosopher.

Question

How does a hearer correctly interpret a conversational implicature, given that it goes beyond what can be semantically decoded from their utterance?

Grice's Answer:

We infer that they meant something beyond what they said (or made as if to say) by assuming that they were being cooperative, and inferring what they must have meant in order to count as cooperative.

Cooperative Principle:

"Make your contribution such as it is required, at the stage at which it occurs, by the accepted purpose or direction of the talk exchange in which you are engaged."

Maxim of Quantity: Information

- Make your contribution as informative as is required for the current purposes of the exchange.
- Do not make your contribution more informative than is required.

Maxim of Quality: Truth

- Do not say what you believe to be false.
- Do not say that for which you lack adequate evidence.

Maxim of Relation: Relevance

- Be relevant.

Maxim of Manner: Clarity ("be perspicuous")

- Avoid obscurity of expression.
- Avoid ambiguity.
- Be brief (avoid unnecessary prolixity).
- Be orderly.

Non-Conventionality

"...conversational implicata are not part of the meaning of the expressions to the employment of which they attach." [38]

Calculability

"The presence of a conversational implicature must be capable of being worked out; for even if it can in fact be intuitively grasped, unless the intuition is replaceable by an argument, the implicature (if present at all) will not count as a conversational implicature; it will be a conventional implicature."

Cancelability

"...a putative conversational implicature is explicitly cancelable if, to the form of words the utterance of which putatively implicates that p, it is admissible to add but not p, or I do not mean to imply that p, and it is contextually cancelable if one can find situations in which the utterance of the form of words would simply not carry the implicature." [38]

Nondetachability

"The implicature is nondetachable insofar as it is not possible to find another way of saying the same thing (or approximately the same thing) which simply lacks the implicature." [37]

Upshots of Grice's Theory

- A way of connecting communication to all other cooperative activities.
- A way for a systematic semantics to be compatible with Wittgenstein's observations about language use?