

POSSIBLE (How to read Grice)

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‘If there is a moral issue in the business of doing linguistics (or philosophy KT) it is that we should struggle to avoid making our students the victims of our personal histories and limitations.’
(Labov 1975: 128)

‘I think the history of twentieth-century philosophy of language ought to be rewritten.’
(Recanati 2004: 83)

I, with certain caveats that may emerge in what follows, fully agree. Here are some notes to contribute to a draft of one of the chapters of a suitably moral, responsible and historically revealing account. Only notes, mind you: As Richmond Thomason says somewhere, pointing the way is easier than going the distance.

1 Thesis: Grice was not a ‘Gricean’¹

Grice was careful to emphasize, as others were, it seems, similarly careful to ignore, the following:

‘The conversational maxims (...) and the conversational implicatures connected with them, are specially connected (...) with the particular purposes that talk (...) is adapted to serve and is primarily employed to serve. I have stated my maxims as if this purpose were a maximally effective exchange of information (...).’

(Grice 1975a: 67–68; 1975b: 47; 1989: 28)

He went on:

‘(...) this specification is (...) too narrow, and the scheme needs to be generalized to allow for such general purposes as influencing or directing the actions of others.’

(Grice 1975a: 68; 1975b: 47; 1989: 28)

So, what, we might ask, is ‘a maximally effective exchange of information’ as opposed to, presumably more diffuse, and undefined, ‘general purposes’?

2 (Some) Evidence

The answer to this question is simple now that we are, as earlier critics and commentators were not, in possession of *Studies in the Way of Words*.² In the Preface to this book Grice speaks of his ‘recurrent endeavor (...) to approach philosophy through a study of language, in particular *ordinary* language’ and to examine ‘the role of the consideration of ordinary

¹ ... although the jury is still out on Davidson (cf. Cook 2009). There is now a small, but developing industry examining whether Frege was a Fregean (cf. Janssen 2001, 2012; Pelletier nd., 2001; Hintikka 1980: 50, and Ruffino 2003). I’m of the view that Frege was a proto-Gricean, but that is a story for another birthday.

² This is, of course, Grice (1989). It is, quite clearly, not sufficient to be in simple possession of this extraordinary and endlessly fascinating book. It is necessary to also read it with the greatest possible care and Inspector Morse-esque forensic attention to detail, style, nuance and wit. (On that last, let us not forget that Grice was keen to proclaim ‘it is my belief that doing philosophy ought to be *fun*. I would, in fact, be prepared to go further, and to suggest that it is no bad thing if the products of doing philosophy turn out, every now and then, to be *funny*’ (Grice 1986a: 61; emphasis in the original).)

language in philosophizing'³ (Grice 1989: vi). And in the Prolegomena (Grice 1989: 3–21) he makes a declaration that should be continuously flashing in red neon lights at the entrance of every Linguistics and Philosophy department:

'My primary aim is (...) to determine how any such distinction between meaning and use is to be drawn, and where lie the limits of its philosophical utility.'

(Grice 1989: 4)

3 Philosophical utilities

Grice's strategy for distinguishing meaning and use is by now familiar and is relatively simple to execute. It involves taking a feature that some have thought integral to the meaning of an expression and showing that it is more convincingly interpreted as resulting from a contextual mechanism. Thus, the content of 'and' is identical to that of '&' because temporal and causal features derive from the application of contextual maxims and not from an overly promiscuous spectrum of conventional meanings. Similarly for 'or'. Its content is exhaustively modelled by 'v' and any divergence is accountable by an infringement of the Maxim of Quantity. Similarly for 'if'. Its content is exhaustively modelled by the material conditional and any 'gap' between the material and the natural indicative conditional is filled by the conventional implicature that Grice calls 'The Indirectness Condition'. Thus, with these hypotheses, especially, no doubt with the eternal gratitude of Philo of Megara, the last, Grice saves propositional logic and puts money in the philosophical bank. All of this is now text-book material.⁴

Grice (1961) also attempts to save The Causal Theory of Perception. In the context of someone, in full daylight, standing just feet from a red British post box and saying 'That looks red to me', in flagrant violation of any proposed Doubt or Denial Condition, that someone is not speaking falsely but is speaking truly, but oddly. The Doubt or Denial Condition is shown to behave in similar ways to temporal and causal 'features' of 'and', what we might call 'The Ignorance Condition' for 'or' and 'The Indirectness Condition' for 'if'. Thus, we begin to see the gradual emergence of a natural class of contextual inferences, The result is that The Causal Theory of Perception is brought back to life and Grice puts more money in the philosophical bank.

The strategy of moving 'stuff' out from the conventional and placing it within the contextual rests upon (i) a familiar principle of parsimony:

On general grounds of economy, I would be inclined to think that if one can avoid saying that the word so-and-so has this sense, that sense and the other sense, or this meaning and another meaning, if one can allow them to be variants under a single principle, that is the desirable thing to do: don't multiply senses beyond necessity.

(Grice 1982: 232; 1989: 291)⁵

³ This last word is ugly, (although it may have been current at the time; cf. Emmet 1968) and I shall replace it, except in quotes, in what follows with 'philosophical discussion', or 'philosophical discourse'. On the more substantive question of what he means by 'philosophizing', Grice is not so helpful: 'Unfortunately I do not find it by any means easy to give a general characterization of the philosophizing in which I engage; indeed I am not sure that it is all of one sort' (Grice 1989: 171).

⁴ Not so well-publicised is the clever argument that puts Grice's consequentialist implication back into the conventional meaning of indicative conditionals; see Strawson & Wiggins (2001). For an instructive early practical analysis of the method for placing value in the content or in the context, see Grice (1973). This is a topic that deserves its own dedicated chapter in the revised history of twentieth-century philosophy of language.

⁵ This principle is often called Modified Occam's Razor – notice that I, like Grice, prefer the Latinate 'Occam' to the Anglo-Saxon 'Ockham' – or more simply Grice's Razor. (The earliest application of Occam to language that I have been able to find is in Ziff (1960: 44): 'There is no point in multiplying dictionary entries beyond necessity. (This is the point of Occam's eraser)' (although I am certain that more assiduous archeology will encounter applications that predate this).) Grice's Razor was challenged by what might be called Cohen's Beard (cf. Cohen

and (ii) a less familiar, but very natural, principle of portability:

Rational human thought and communication will, in pursuit of their various purposes, encounter a boundless and unpredictable multitude of distinct situations. Perhaps unlike a computer we shall not have, ready made, any vast array of forms of description and explanation from which to select what is suitable for a particular occasion. We shall have to rely on our rational capacities, particularly those for imaginative construction and combination, to provide for our needs as they arise. It would not then be surprising if the operations of our thoughts were to reflect, in this or that way, the character of the capacities on which thought relies.

(Grice 1988: 200)

Language is, quite clearly, much more useful to its clients if it can be moved easily around, from context to context, in relatively small and manageable packages.

An extension of the strategy is illustrated in Grice's rebuttal of certain criticisms of the Theory of Descriptions. According to Grice (1981/1989: 269–282), 'The present King of France is bald' entails 'There is a present King of France' (as per Russell) and 'The present King of France is not bald' conversationally implicates 'There is a present King of France' and this implicature behaves properly under the usual diagnostics. Grice is not personally committed to this analysis. Like his account of vacuous names (Grice 1969), he regards it as an interesting exploratory exercise. I will not pursue the matter in these remarks. (Note that Grice has nothing to say on the further matter of the referential/attribution distinction.)

Now, to conclude this section (and to embark upon a sentence of quasi-Gricean complexity), and with the above utilities in mind, if we make a distinction, perhaps already latent in the literature, between the mere *illustrations* that Grice provides (mostly of a mundane, conversational nature) and the more substantial applications that Grice makes (mostly of a solid, philosophical character) of (what Cohen (1971, 1977) calls) the Conversationalist Hypothesis, then, it is not too implausible to infer, and, indeed, I would most certainly be willing to infer, that uppermost in Grice's interests is the solution, or, if not a solution, then progress towards a solution, of persistently troublesome philosophical problems: He wants to show that the Conversationalist Hypothesis, or some version of the Conversational Hypothesis, is a useful philosophical investment and 'if not true ('profitable', KT), at least not too obviously false ('unprofitable', KT)' (Grice 1961: 121).⁶

4 Forgotten observations

One has been mentioned already in Section 1: the one about 'a maximally effective exchange of information'. This observation, when noted, allows, for example Harnish (1976) to say:

1971, 1977) with its proliferation of meanings, although this challenge was not vigorously maintained nor explicitly executed. It later gave way to a more fashionable Cohen's Stubble (Cohen 1986). Grice shaves, but not necessarily very closely (cf. Bontly 2005; Hazlett 2007; Phillips 2012). This topic deserves a more elaborate treatment in the longer version of these notes.

⁶ The distinction between, shall we say, Grice the Philosopher and the Gricean Linguist, has some circumstantial merit: '*Logic and conversation* (...) appeared in two separate collections, both published in 1975. Its publication was clearly the source of some confusion, with both sets of editors claiming to offer the essay in print for the first time. *The Logic of Grammar*, edited by Donald Davidson and Gilbert Harman, seems to have been Grice's preferred publication, and was the one he always cited. There, his lecture appears alongside essays by past and contemporary philosophers such as Frege, Tarski and Quine. The editor's [*sic*] introduction places Grice in a tradition of philosophers interested in the application of traditional theories of truth to natural language. In *Speech Acts*, (...) on the other hand, *Logic and conversation* is placed in the context of contemporary linguistics. (...). The editors (...) hail the first publication of 'the seminal word on this topic'. It is rumoured that Grice signed the contract for his lecture to appear in this linguistic series while at a conference at Austin, Texas, and only after a long evening spent in the bar' (Chapman 2005: 186). It would seem that some linguists attempted to get Grice drunk in a Cold War-esque effort to recruit him as one of their own.

Grice nowhere says, nor would he want to say, that all conversations are governed by the cooperative maxims. There are too many garden variety counterexamples: social talk between enemies, diplomatic encounters, police interrogation of a reluctant suspect, most political speeches, and many presidential news conferences. These are just some of the cases in which the maxims of cooperation are not in effect and are known not to be in effect by the participants.

(Harnish 1976: 340 fn 29)

This observation, again, when noted, also allows, for example, Swiggers (1981) to propose ‘the maxim (or super maxim) of ‘Conversational Topology’’ which states: ‘Pay attention to (or: have in mind) the kind of conversation we are having’. He goes on:

This maxim (...) is hierarchically the most important: it is only with regard to the topology maxim that the maxim of relevance can impose itself on the maxims belonging to the categories of quality, quantity and manner. (...) the admission of this maxim allows us to give a pragmatic-linguistic substratum to the (...) scope (...) of a discussion. It is the topology maxim which *determines* what is relevant or not for the kind of conversation we are dealing with.

(Swiggers 1981: 306; emphasis in the original)

It makes enormous strategic and methodological sense, of course, to begin small and leave the larger, more general, conversational purposes for later. Grice, remember, observes that ‘[i]t is irrational to bite off more than you can chew whether the object of your pursuit is hamburgers or the Truth’ (Grice 1989: 369).

Another observation relates to the Maxim of Quantity. The first words of Quantity 1 are ‘Make your *contribution* (...)’. The first words of Quantity 2 are: ‘Do not make your *contribution* (...)’ (emphases added in both cases: KT). The observation is that in Gricean pragmatics ‘the notion of contribution (...) has remained an overlooked (and almost clandestine) concept, despite its early appearance in pragmatics in the formulation of the Gricean conversational maxims’ (Nemo 1999: 413).

The argument continues:

If it seems (...) to have been considered, without discussion, that contributions and utterances were one and the same thing, (footnote: Even though it is (...) clear that a contribution may be formed of a single utterance, it is also beyond doubt, especially in Grice’s maxims, that there is no reason whatsoever to believe that contributions should be formed of a single utterance.) it is very important to avoid this confusion and to understand that the constraints on utterances⁷ (...) and the constraints on contributions are of quite a different nature.’

(Nemo 1999: 413)

And the conclusion deserves a lengthy quotation:

(...) whatever is said is paid in terms of what is left unsaid. (...) as soon as [utterances] are considered [not one by one but] as a whole, then the ‘**This (is what) must be taken into account**’ or ‘**This (is what) should be considered**’ nature of contributions becomes apparent. Which explains why their fundamentally social value, a value of intervention in a social context, is also interpretable in terms of the speaker’s goals (or relations to things). Contributions (...) are revealing the interlocutors’ aims or affects, a dimension which despite not being part of the communicated content, is clearly part of the understanding we have of the communication process.’

(Nemo 1999: 413–414)

The final observation, in the present context, anyway, relates to two of Grice’s more vaguely formulated, and therefore less than helpful, proposals. First problem, The Cooperative Principle: ‘The cooperative principle (...) is problematic (...) because it does not specify the nature of cooperation under consideration’ (Kasher 1982: 38). Solution, replace The Cooperative Principle with The Principle of Effective Linguistic Means: ‘Given a desired literal purpose, the ideal speaker opts for a linguistic action which, to the best of his belief,

⁷ In the interests of economy I make no reference to the natures or the names of these constraints. Such an attempt would take us very far afield. A very careful reading of Nemo (1999) and subsequent work is recommended.

attains that purpose, most effectively and at least cost, *ceteris paribus*' (Kasher 1977: 114; cf. Kasher 1987: 286). Second problem, The Maxim of Relation: 'Be Relevant.' Grice had enormous difficulty in clarifying what this maxim amounted to (Grice 1975a: 67; 1975b: 46; 1989: 27). Others have attempted to convert the maxim into a statement about the psychological processing of utterances. Of these others, Grice has said that their attempts have ignored the fact that 'only after the identification of a focus (...) of some particular direction (...) of relevance (...) can (...) and assessment [of relevance] be made'; Grice 1989: 371–372). Solution, emphasise ends, goals, directions and ambitions of all participants and fill out 'Be relevant' in this way: '[A]t every stage in your pursuit of your desired ends, consider the means used concurrently by others, and determine the manner of using your means accordingly; moreover, prefer using your means in a manner which you believe is likely to help other persons in their pursuit of their desired ends over any other way of your means, *ceteris paribus*' (Kasher 1977: 115).⁸

5 Abbreviated notes for an interim conclusion of this preparatory note

There is the potential for many a slip betwixt a proper name and its corresponding denominal adjective: Frege/Fregean; Davidson/Davidsonian; and, in the present context, Grice/Gricean. So, the precautions to keep in mind when navigating Grice's Proper Name to Denominal Adjectival Transition (GPNtDAT, for short) include, but are not limited to:

- (1) Grice is principally, perhaps only, interested in the clarification of philosophical discourse, with the ambition of finding durable philosophical progress;
- (2) Philosophical progress is founded on the move away from the conflation of 'meaning' and 'use' and towards their distinction;
- (3) The basic unit of philosophical discourse is not the utterance (as per much contemporary pragmatic research), but the 'contribution' (more work needed here);
- (4) There is much virtue in modesty. Grice (1989: 4) acknowledges that he is merely taking 'some tottering steps' towards 'a systematic *philosophical* theory of language' (emphasis added: KT).

Where those tottering steps eventually lead involves answering questions that are as open today as they were in 1967. But, to conclude with a final quote: '(...) the narration of these stirring events must be left to another and longer day' (Grice 1989: 385).

Author's note

An obvious debt to Sbisà (2007) is acknowledged. For possible interpretations of 'POSSIBLE', see Jubien (2009). This short note is for Klaus von Heusinger, on the occasion of his 60th birthday, who is, and who has always been, indubitably the best of all possible book-series co-editors.

⁸ It seems that Grice would have much sympathy with both of these solutions: 'I presume that, in designing the Universe or at least the living segment of it, the imaginary Genitor would be governed by a principle of providing for the highest possible degree of Economy of Effort; such a procedure would not only make his work more elegant, but would be beneficial to the creatures under construction, on the assumption that calculation and concentration of attention involve effort, and that there are to be limitations on the quantity of effort of which a creature is capable at any one time, with the result that the less the effort expended, the greater the reserve which is available for emergencies' Grice (1986b: 30). For an interesting counterbalance to and plausible diagnosis of, this very widespread view, see Roscoe (2014).

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