Philosophy 408: The Language Revolution — Hamilton College
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Class 16 - IBS

I. Semantic theory, semantic despair

Quine was skeptical about meanings, but not meaning.
It does not follow from Quine's work that sentences or utterances, or whatever, lack meaning.
Quine's work, if it is right, constrains our theory of meaning.
But, we still need an account of language and communication.
So, let's think a little bit about what a theory of meaning would look like.

If we were to have a theory of what philosophers do, it might have as an axiom:

1. Philosophers study x iff x is philosophy.

1 is circular because it defines what philosophers study in terms of what philosophy is.
Similarly, Quine argues, we will have to explain meaning in terms that do not refer to meaning, on pain of circularity.
If we want to explain meaning, we have to do so without relying on intensional vocabulary.
Later in the term, we will look at suspending the circularity clause in semantic theory, but for now, let's see what we can do by including it.

Consider the semantic theory that Martinich presents in §VIII of his introduction.
He starts with some base and projection rules about the references of our terms.
Then, he develops theorems about the truths of sentences which depend on the references of their parts.
Such theories of truth have a bunch of theorems of the following sort:

2. 'Snow is white' is true iff snow is white.

Sentences like 2 are what we call T-sentences.
We will return to them shortly, when we look at Tarski's theory of truth.
For now, we are concerned with a theory of meaning, not of truth.
Nowhere in Martinich's semantic theory do we find meanings!
Theories of reference and truth are easier to construct, for precisely Quine's reasons.
Truth and reference are extensional concepts, and have nice identity conditions.
Martinich is providing an extensionalist semantic theory.
It may turn out that the only possible semantic theory will be extensional.
But, let's not give up all hope of meaning, yet.

For a theory of meaning, we want sentences of the following sort:

3. 'Snow is white' means...

How will we fill-in the right side of 3?
One option is quite simple:

3'. 'Snow is white' means that snow is white.

3' has the advantage of seeming so obviously true that it is trivial.
It is not circular, since it does not use the concept of meaning on the right side.

Unfortunately, 3' is not as trivial as it seems.
'That snow is white' is a proposition, of the sort that Frege defended.
It is an abstract object, mind-independent and language-independent.
Quine's arguments for meanings skepticism are directed at exactly this kind of ontologically tendentious meaning theory.
Quine's arguments about circularity (the closed curve in space) entail that we can not use any intensional idioms on the right side of 3.
And, if we fill in the right side of 3 with extensional idioms, we run into problems with creatures with hearts and kidneys.

The positivists tried to complete the right side of 3 in terms of verification or observation conditions.
But, Quine showed that the verificationism, or reductionism, was as problematic as the intensional idioms at the root of the analytic/synthetic distinction.
So, Quine's work does lead to skepticism about semantic theories.

Intensions all lack sufficient principles of individuation.
And, extensions provide the wrong conditions.
Options for semantic theory look bleak.
Grice has a proposal to get around the problems.

II. Putting speaker meaning ahead of sentence meaning

Notice that our semantic theory is aimed at explaining the meanings of sentences.
Grice, as Strawson before him, wants to explain the meanings of utterances, or uses, of sentences.
Grice's idea is that speaker-meaning will be easier to tackle than sentence-meaning.
We can appeal to the concrete uses of sentences, rather than their transcendent meanings.
Thus, Grice's theory will have theorems of the form:

4. By saying 'snow is white', the speaker meant...

The right side of 4 will be filled in shortly.
Once we have an account of speaker-meaning, we can generate an account of the meanings of sentences, theorems of the form of 3, by reference to the meanings of individuals who use those sentences.
For x to mean something at a particular time it's just 'Somebody meant_{NN} something by x.'
For x to mean something timelessly, one would need a disjunctive statement about what people tend to effect by such an utterance.

III. The explanation of speaker-meaning

Grice's plan is to fill in the right sides of sentences like 4 with references to speaker's intentions.
Thus, we call Grice's program intention-based semantics, or IBS.

His first shot at the abstract form of a meaning theory is:

> 5. By saying x, S means that p iff S uttered x intending to form the belief that p in her audience.

So, by saying, "It's a lovely day, today," to Mrs. Jones, I am intending to induce a belief in Mrs. Jones that it is a lovely day.
The meaning of my expression would be explained in terms of the resulting belief of Mrs. Jones.
Meaning is thus essentially a part of communication and use.

Grice demonstrates the problem with his first shot.
Consider my act of leaving B's handkerchief near a murder scene to induce the belief in a detective that B was the murderer.
We can not say that the handkerchief meant that B was the murderer.

Well, we could say that, but it would be odd to do so.
The handkerchief is a clue, not an utterance communicated to the detective.
Contrast, for example, the handkerchief with a signed, handwritten note that said that B is the murderer.

The lesson of the handkerchief example is that not everything that induces a belief, or is intended to induce a belief, can be described as a meaning, in the relevant sense.

One could easily fix 5 to avoid the handkerchief problem by changing its 'iff' to an 'only if':

> 5'. By saying x, S means that p only if S uttered x intending to form the belief that p in her audience.

But, Grice does not pursue that line, since he wants both necessary and sufficient conditions on meaning.
Instead, Grice argues that the problem with 5 is that it does not account for the fact that the speaker must intend the audience to recognize the speaker's intention behind the utterance.
In the handkerchief case, the detective does not recognize that anyone meant anything by the handkerchief.
Thus, 5 is too liberal, ascribing meaning where there is none.

Grice's second shot:

> 6. By saying x, S means that p iff
> a. S uttered x intending to form the belief that p in her audience; and
> b. S intended her audience to recognize that intention.

6 avoids the handkerchief problem, but is still insufficient; p 111.
In the Herod, Salome, and John the Baptist case, Herod intends to make Salome aware that John the Baptist is dead, but he has not said that he is dead.
The child does not say that she is sick by showing that she is pale.
My leaving the broken china for my wife is not saying that my daughter broke the china.

Grice uses the example of a photograph and a drawing to progress to his third shot, p 111.
Both the photo and the drawing depict Mr. Y and Mrs. X getting friendly.
Grice shows them to Mr. X.

In both cases Grice intends Mr. X to form a belief.
In the case of the photograph, Grice does not mean anything.
When Grice draws the picture, then there is meaning.
The intention of the speaker must be tied to both the production of the utterance, and the recognition of that intention by the audience.

Grice's final formulation, for the purposes of this article:

7. By saying x, S means that p iff
    a. S uttered x intending his audience to form the belief that p; and
    b. S intended that his audience recognize his intention; and
    c. S intended that his audience form the belief that p at least partly because they recognize his intention.

For a slightly more detailed Gricean account of speaker-meaning, the best one developed, see Chapter 2 of Stephen Schiffer's *Meaning*, available on the website; it's a good paper topic.
We will get to Schiffer's later work, after break.

One advantage of Grice's account is that unlike other accounts, it is easily extended to imperatives and some actions, p 112.

IV. Natural and non-natural meaning

We have ignored, so far, Grice's odd locution of non-natural meaning.
The theorems of Grice's theory actually look like:

4". By uttering 'snow is white', p $meant_{NN}$...
7'. By saying x, S $means_{NN}$ that p iff...

Grice begins his article by distinguishing natural sense from non-natural meaning ($meaning_{NN}$).
Natural meaning is exemplified by:

8. Those spots mean measles.
9. The recent budget means that we shall have a hard year.

In natural meaning:

NM1. 'x means that p' entails that p;
NM2. You can not conclude that p is what was meant by x;
NM3. You can not conclude that there is any one who means anything by p (measles, budget);
NM4. What is meant is not a proposition;
NM5. One can recast the sentences as 'the fact that...'.

Non-natural meaning is speaker-meaning, and has come to be called that.

In non-natural meaning, like 4":

~NM1. One can not conclude that p;
~NM2. You can conclude that something was meant by x;
~NM3. Somebody meant it;
~NM4. There is a proposition;
~NM5. You can not recast the statement as 'the fact that p means that q'.

Grice hoped to connect the analyses of natural and non-natural meaning.
(I take it that this hope is a consequence of his interest in natural-language philosophy.)
But, the lasting importance of Grice's work was due to his IBS account of meaning$_{NN}$.

There are really two, inter-related points of Grice's focus on non-natural meaning.
First, like Russell and Quine, he wants to avoid references to spooky entities.
Note that natural meaning looks pretty easy to explain.
It involves no reference to spooky entities.
Second, in order to avoid reifying meanings, he wants to reduce meaning$_{NN}$ to some other kind of natural property.

V. A two-step reduction

Grice explains intensions in terms of intentions.
His semantic theory is thus a reduction of linguistic representations to mental representations.
On the right side of 7 and 7' are references to intentions and beliefs.
Are these entities any less spooky than Fregean propositions?

Let's start with intentions, which are mental states.
At the beginning of "Two Dogmas," Quine criticizes Fregean meanings, whether they are taken to be mental states or third-realm entities.
So, it looks as if Grice has made no progress, and we are returned to the despair of §1.

On the other hand, we surely have mental states, whatever they turn out to be.
We will have to have some explanation of those mental states, some theory of the mind.
We can account for Quine's worries by ensuring that our theory of mind involves no reference to spooky entities, like Cartesian souls.
But, perhaps the mind is the brain, or the functional organization of probabilistic automata (robots!).
As long as our theory of mind accords with the laws of physics, it need not involve anything spooky.
If IBS works, it foists the linguistic problems onto the philosophers of mind, but that's progress.

So, IBS attempts to reduce semantic phenomena to psychological phenomena, with the further, physicalist goal of reducing the psychological to the physical.
The program is a thus two step reduction.
IBS has as its ultimate goal, the reduction of all semantic facts to physical facts.
(This goal is perhaps clearest in his first attempt to explain meaning$_{NN}$, Stevenson's causal account on p 109-110.)

VI. The big bad bug

On the Gricean account, a speaker utters a sentence, with a particular intent.
The audience hears it and forms a belief, or acts in a particular manner.
We discussed intentions.
How are we to understand the beliefs?

Beliefs are mental states, like intentions.
The standard interpretation of beliefs is that they are relations between believers and propositions.
Uh-oh.
We will return to this topic after break.

Another interesting topic, which we will probably not discuss, is the question of epistemic involuntarism.
Grice thinks that we can decide to believe someone, or something; see p 112.
This seems implausible.